Separate, but Unequal: School Segregation and Desegregation in DeSoto and Tate Counties

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Separate, but Unequal:
School Segregation and Desegregation in DeSoto and Tate Counties

By

Breanna Johnson

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Abstract:

Although there is a vast amount of research on the American Civil Rights Movement, there is very little research done on the movement within DeSoto and Tate Counties, which are located in northwest Mississippi. These two counties had many important events happen in them, but the desegregation of schools had the greatest impact on their race relations. While these two counties had a generally peaceful integration when compared to other counties in Mississippi, the overall ambivalence of most white people toward integration is important to highlight. Through oral history interviews of people who were involved in the schools during this time period and research in local newspapers, this project shows the events the process of school desegregation in the counties. Although these events proceeded more peacefully than in other Mississippi counties, they still were not without flaws and issues. This project adds another dimension to the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. It shows that not every county in Mississippi underwent the same struggle in terms of school segregation and desegregation. Yet every county did struggle with segregation and desegregation in unique ways.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I had a little teacher from Chile and she hadn’t been in the United States long, and I always said that nobody told her that she was supposed to treat the Black students differently... She was the greatest teacher. Just the way she made us feel... I made up my mind then that I wanted to be able to impact young people the way she was able to impact young people.

-Bernice Jackson

In 1870, during the Reconstruction Era, public schools began to appear in Mississippi. By 1875 there were both all-Black and all-white schools throughout the state. The Ku Klux Klan began to appear frequently, with its focus on suppressing Black education. When the Reconstruction Era ended, the white, upper-class planters’ party was able to take back over. Segregation became the law of the land throughout Mississippi from 1870 to 1970. For one hundred years, Mississippi worked a dual education system.¹

This dual education system led to immense problems throughout Mississippi. Small schools and small school districts popped up all around the state which created an issue of funding. The lack of funding was especially felt by the Black students, but the government was also not able to properly fund the white schools either. In the 1914-1915 school year, Mississippi spent $1.53 per Black student and spent $8.20 per white student. In the 1929-1930 school year, the discrepancy grew even more with the state of Mississippi giving $5.94 per Black student and $31.33 per white student. In the 1942-1943 school year, this discrepancy grew again with Mississippi only giving $6.16 per

¹ Bolton, Hardest Deal of All, 3-8.
Black student and $47.95 per white student. Even with this increase in spending, Mississippi still lagged behind most states’ spending for education.

In 1939, even if Mississippi spent all available public money on education, it would still have needed about $9 million to reach the national average. The only state that was behind Mississippi at that time was Georgia. Charles Bolton, a Mississippi historian who focuses on the integration of schools, writes, “The amount neighboring Tennessee spent per capita for black education in 1930, the highest in the region, was slightly better than Mississippi’s spending on white education.” This shows that Mississippi’s dual education system was not successful, and it was not allowing white students to be successful and properly educated as most white Mississippians believed.

The fate of the Black citizens was even worse throughout the 1870s and into the 1950s. In 1937, the state of Mississippi appropriated less than 50% of its educational funds to both Tate and DeSoto County for Black education. At the same time, the Black population was 72.3% of DeSoto County’s total population and the Black population was 59.9% of Tate County’s total population. This shows that both counties were giving over half of the funds that were meant for Black education to white education even though the white population was in the minority for both counties.

Clifton L. Moseley, a Black man living in Desoto County during this time, wrote in the 1960s, “It is hard to believe that little progress in the education of the Negroes of DeSoto County occurred between 1870 and 1955, a period of 85 years.” He continues,

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2 Bolton, Hardest Deal of All, 21.
3 Bolton, Hardest Deal of All, 20-23.
“The torch of education was left entirely upon the will and initiative of the Negroes themselves.” Many times Black churches in the area were used as schools, and the community themselves also raised money to build their schools without assistance from the state government.

This project will seek to explore the process of school desegregation in DeSoto and Tate County. It will also seek to show the ambivalence of this time period that many Black citizens felt. While the DeSoto County School District and the Senatobia Municipal School District both attempted to delay any type of integration between 1955 and 1966, both school districts did eventually begin freedom of choice plans. Then in 1970, the Senatobia Municipal School District and the DeSoto County School District created their desegregation plans with very little argument and were able to successfully integrate the schools with very little violence or issues. Tate County School District fought desegregation and did not have the same type of successful integration as the other two school districts. The successful integration of the DeSoto County School District and the Senatobia Municipal School District has allowed these two school districts to be successful and some of the best in the state.

DeSoto and Tate Counties

DeSoto County was formed on February 9, 1836. Its northern border was the Tennessee state line, and it bordered Panola County to the south. Its eastern border reached the Mississippi River, and its western border was Marshall County. In 1873,

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Tate County was formed using pieces of Tunica, DeSoto, and Marshall Counties. The counties are unique in Mississippi. When most people think of Mississippi, they think of the Mississippi Delta, which is a stretch of extremely fertile soil that allowed for high crop yield. Many of the farmers focused on cash crops and the land-owning farmers were able to bring in large incomes. The farmers who were not land-owning were left to work other people’s land, which led to extreme poverty.

DeSoto and Tate Counties were not a part of the Mississippi Delta and are sometimes considered the suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis is a large metro area that is in the southwestern corner of Tennessee. Its southern border runs parallel with DeSoto County’s northern border. The industrialization of Memphis brought new jobs to DeSoto and Tate County that other areas in Mississippi did not have access to. This gave citizens from DeSoto and Tate County access to jobs that were outside of farming. Because they did not have to work as sharecroppers or other low-paying farm jobs, the citizens who took these jobs were able to move out of severe poverty. It also allowed Black citizens more freedoms because they had jobs that were independent of the crusades of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizen’s Council, and any other groups that were trying to keep them from being prosperous and rising out of poverty. These economically independent individuals were typically more likely to participate in forms of activism because their livelihoods were not as easily threatened. Because Memphis was also a hub city for transportation, the city had more individuals who were more understanding of the plight that Black Americans were facing at this time. These more liberal thought patterns also seeped into Tate and DeSoto Counties because the citizens
were interacting with people who thought differently instead of only interacting with the close-minded people of their small towns.

DeSoto and Tate Counties, then, were a little bit of everything. They were a little bit of the Mississippi Delta due to proximity and the fact that the economy was still very dependent on farming, but they were also a little bit of Memphis because of the proximity and the fluidity of movement between the areas. Because of this mixture, the counties had a somewhat unique economy, social structure, and history. The counties also had an ambivalence that speaks to the strangeness of the Civil Rights Movement. Many of the participants that shared their oral histories with this project show that while things were better in DeSoto and Tate Counties, integration still was not completely successful. This shows that even the best during this time was not a good option for Black citizens. There is always a sense in their stories that a situation could have been much better, but at the same time it also could have been much worse. This situation makes DeSoto and Tate Counties very unique in the discussion of the Civil Rights Movement because it is not full of violence like other locations, but it also shows intolerance and struggles.

School Consolidation

In 1910, Mississippi passed a plan to consolidate the different white schools around the state. The idea behind the plan was that by consolidating the schools, the schools would be more centralized, allowing the school districts to use local funds to improve the white schools. They would extend the school year for white students, raise white teachers’ salaries, and create a transportation system to get the white students to
school. In the 1909-1910 school year, there were 4,256 separate white schools. By 1946
the schools had consolidated to 861 schools with 164 schools that were still refusing to
participate.\(^6\) Schools in DeSoto County and Tate County were still refusing to participate
in 1946.

This plan did not apply to the Black schools that existed throughout the state. In
the 1909-1910 school year, there were 3,006 Black schools and by 1946 there were
3,737. This lack of consolidation for the Black schools led to a huge inequity between
the white schools and the Black schools, which also exacerbated an inequity between
the education that the Black students were receiving and the one that the white
students were receiving. By the 1942-1943 school year, Mississippi was spending $47.95
per white student but only $6.16 per Black student. In 1946 a plan was made to try and
improve education across the state. While the money that the plan controlled was
meant for Black education, it was quickly dispersed among white schools, and very little
of it was sent to the schools that it was planned for. Members of the Black community
were upset by this and reacted to the news with lawsuits. The state had to work on new
plans to try to equalize the schools. In 1953 there was another push for more equitable
school funding, with a plan to consolidate all school districts hitting the schools in 1954.\(^7\)

In 1954, all schools were mandated by state law to consolidate. It was called the
Minimum Education Program and the Educational Finance Commission was in charge of


overseeing the consolidation of the schools. Most of Tate County was willing to consolidate around this time, but the Senatobia School chose to stay separate and form a school district which included the Melvin Cathey School, a Black school. This became known as the Senatobia City School District. The rest of Tate County joined together and formed the Tate County School District. The Tate County Schools consisted of Independence White School, Independence Black School, Coldwater White School, Coldwater Black School, and a school that would eventually become Strayhorn Schools. When civic leaders were first told in 1954 that they would have to consolidate, they hired Dr. H. M. Ivy to come and make recommendations on how to best consolidate the district. He recommended that “Arkabutla would be moved to a new site near Cottonville and combined with Sarah and Strayhorn. Coldwater and Senatobia would be combined and include Crockett. Independence would be combined with Thyatira.” This would leave only an elementary school in Coldwater. The people of Coldwater were against this. According to The Heritage of Tate County Mississippi they were “up in arms and applied unfair pressure that included abuse, threats and they would not accept [it].” The people of Coldwater did ultimately get their way because they were able to keep their school and Senatobia chose to stay completely separate.8

All of the schools in DeSoto County consolidated in 1955 into the DeSoto County School District. DeSoto County was consolidated from many small schools across the county to three larger white high schools that were able to offer seventh through twelfth-grade education. Many of the local primary schools were still kept within the

8 The Heritage of Tate County Mississippi. Curtis Media Corporation, 1991, 126-141.
original neighborhoods to ease any transportation needs that full consolidation might cause. These larger schools were the Horn Lake School, the Hernando School, and the Olive Branch School. In the original plan that was submitted to the State Educational Plan Finance Commission, it was stated, “For a probable period of ten years only one colored high school will be needed. This should include grades 7-12 and be located at Hernando.” It was also highlighted, “It will be unwise to work rapidly in the erection of additional high school facilities for colored pupils due to heavy retardation in the present elementary grades.” Work began on Hernando Central High School (the Black school) shortly following the release of this plan and in the 1955-1956 school year it was opened and began accepting its first students.\(^9\) By 1970, the population of students that were Black grew to the point where there were three Black high schools; Central High in Hernando, East Side High in Olive Branch, and the Delta Center in Horn Lake.\(^10\)

**Methodology**

The primary source of research for this project comes from the oral history interviews that I was able to do with people who experienced segregation and desegregation in some way. I was very privileged to be able to interview people from DeSoto County Schools, Tate County Schools, and Senatobia City Schools. This topic has interested me because I am a DeSoto County native who was raised in Hernando, Mississippi. I spent most of my life seeing the marker on Highway 51 where James Meredith was shot during the March Against Fear, but not actually learning about much

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of the local history. Throughout my time in my studies, I have come to realize that the
Civil Rights Movement is not a subject that deals heavily with DeSoto and Tate County
and I have sought to fix that through this project. While I am a native of DeSoto County,
I am also a white woman who has worked within education for the past six years. I am
currently employed by the Senatobia Municipal School District as a high school special
education teacher. Many of my interviews came through educational channels because
of this. I was able to interview many former employees of Senatobia School District
through prior acquaintanceships and introductions from colleagues. Many of the people
that I interviewed have a special interest in the schools as well as the larger sphere of
education because of this.

Because of these unique perspectives of the pool of people that I interviewed, it
is important to highlight that their general opinions of the state of education may not
reflect a larger opinion of their groups that they are representing. These are all people
that pursued upper education after graduating from high school and then stayed
intertwined with education. Most of the people that I interviewed also were from
middle class households that either had jobs outside of the agriculture sector or they
had families that owned their own farms. This also sets this group apart from many of
the people in their respective groups that they are speaking for. The people that I
interviewed were also unique because they were the people that agreed to participate
in this project. Many of the Black interviewees were all incredibly active in the Civil
Rights Movement and were very vocal about their rights and their beliefs. Many of them
were (and still are) active members of the NAACP. The white interviewees were also
unique when compared to the overall white community. These are all people that agreed to discuss desegregation and did not have any hatred toward the Black community. They are also all more liberally leaning when compared to the average Mississippian when discussing racial politics. Lastly, these people are all adults who are looking back at their childhoods and young adult years after many years have passed. Some of the stories may have had parts forgotten or misremembered, events could be confused, or adult thoughts could be added to their past selves. While this project does have some biases that it has to address, many of the participants tell similar stories that add credibility to their remembrances. Secondary sources also add credibility and context to their stories.

I interviewed Mr. Michael Cathey on January 28, 2023. He was born in 1957 and he was a student who attended Melvin Cathey Schools/Senatobia Colored Schools. His father was the head principal of the school so he was also able to give special insight into the administration of the school. The schools integrated when he was in seventh grade and he graduated from an integrated Senatobia High School in 1975. He then attended Northwest Mississippi Community College from 1975 to 1977 before going to the University of Mississippi from 1977 to 1979. He was able to first register to vote at the age of eighteen in 1974 and has been a member of the NAACP for his entire adult life. He has had an influential impact on the community of Senatobia. He is a preacher at the West Gilmore Street Church of Christ and he is also an entrepreneur. Both of his parents were heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement and in June of 1966 when Martin Luther King Jr. marched through Senatobia during the March Against Fear, his
parents were there to listen to him and his mother organized the meals for the marchers that day. Thanks to his childhood of growing up with activists and his impact on the community, he has been able to be a successful activist in his own life and has helped to bring success to the Black community.\textsuperscript{11}

On January 30, 2023, I interviewed James Jackson. He was born in 1937 and attended all of his years of school in a segregated institution. He graduated from high school in 1955 and attended many schools throughout the years. He attended Pilgrim’s Rest School which was a one-room elementary school that was built by his father and others. He also attended Senatobia Colored School for one year when his family moved to Senatobia. He then attended Warrior High School for two years until it burned down. He ultimately graduated from Freedonia High School. In 1974, he was elected to the Senatobia City Schools school board, and he graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1976 with a master’s degree in Educational Leadership. He was a school board member for fifteen years and was on the school board during the 1987 boycott. Before he was elected to the school board, he also taught school for three years in Panola County Schools which is located in the county immediately south of Tate County. He also worked within the Youth Corps which was a part of the Department of Labor where he helped poor white and Black students. He worked there until the program was eventually phased out of use. He then went on to work at Northwest Mississippi Community College. While he was there, he was able to bring in Civil Rights leaders to

\textsuperscript{11} Michael Cathey, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Cathey Enterprises, January 28, 2023.
come and speak to the students. He was able to host Martin Luther King Jr.’s daughter in 1976 and shortly after that, he was also able to host James Meredith to speak there. Like Mr. Cathey, he was also an activist who had been raised by other activists. He was able to register to vote in 1963 at the age of either 24 or 25. When he registered to vote he was the fifteenth Black person to register to vote in the entire county of Tate County. He also joined the NAACP and was among some of the trailblazers who fought for the rights of the Black community. Some of these men included Reverend Nathaniel Green, Adell Davis, Edgar Burton, Robert Logan, and Roosevelt Cathey.  

On February 2, 2023, I was able to interview Sam Jones. He was born in 1952. Mr. Jones attended the white Hernando Schools and was in his senior year when the schools were desegregated. He grew up as a farmer’s son and had an interesting experience because of it. He grew up being able to play with both white children and Black children. Many children in this time period were kept separate from children of another race. When schools did integrate, he and his old childhood friends were able to reunite and this included him being able to hang out with Leroy Paine during school. He also was able to share the things that the students missed out on when schools integrated. During his senior year, the students missed out on breaks, pep rallies, and prom. All of these things were done away with to keep the races from mixing during free time. Mr. Jones graduated in 1971 and attended Northwest Mississippi Community College until 1973 where he received an Associate of Arts degree in business. He then  

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graduated from Mississippi State University in 1975 with a bachelor’s in business. He has worked as a real estate agent ever since.\footnote{Sam Jones, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, 330 Commerce St., February 2, 2023.}

On February 8, 2023, I had the opportunity to interview Vernon and Bernice Jackson. Mrs. Jackson was born in 1955 in Hernando, Mississippi. She began school at Hernando Central School and in tenth grade moved to Hernando High School after the schools integrated in the 1970-1971 school year. While she was in school, she made friends with many of her classmates and most of the time was able to have a very pleasant experience, although she still tells of negative experiences that she had to face because of her skin color. While she was in school, she met amazing teachers and one of them was Mrs. Maria Coleman. Her experiences with Mrs. Coleman changed the entire trajectory of her life. She was able to register to vote at the age of eighteen in 1973. She also joined the NAACP and has since stayed as an active member of this organization. She is also in an organization called Mission MS of Senatobia which meets in Senatobia weekly to try and discuss how the community can bring the white race and the Black race closer together. After graduating high school in 1974, she attended Jackson State University (JSU), which is a historically Black university that is located in Mississippi’s state capital. She received her bachelor’s from JSU with a degree in Spanish education in 1978 and thanks to the many programs that JSU offered she was able to visit Mexico in 1974 and take summer classes and live with a family to fully immerse herself in the culture and the language. After beginning to work as a teacher, she decided to go back
to school where she enrolled at the University of Mississippi and studied in the ELL (English Language Learner) program. She eventually received her master’s in curriculum and instruction as well as administration leadership. She has begun her doctoral studies and is currently working on her dissertation. Her career in education has left a legacy with all of her students, especially the students in Senatobia. While working for the Senatobia Municipal School District she was able to become the first Black female assistant superintendent and create many outreach programs to reach all of the communities in Senatobia and to assist all students. Since retiring from this position, she still runs the Parent Center for the Senatobia Schools which is an outreach program that helps parents and students. She is a major facilitator in meeting the needs of students and their families, educating the community, and helping the district impact students.\textsuperscript{14}

Mr. Vernon Jackson was interviewed at the same time as his wife on February 8, 2023. He was born in 1947 in Coldwater, Mississippi. He was able to first register to vote in either 1968 or 1969 and has been a member of the NAACP for most of his adult life. Like his wife, he is also a member of the Mission MS of Senatobia where he tries to help the races to come together and to work together. Mr. Vernon Jackson grew up going to schools in Tate County, but in eleventh grade, he moved to Waterloo, Iowa, where he attended an integrated school for the first time. That summer between his junior and senior year of high school he was drafted into the military and was sent to Vietnam. He spent most of his time there in the jungles as an infantry soldier. While he was serving in

\textsuperscript{14} Bernice Jackson, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Municipal School District Professional Development Center, February 8, 2023.
the military, he also attended an international school so that he could finish his high school diploma. After he was released from the military, he found out that that diploma was ultimately useless in the United States and he had to get his GED. He did not allow that to hold him back, though, and he began his studies at Northwest Mississippi Community College. He took extra classes as well as summer classes so that he could finish his degree quickly. He successfully managed that and graduated from Delta State University (DSU) at the age of twenty-four with a bachelor’s in education. He decided to become a teacher because he saw the job of teaching as one of the few ways that a Black person could become a professional within his community. He began teaching and in 1985 he graduated from the University of Mississippi with a master’s degree in education. Then he graduated from the University of Mississippi again but this time with a specialist’s degree in school administration in 1991. Mr. Jackson became the assistant principal of Senatobia High School in 1987 and then became the first Black assistant superintendent for Senatobia Municipal School District. When he left the Senatobia School District to become the superintendent of North Panola School District, he was succeeded by Mrs. Jackson.¹⁵

On March 3, 2023, I was able to interview Judge Gerald Chatham, Sr. Judge Chatham was born in 1944 and raised in Hernando, Mississippi. His father, also named Gerald Chatham, was the district attorney during the Emmett Till trial. Judge Chatham said that he had a unique upbringing because of his father who was very kind to

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everyone, even people of other races, and he made sure to instill that belief into his children. His mother and father taught him the importance of voting and taught him to believe that if he did not vote, he would lose his freedom. They also taught him that “voting was something you just did, you didn’t make an excuse. That was your obligation as an American citizen.” Judge Chatham graduated from Hernando High School in 1962 and would go on to eventually study law at the University of Mississippi. He knew from the youngest of ages that he wanted to be just like his dad and to also be a lawyer. He would go on to become the first full-time district attorney for the 17th Judicial District which was the same job that his father had. After stepping down from being the district attorney, he became a judge in DeSoto County which is the position that he still holds to this day.16

On March 27, 2023, I was able to sit down and hear the story of Deloise Dobbins Oliver. Mrs. Oliver was born in 1955 in Hernando, Mississippi. She grew up in the eastern portion of Hernando and attended Hernando Central School from first through fifth grade. Her parents were activists who fought for equal rights for themselves as well as their nine children. Her father was a farmer who was very privileged to own the land that had been in his family’s possession. Her mother was a homemaker but also brought in her land. Her great-grandmother purchased eighty acres of land shortly after World War I. She did not trust her son-in-law so she made the land where nobody could sell it until the third generation after her. Her great-grandmother, a Black woman living in

Hernando, Mississippi in the 1910s, was wonderfully smart and made sure that the land would be able to help her family for years to come. Unfortunately, Mrs. Oliver’s cousins did sell their portion of the eighty acres, but her siblings and her have all kept it. They have turned their forty acres into a subdivision of sorts and named it after their great-grandmother. Like Mrs. Oliver’s great-grandmother, her mother was always looking at ways to protect her children and to set them up for a successful future. One of these ways was to enroll them into the white public high school as soon as possible when Freedom of Choice was announced. She enrolled her daughter, Mrs. Oliver, in the sixth grade in the first year that she was able to. She also enrolled her older daughter in the twelfth grade a year later which was the first year that she was able to.\(^\text{17}\)

After beginning the sixth grade at the white Hernando High School, Mrs. Oliver continued to go until her tenth-grade year. The tenth grade was when desegregation hit and everybody was combined into the same school. Mrs. Oliver graduated from Hernando High School in 1974 and then went to Northwest Mississippi Community College. She transferred to the University of Mississippi where she received her Bachelor’s in Education. She later went back to the University of Mississippi where she received her Masters of Education. She taught English at Senatobia Municipal School District and she worked in the school district until she retired.\(^\text{18}\)

On March 29, 2023, I was able to interview Mrs. Carole Stigler. Mrs. Stigler was born in 1946 in Memphis, Tennessee. She grew up in Memphis with a mom who worked

\(^\text{17}\) Deloise Oliver, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Hernando Public Library, March 27, 2023.

\(^\text{18}\) Deloise Oliver, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Hernando Public Library, March 27, 2023.
as a secretary and a dad who had many careers including the military, a heavy machinery mechanic, and an equipment specialist writer. She graduated from high school in 1964 and began studying at Union University where she received a bachelor’s in English with a minor in education. She began working in 1968 at a small school in Tennessee called Chester County High School before coming to Mississippi to work at Hernando High School in 1969. She taught for one year before the schools were desegregated in the 1970-1971 school year. She had previously been teaching tenth-grade English, but when the call came for some teachers to go to Hernando Central High School once integration hit, she readily chose to make that jump. She taught ninth-grade English for two school years before eventually leaving Hernando to move to Senatobia. While working for the Senatobia Municipal School District, she married her husband who also worked for the school district. Her husband became the high school principal and was the head principal during the 1987 boycott. While marrying her husband and raising two children she also went to Memphis State University (now the University of Memphis) where she earned her master’s degree in guidance and counseling. She also received a specialist degree as well as certificates from the University of Mississippi. She became the first female assistant superintendent of the Senatobia Municipal School District and worked alongside both Mr. Vernon Jackson and Mrs. Bernice Jackson. After she and her husband officially retired from the school district, her son came to the high school to become the head principal. She also ran for
the school board and became a member of the board before eventually retiring from everything in January of 2023.19

On April 27, 2023, I was able to interview Kay Chapuis. Mrs. Chapuis was born in 1954 and was raised in Hernando. She graduated in 1972 from Hernando High School and was in the eleventh grade when Hernando Schools integrated. Before integration, she previously attended the all-white Hernando High School. She characterized herself as very naïve about what was going on around her. She remembered being told, “Don’t worry… everything’s going to be the same. It’ll just be different people here.” In her senior year, they were not allowed to have a prom because the school did not want the Black and white students associating with each other in that sort of setting. Overall, though, Mrs. Chapuis did not notice a large difference during integration. She was very studious and did not commonly interact with many other students socially. She loved to read and would spend all of her free time at the library. Mrs. Chapuis was able to register to vote when she turned eighteen years old, but was also sad because the election was in November and because her birthday was not until December, she was not able to vote in that election. She had to wait until the next election after that. To this day, though, she believes that it is important to vote because “You have to at least try, you have to try to put forward what you believe is right.” She did not grow up in a family that concentrated on voting, though. Neither of her parents had ever voted. Her mom did not because her hands were full raising five children, and her father was unable to read and write. She graduated from Hernando High School in 1972 and then

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went to Northwest Mississippi Community College where she received a degree in social work. Her parents were very poor and they did not put much stock into education. Thankfully, though, she had friends that were good influences and with their support, she decided to go to college. When she left Northwest, she became a librarian at the Senatobia Public Library. When her daughter was three years old, she decided to attend the University of Mississippi to get a degree in elementary education. She graduated in 1982 with that degree. For six years she worked at Coldwater Elementary School, which is in the Tate County School District, and then worked at Senatobia Middle School until she retired. Mrs. Chapuis remembered that many of the white families would gather on the lawn of the DeSoto County courthouse and would have picnics together. The Black families would not be invited even if they were upper class or lower class. Her family was not invited even though they were white because they were not considered upper class. She also never had the opportunity to shop in the primarily white shops that were in Hernando and she also was not able to purchase ice cream from The Dip because her family was not able to afford it.20

On June 5, 2023, I was able to interview Mrs. Bobbie Banks. She was born in 1959 and was raised in Senatobia, Mississippi. She attended Melvin Cathey School from first through fifth grade and then in the 1970-1971 school year she was sent to The North School which was the formerly all-white school; for one year, it was the all-girl school in Senatobia. After that one year, she started at Senatobia High School for her seventh-grade year and continued to attend there until she graduated in 1977. When

20 Kay Chapuis, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Public Library, April 27, 2023.
desegregation hit while she was in the sixth grade, she was not aware of anything changing. She knew that she was going to a new school, but she did not know why. She knew that for one year she went to school with all girls, but again she did not know why. She also knew that suddenly there were white students and white teachers, but again she did not know why. While it was all new to her, she never found it alarming or even questioned it. She just knew that that was how school was going and she was just there to be a student. In her senior year of high school, she was nominated to be on the 1976 Homecoming Court. She was then elected to be the Homecoming Queen by the football team. She was the first Black Homecoming Queen that Senatobia had ever had. She was not the only first in her family, though. Her father, Cornelius Webb, was the first Black police officer in Senatobia. Mrs. Banks offered a unique perspective on desegregation compared to others that I was able to interview because she was so young when it happened. While in the sixth grade, she was not aware of the underlying tension and stress that many of the older students were aware of during this time. By the time that she reached the age to join activities and sports, desegregation had been the status quo for several years. She stated that even though there was hesitation from students, faculty, and parents at the beginning, within just a couple of years many of them were fully on board and accepting of this new plan. After graduating from Senatobia High School, Mrs. Banks attended Northwest Mississippi Community College, where she received an associate’s degree in accounting. She then went on to receive her Bachelor’s degree from Delta State University in Business Administration. After receiving
her education, she returned to Senatobia and has been the district’s Food Services Director.\footnote{Bobbie Banks, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Municipal School District- Student Support Services Offices, June 5, 2023.}

On June 7, 2023, I had the opportunity to interview Sharon Hale. She was born in 1958 and was raised in Senatobia, Mississippi. Her mother was a social worker and her father was a farmer. When Senatobia Schools desegregated, Mrs. Hale was in the seventh grade and her parents chose to pull her out of public school and they sent her to Hillcrest Academy which was located in Thyatira, a small community east of Senatobia. After two years there, they pulled her from that school and sent her to the larger Magnolia Heights School which is located in Senatobia. She graduated from this school in 1976 and then attended college and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in education. She worked at Bovine Elementary before returning to her hometown of Senatobia. She worked at Senatobia Elementary for years but remembered that the first time she had to go there for an interview, she had to ask for directions. Senatobia Elementary was the former Melvin Cathey School which had been the Black school while she attended Senatobia Schools. She had never been to that school and had not even known that it existed while she was growing up. She was hired after the interview and worked in that building until she retired. She worked as a kindergarten and a first-grade teacher and she also worked as a librarian. After she retired, she chose to go back to her alma mater, Magnolia Heights, and has worked there since.\footnote{Sharon Hale, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Public Library, June 6, 2023.}
My history of segregation and desegregation is built around these interviews with the people who experienced it firsthand. Another large portion of my research was the local newspapers in DeSoto and Tate Counties. In DeSoto County, the main newspaper was The Times-Promoter which would merge with another company and become known as The DeSoto Times in the 1970s. The full archive of this newspaper is held at the DeSoto County Museum where it is bound in hardback books and is available for anyone to come and study. I went through the years of 1954 to 1972 in this newspaper. In Tate County, the main newspaper was The Tate County Democrat. The full archive of this newspaper is held at The Tate County Democrat’s office which is located in Senatobia, Mississippi. It is also bound in hardback books and is available for anyone to come and study. For this one, I went through the years of 1954 to 1972 and then I also looked through 1987 so that I could include reports on the 1987 boycott. I also used reports from 2019 to find the latest school accountability ratings for Tate County Schools and Senatobia City Schools.

Chapter Outline

This first chapter introduced the counties and school districts that this project will focus on. The counties are DeSoto and Tate Counties and the school districts are DeSoto County School District, Tate County School District, and Senatobia Municipal School District. It also introduced the people who have contributed their oral histories to this project. They are Michael Cathey, James Jackson, Sam Jones, Bernice Jackson, Vernon Jackson, Gerald Chatham, Deloise Oliver, Carole Stigler, Kay Chapuis, Bobbie Banks and Sharon Hale. It also introduces the other primary resources that were heavily
used for this project. There were two local newspapers which were *The Times-Promoter* and *The Tate County Democrat*.

Chapter two focuses primarily on the oral histories of James Jackson, Vernon Jackson, Bernice Jackson, and Michael Cathey. Within it, I will be exploring the years of segregation in DeSoto County and Tate County, focusing primarily on the years of 1950-1964. These years were chosen strategically to show segregation before *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the aftermath of the decision. While Mississippi schools did not begin integrating like they had been ordered to, they did begin equalizing the Black schools in comparison to the white schools. DeSoto and Tate Counties were similar to the rest of the state during this time. In 1955, several months after the *Brown* ruling, DeSoto County announced that it would build the first Black high school in Hernando. Around this time, Senatobia Schools (a school district within Tate County), also announced the building of a similar school. Elementary schools also began to be consolidated so instead of having small one-room schools that were commonly attached to churches, these counties began to build consolidated schools that would offer more educational avenues for more students of color. While these counties made leaps and bounds to portray their counties as equal for all students, there were still inadequacies within the Black schools.

In chapter three, I dive into the Freedom of Choice program. This was a program that was very popular in Mississippi and also in some other southern states as well. The idea behind this program was that the school districts would allow students to attend whatever school they wished to attend within the school district that they lived in. In
Mississippi, many school districts made it very challenging for students to choose what school they wished to attend; they did not broadcast this new program, and at times they would just outright deny a Black student from attending a white school. It also was not successful because across the state not one white student chose to attend a Black school. In DeSoto County, the program was more successful when compared to the rest of the state. Freedom of Choice lasted from 1964-1970. In the 1969-1970 school year, DeSoto County had forty-three Black students at the white Hernando School. While this was not a huge portion of the overall student body, it does show that DeSoto County Schools were more willing to allow Black students into the school than other school districts in Mississippi. Senatobia City Schools were not as successful because, in the same school year, it only had two Black students. This chapter will mostly be based on the experiences of Deloise Oliver. Ms. Oliver was able to attend the white Hernando School from the sixth grade until the schools integrated in her tenth-grade year. This chapter will illustrate the differences between the experiences in DeSoto County and experiences elsewhere across the state. Ms. Oliver experienced kindness from some teachers and fellow students, but she also experienced loneliness and some harassment. Overall, though, her experience was not as bad as many experiences were throughout this time period. This is strongly related to the acceptance of the people of DeSoto County during this time period, but the white people of DeSoto County were more accepting and tolerant of Black people and especially Black students because they were not threatened by them.
In Chapter four I address the final culmination of desegregation in DeSoto and Tate Counties. This chapter mainly focuses on the years immediately following the 1970-1971 school year, but it also leaps forward to 1987 to touch on an education and economic boycott that happened in Senatobia. This chapter incorporates oral histories from teachers, students, parents, and school board personnel. It highlights the fact that there was very little violence when schools desegregated and that there was also very little fleeing of white students from the public schools of DeSoto and Tate Counties. While some segregation academies began around this time, there was not a mass exodus of white students which was the norm in many other school districts around Mississippi. On the surface, these schools seemed to peacefully integrate, and many students had positive experiences during the process. When it is examined on a deeper level, though, this experience does not look as simple as first let on. DeSoto County Schools used ability grouping to make sure that the classrooms were still primarily segregated. Some teachers still voiced hateful comments toward Black students, and even fifty years later, the Black students and the white students still do not feel like they are the same and are planning separate fifty-year high school reunions. In Senatobia City Schools, when Bobbie Banks won Homecoming Queen, the football team had to threaten to boycott the rest of the game to ensure that she would win the crown over a white student. When she did win, a huge percentage of the fans left the stadium in anger. The 1987 boycott also showed these negative experiences because it showed that the Black community was not okay with how the school was being run and the lack of diversity within the district’s administration. Both school districts also lost many of
the cultural aspects of the Black schools when they desegregated. The graduation pictures, the yearbooks, and the trophies were all lost in the years after desegregation because they were never moved into the white schools when the students moved into the schools. This can create the idea that the achievements of the Black schools were not as meaningful when compared to the achievements of the white schools. These schools also lost their legacies and their unique history when these important pieces of their culture were lost.

In chapter five, I deal with the lasting impacts of this time period. While DeSoto County Schools and Senatobia City Schools did have some rough spots and were not perfect at desegregation, they did, overall, create a good experience for students so that they could learn and grow within the halls of their schools. This positive experience is still seen today. Both school districts are some of the top in the state. Tate County School District fought desegregation and never completely desegregated like it was ordered to. Today this school district has schools that fail the accountability rating every year and are not able to properly educate students. This example is seen throughout Mississippi. Most school districts in the Delta fought integration and when they were forced to desegregate the districts had a mass exodus of students. These are the same school districts that are struggling to this day and are not able to pass the accountability rating for the state. These lasting impacts show how important it was for school districts to have positive integration because the school districts that did are still reaping the benefits to this day.
Chapter 2: Segregation (1870-1964)

On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court made a ruling in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case. This was a civil rights case that was originally argued by the Supreme Court on December 9, 1952. The ruling stated, “Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race... denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.” Chief Justice Earl Warren gave the opinion of the Court in the decision. He highlighted the fact that many states, especially in the South, had been making moves to create a more equalized system and he highlighted the changes to the “buildings, curricula, qualifications and salaries of teachers, and other ‘tangible’ factors.” He noted, though, that the Court could not make its decision based solely on the fact that the states had tried to correct these tangible factors because the Court must see if the actual act of segregation of the races deprives the plaintiffs of equal protection. Justice Warren explained in his summary that schools have changed since 1896, when Plessy v. Ferguson allowed states to legally segregate based on race. He highlighted that “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments.” He went on that “It [education] is the very foundation of good citizenship.” The Court decided that separate schools were inherently unequal because the “segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race... deprive[s] the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities.”

With that decision by the Supreme Court, the South was thrown into turmoil. This was perhaps most dramatically seen in Mississippi. From the top down, legislatures and leaders began to plan and orchestrate schemes that would keep Black children and white children from attending the same public schools. The state government considered ideas to get rid of public schools and instead have publicly funded private schools that would still be able to segregate based on race. In 1955 the legislature stated, “there will be no integration of the races in Mississippi and there will be no compromise on the matter.”

The main fear of desegregation was the fear of the different sexes of the two races combining and mingling together. Shortly after Brown v. Board, Tom Brady, a judge for the Mississippi Circuit Court, wrote a manifesto called Black Monday. He explained that with the combining of races in school, a young Black boy would “perform an obscene act, or make an obscene remark, or a vile overture or assault upon some white girl,” and that this would cause white violence to erupt against the Black community. He argued that by combining the different sexes of the different races, the government was setting up a system that could only end in “riots, raping, and revolutions.” These fears came to light throughout the history of desegregation in Mississippi. When Senatobia Municipal School District desegregated, it sent all male students to one school and all female students to another school because they did not

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2 Bolton, Hardest Deal of All, 72.

3 Tyson, The Blood of Emmett Till, 76-77.
want the sexes of different races to combine. During the freedom of choice era, DeSoto County predominately had Black female students attend the white schools and had very few Black male students attend. This was to help ease white fears and to also keep them from raising up in arms about a large amount of Black male students joining their white daughters in school.

While many of these plans to keep away integration were happening in the state capital of Jackson, there were also local decisions that were being made. The news of potential integration had hit the citizens of Tate County and they were beginning to act on their fears. In the August 11, 1955, issue of the Tate County Democrat, the headlining article was titled “Citizens Council Mass Meeting Friday Night.” Judge Tom Brady and Senator James Eastland were coming to Tate County to speak on the “segregation question” which the article says is “confronting people in Mississippi at four or more points.” Over 1,000 people came for this meeting. Judge Brady stated that segregation was a “God-given right.” He was also quoted saying, “We don’t hate the Negro. We are his friend and he is ours.” In his speech, Senator Eastland was characterized as “blasting the Supreme Court’s decision” when he said, “There is not a single legal reason for it... it is immoral, infamous, and illegal and... deserves no respect from us.” He was also quoted saying, “They can’t make us do anything. If we lose this cause it is because we want to lose it. All powers are in the hands of the people.”

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5 “Eastland-Brady Presented Facts, Made People Think.” Tate County Democrat. August 18, 1955
The White Citizens Council was first formed in the early 1950s in Indianola, Mississippi. It was formed by Robert Patterson but was based on Judge Tom Brady’s manifesto, *Black Monday*, where he stated that there should be groups formed across the South where the people were law-abiding, but resisting integration of the schools. Brady suggested to name it “Sons of the White Magnolia,” but when Patterson named it, he chose the Citizens Council. Their goal was to use economic retaliation, intimidation, and harassment to keep Black citizens from trying to desegregate places, but most importantly to keep them from desegregating schools. The White Citizens Council was incredibly successful in their tactics and because of them by 1964, there was still no school district in Mississippi that was desegregated. The White Citizens Council ballooned in popularity around the state. A local chapter was formed in 1955 in Tate County, but a chapter was never formed in DeSoto County.

The local chapter of the Council shared the plan for the local areas to all meet over the next month and then to have another county-wide meeting in the next month. Another news article quoted Senator Eastland, “I don’t have to abide by it [the court’s decision], all I have to do is remain white. They cannot force us to drink the black hemlock… they can’t force us to be mongrelized.” John Moore Callicott, the mayor of Coldwater (a small town in Tate County) was president of the Tate County Citizens Council. Hal Spragins, Jr. was the Master of Ceremonies, Robert B. Patterson the

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7 “Citizens Council Plans Community Meetings in Tate.” *Tate County Democrat*. August 18, 1955.
executive secretary of the Mississippi Association of Citizens’ Councils, and M.P. Moore
the director of the Tate County Council.\textsuperscript{8} The \textit{Tate County Democrat} continued to post
monthly updates on meetings for the Citizens Council over the next few months and
into the next year. Many of the articles encouraged all white people to attend so that
they could continue their Christian way of life.

The Citizens Councils were the immediate white response to \textit{Brown v. Board of
Education} and erupted in popularity soon after the decision was made. According to the
articles in the newspaper, the Tate County Citizens Council was 500 members strong
and had a turnout of 1,000 people. There is no surviving information at this time that
can corroboreate those numbers and after 1956 the \textit{Tate County Democrat} stopped
running so many articles for them. These articles nevertheless show that while
northwest Mississippi did not experience the same level of violence due to integration
as other parts of Mississippi, there were large groups of people who were completely
against integration. Senator Eastland and Judge Brady used Christian rhetoric in their
speeches supporting segregation. They are quoted as saying, “We are on God’s side”
and “the Citizen’s Councils’ cause was Christian and Moral.”\textsuperscript{9} This theme of using
Christianity and Christian rhetoric was seen throughout the fight against integration.

Many white evangelicals used a Christian rhetoric to fight against integration.
Preachers as well as average citizens would use Bible passages to add weight to their

\textsuperscript{8} Eastland-Brady Presented Facts, Made People Think.” \textit{Tate County Democrat}. August 18, 1955

\textsuperscript{9} Eastland-Brady Presented Facts, Made People Think.” \textit{Tate County Democrat}. August 18, 1955
belief that segregation was good. Many Mississippians saw white supremacy and evangelicalism as similar ideas and because of this, when integration was first introduced many of them saw it as a “heinous moral evil.” Not all white Mississippians saw it this way, though. Some were motivated by their faith to examine segregation and to see if it was truly favored by God. These people rarely fully supported integration, though, probably due to fear of being ostracized from their community. Instead they would champion ideas that surrounded integration like free speech and basic decency.¹⁰

Hate and racism were all around throughout this time period. In September of 1955, Judge Gerald Chatham’s father was the district attorney in the Emmett Till case. He was called to persecute JW Milam and Roy Bryant for killing the fourteen-year-old boy because he was the district attorney for the 17th Judicial District which included DeSoto, Tate, Panola, Yalobusha, and Tallahatchie Counties in northwest Mississippi.¹¹ When the reports first came out of Mississippi about Emmett Till, the governor of Mississippi, Hugh White, sent Mr. Chatham a telegram that urged him to energetically prosecute the case and he also sent a separate telegram to the NAACP national office saying that Mississippi would persecute the case and do what needed to be done. These tones and attitudes quickly changed, though, as reports came out from other places. T.R. M. Howard told reporters, “There will be hell to pay in Mississippi.” Mamie Bradley,


Emmett Till’s mother, said, “Mississippi is going to pay for this.” White then contacted Chatham and offered to take him off the case, but Mr. Chatham turned him down.

White Mississippians saw the quotes and critiques from the northern press and the civil rights leaders as a verbal assault against Mississippi and how it was run. This caused them to take these criticisms personally which caused them to resent what was being said and to lash out against them. It also caused them to close their ranks around Bryant and Milam and to see this as an issue of ‘us vs them’ instead of the horrific murder that they had previously seen it as. Gerald Chatham was far enough removed from Money, Mississippi, that he was able to see this case more clearly instead of through glasses that were tinted by the criticism of his state. This is another unique perspective of DeSoto and Tate County. The counties, especially DeSoto County, are part of the Memphis metropolitan area which allows many citizens to split their alliance between Mississippi and Tennessee. These two counties were also not as dependent on farming as other counties throughout Mississippi which made it where the white population did not see the need to control the Black population as much as others. These two facts allowed citizens in these two counties to not feel as assaulted by the words of the northern press and the civil rights leaders, which allowed them to keep a more open mind about the situation.

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13 Chatham interview, March 8, 2023.

This situation with the Emmett Till case was one of the reasons why his father was Judge Chatham’s hero. He took a very unpopular stand and was persecuted by the public for it, but he still stood up for what he knew was right. His health was already poor by this time, but he still gave the trial one hundred percent effort. Judge Chatham explained that he learned to think of civil rights as just doing right by people, as his father did. The media coverage was nonstop, though, and attacked their family and their household as soon as it was announced that he would be persecuting the trial. He explained that “the national news came to our house, interviewed my daddy, interviewed the family, went out to our farm, interviewed the Black people out there, trying to get them to say something bad about my daddy.” The media ended up scrapping the entire story, though, because they realized that he was not the racist figure that they had originally planned him to be. Other areas around the country instantly expected a white farmer in Mississippi to also be racist, but instead, they found a kind man who wanted to do right by others. The hate mail also began to swarm around the same time as the media. People from all over the country sent hate mail to Mr. Chatham for accepting the case. This time period was especially filled with hate and it was not just about school desegregation. Anything that had to do with race was immediately polarizing between groups and would cause the groups to spew hate at each other.¹⁵

¹⁵ Chatham interview, March 8, 2023.
In 1954, DeSoto County citizens heard from Joe Norvell, who was the Vice-Chairman of the County Board of Education. Mr. Norvell went to the different white schools throughout DeSoto County to discuss the fears of integration. A news article stated that he “discussed the Spiritual, Political, and Social-Legalistic aspects of segregation.” It said that he “complimented the colored people... [for] handling their situation with dignity.” An idea that was floating around the Mississippi legislature at that time was if the state was forced to desegregate, then Mississippi would abolish the public schools completely before allowing integration to happen.\textsuperscript{16} Norvell spoke out against it, and the article said, “He believed to abolish the public schools the white people would have most to lose as the colored people already have little to lose.”

Norvell also spoke to the citizens about the equalization laws, which were put into place to try and create equal facilities. He publicly supported them and shared that they were the best program to follow at that time. He also spoke of the Minimum Educational Foundation Program which was required by new laws. He shared with the group that Mississippi had the lowest income per capita in the nation, Mississippi had the lowest money spent per pupil, and that Mississippi had the highest number of one-teacher schools.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Bolton, *Hardest Deal of All*, 66.

\textsuperscript{17} “100 Hernando Schools Patrons Heard Board Vice-Chmn. Talk on Segregation and County Unit Plan.” *The Times-Promoter*. October 14, 1954.
Mr. James Jackson was born in 1937. He has spent his entire life in Tate County and according to his memory he was the fifteenth Black person to ever register to vote in the county. He registered in 1963 and remembered seeing the names of the fourteen Black citizens who had registered before him. He recognized the names and was astonished because many of them were much older than him. When he walked out of the courthouse, he was twenty-four years old and for the first time in his life, he felt like a person that had at least a little bit of power.  

Mr. Jackson is the son of farmers who owned and worked their own four hundred acres of land. His parents were both children of sharecroppers who rented land and worked it their entire lives. He is the grandson of a man who was freed from slavery at fourteen years old. His parents were very lucky to own their land, but even with that privilege, they were still harshly treated which caused them to struggle. When Mr. Jackson was a youth the Department of Agriculture told his parents that they were only able to plant on twenty-two acres of their four hundred. These same standards were not forced on the white planters at the time. To circumvent this, Mr. Jackson’s father, Leroy Jackson, rented some of his property out to other Black farmers so that he could use his land and help himself as well as his community.

Mr. Jackson attended segregated schools throughout his entire time in school. Because he lived in a rural area of Tate County, he attended a small one-room building.

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that was typically the only venue available for rural, Black students to be educated in. The school, which was called the Pilgrim Rest School, was built by his father, Leroy Jackson, and two others named Clyde Avant and Jessie Freemen. When explaining the school, Mr. Jackson said, “When you got there, you had to start the fire... You didn’t have... any bathroom. They had a building outside, a place for you to go to the bathroom. You didn’t have any water. You didn’t have very many books. And you had one teacher teaching everything.” Typically, the schools would be grades first through eighth grade because at that time high school (ninth through twelfth grade) was not available for African Americans. Mr. Jackson was lucky in this regard because he was entering high school right at the cusp of Brown which meant that communities were beginning to create avenues for Black students to attend upper grades. Mr. Jackson was one of the first to be able to finish all twelve years within Tate County.  

Mr. Jackson left Pilgrim Rest School in the seventh grade and then attended the Senatobia Black School in the eighth-grade. After that, he attended Warrior High School for two years before it was burned down. Another school was thrown up and it was called Fredonia High School. Fredonia was in actuality a barn that the county threw up to give the students somewhere to attend high school. Mr. Jackson explained it by saying “You could look through... the wall and see the sun. I never seen nothing like this in my life.” He explained that because it was built in a swampy field that was constantly either muddy or dusty, the county would have the janitor bring a five-gallon bucket of burned oil from the white school buses and he would mop the floors with it to keep the

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mud and dust from being so bad in the school. These stories show that the Black children had to endure many harsh realities that the white students surely did not have to encounter. These types of schools were the norm for Black children in DeSoto and Tate Counties, but they were not the norm for the white students in the same counties. In these same counties, the white students typically had more centralized schools that were better suited for education than the one-room schoolhouses that Black students were educated in.  

Pilgrim’s Rest School

A Black school located in Tate County

Photo Courtesy of Tate County Heritage

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Arkabutla High School

A white school located in Tate County

Photo Courtesy of Tate County Heritage

Mr. Vernon Jackson was the son of sharecroppers, and he was born in 1947 in Coldwater, Mississippi. Both of his parents had approximately third or fourth-grade level educations because of this system of not providing adequate schooling options for Black students. In Tate County when they were growing up, there was no higher-level education available for Black students. They would have had to travel to Memphis to receive a high school education.¹ Mrs. Bernice Jackson, his wife, was born in 1955 in Hernando, Mississippi, and shared that her parents had similar educational experiences in DeSoto County. She shared, “My dad... dropped out in the third grade. My mom had an eighth-grade education... My mom went to a church school. It was in a church, where they had to haul the wood in for fire and stuff. She went to the school as far as she

¹ Vernon Jackson, February 8, 2023.
could go... They all [her mom’s siblings] went to the eighth grade and then went to the fields.”

Mrs. Deloise Oliver’s parents also had a similar experience. She said, “My mom went to the eighth grade... I think my dad said he went through sixth grade.”

This was the typical life for most Black citizens who lived in the rural areas of Mississippi. At this time, the closest high school for a Black student was in Memphis, which is an approximately forty-mile drive.

These experiences of Black children in DeSoto and Tate County were very similar to experiences that were seen elsewhere throughout the state. Throughout the late 1950s, almost no Black students of Claiborne County were able to get a high school education. The county school system did not have high schools for either white students or Black students, but the city school system in Port Gibson was willing to allow the white students to be bused into the city school to get a high school diploma. Black students could choose to go to either the Claiborne County Training School or the Alcorn High School, but neither of these schools nor the school systems provided transportation for the students so many were kept from being able to go past the eighth grade because of this. Many Black students were not even able to get to the eighth grade, though. Fifty rural schools around the county were available for the Black students to attend school. They all offered first through eighth grade and had either one or two teachers teaching everyone. They also had a similar shortened schedule to the

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3 Deloise Oliver, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Hernando Public Library, March 27, 2023.
schools in DeSoto and Tate County that allowed the Black students to only be in school when they were not needed out in the farms. Many Black students struggled to maintain their education and dropped out before they even reached eighth grade.4

While the conditions of the Black school were subpar when compared to the white schools, the students also received a subpar education as well. The typical white school at that time was in session from September until early May. The Black students did not have that privilege. They typically did not start school until around Thanksgiving, once the picking of cotton was done for the season, then the students would get out of school in March before the beginning of planting season. They would then return to school for approximately six weeks in June and July.5 This shows that there was a very large disparity between the state of white education in DeSoto and Tate County and Black education. The Times-Promoter reported on July 1, 1954, “The colored schools... will open on July 12 for a two-month term, then close for the cotton-picking season. They will reopen on December 1 for the winter term.”6 Headlines with similar reports can be seen from the 1954-1955 school year and up until the 1963-1964 school year. In the 1964-1965 school year, the summer session was finally done away with and the Black students were on a similar schedule as the white students. It was announced at the beginning of the school year “The county’s colored schools’... students will register

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6 “County School Board.” The Times-Promoter, July 1, 1954.
on Tuesday, September 1. Regular classes will be in session Wednesday. There will not be a cotton-picking recess this fall.”

While the conditions in the school were subpar, the experiences with the other children made the situation even worse. Mr. Jackson shared that when he was growing up, there were buses for white students to ride to school, but the Black students had to walk to school. Mr. Jackson first set the scene, explaining the daily struggles that he and his siblings had to face while they walked to school. Mr. Jackson said, “In my early years... we were walking two miles to school. There wasn’t no bus now. If you got there [to school], you were gonna walk... It’d be raining and sleet ing and everything else. But they [his parents] still said you got to go to school.” Mr. Cathey added, “My daddy [Melvin Cathey] walked five miles to school. He showed me how he had to walk... and [with] the [white] busses throwing up dust.” Mr. Jackson agreed with Mr. Cathey and also elaborated on the abuses that they would face in Tate County at the hands of the white children, “The window be down, they holler, they would throw things. Sometimes I guess they put rocks on there. Just took them to throw it [at] us.”

While it seemed like all of the odds were against the Black children who were forced to walk to school amongst insults and stones being thrown at them just to then get to a cold school where they had to start their fires, use the restroom outside, and use many second-hand items, some were still able to rise above those circumstances and make something special out of their lives. Mr. Jackson is a prime example of that.

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8 Jackson interview, January 30, 2023.
He accredited all of his success to his mother. He said, “My mother was the one that really guided us when it came to the educating thing. My mother was real smart in math.” He continued with, “She just held out a math book and it was just like you was in school.”

Mr. Jackson, who would go on to get a Master’s Degree, believes that this lack of options for schooling is part of the reason why he pursued education even after he left school. He said, “I didn’t like the system... I didn’t want to be used. So, I felt like this, as far as getting an education, the farther you go and the more you know, the better off you going to be.” He continued, “I didn’t have any intention of being a principal... But my thought was I couldn’t sit up at a conference with the superintendent and the principal and they talk over my head... I wanted to make sure I was on that level... that was the driving point that drove me to continue.” At this point Mr. Jackson got emotional. He said, “I hate to sound negative... but I didn’t want him telling me nothing. And that comes from my heart... As long as I know an answer, you’re not gonna be able to fool me.”

Throughout this time period, the people were able to create their successes because the larger community and the government organizations were not assisting them. Because of this, they found that they had to assist themselves and each other if they wanted to see success on a large scale. Mr. Jackson, for example, was able to attend school because his father and neighbors built the school. He was able to learn

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10 Jackson interview, January 30, 2023.
even with long breaks in his schooling because his mother pushed him and challenged him every day. It was the people in the communities that made the largest impact on his education. This resilience was a direct impact due to the harsh treatment that many of them received at the hands of Jim Crow. The world around them was set up for Black citizens to fail. They lacked access to basic needs, access to successful careers, and access to education. They also faced the threat of violence, whether economic, physical, or a combination of the two. Because of these inequities that they faced, they had to band together as a community to fight racism and their main option was through education. By teaching the younger generation, they were giving them a chance of not just survival, but also an opportunity to have a successful life.

Segregation After Brown

Things began to change in 1955 for Black students with the ruling on Brown v. Board of Education. On June 2, 1955, The Times-Promoter published an article about the ruling. It said, “It is not known now, of course, if the steps taken by Mississippi to have eventually equalized schools for white and colored will take care of the situation.” The article goes on to say, “It seems most likely that schools built in the predominantly colored sections of towns and counties will take care of the colored children, and naturally it will be the most feasible for the children to attend.” The superintendent of DeSoto County Schools, J. F. Russum, said, “Mississippi had schools set up under the
state constitution and would continue to abide by the constitution so far as possible and that DeSoto County would follow suit.”

These equalization plans were prevalent around the state of Mississippi and they were happening just the same in DeSoto County. On July 7, 1955, it was announced that the district would begin offering “4 years of public high school... for negroes beginning this year, instead of the 2 years.” Their intentions of making these schools equal were made evident when it was stated “Under the new plan educational facilities for Negroes and the schools for the white children will be equalized.” The thought process was that by providing more equal access to education, the state of Mississippi would be allowed to continue keeping separate facilities. In the plan, there would be three white high schools with a fourth high school to be built. Plans were made to build and open the first twelve-grade school for Black students in Hernando and to build or maintain three elementary schools for Black students. In March of 1956, the district was able to purchase the plot of land for the high school. The superintendent stated that the school would have “24 classrooms, library, laboratory, cafeteria, gymnasium and athletic field, and the entire setup will be as good and actually more modern than the present white schools.”

While the county was still working on building the school, the students were already able to step into the first high school institution in DeSoto County for Black students. The elementary school moved into a church building and the high school moved into the previous elementary school. The high school immediately began to create routes for students to find success that they had previously never had access to.

In August of 1955, it was announced, “The principal of the new Hernando Negro High School, J. T. McGlowan, has 32 boys wanting to play football,” before asking for businesses and local citizens if they could help donate money to allow the team to form and have the needed materials to play.¹⁶ The school did not just focus on creating athletic avenues for students, it also tried to create avenues for students to find passions in the arts as well. In February of 1956, it was announced that the Hernando school was organizing a band. The article in the newspaper stated that twenty-one students had already signed up, but “The band needs donations from business firms and white and colored friends.”¹⁷ The school also needed assistance with getting books. It was reported in 1955 that the school was asking for donations of books and magazines. The article said that the school had 175 students and that to become accredited it needed to have at least five books per student.¹⁸ The school needed heavy assistance from the community so that it could be successful. The same advertisements were not posted throughout the newspapers concerning the white schools. The county was trying

¹⁶ “Hernando Negro High School is Organizing Football Team.” *The Times- Promoter.* August 18, 1955.
to make these schools seem to appear equal, but the county was not willing to put in enough money to truly make them equal.

Senatobia City Schools had the same equalization plans at its Black school. In the early 1950s (the exact year is not clear), the school on Gilmore Street (which would eventually become known as Melvin Cathey School, but did not yet have a name), built a brick building thanks to a $50,000 bond that was issued to the district. In 1954, the Gilmore Street school received its first principal Melvin Cathey. In the 1961-1962 school year, the school received additional money and was able to build a gymnasium and more classroom buildings and was officially able to begin offering high school level courses to Black students. The school was then named Melvin Cathey School after the principal. He would continue to serve as the principal there from 1954 until 1970 when he became the principal of the South School. After full desegregation hit in the 1971-1972 school year, he became the principal of Senatobia Elementary School.19

Even with the outpouring of equalization programs that were taking off around Mississippi, the smaller schools were still prevalent and were still the primary education zones for Black students who lived in rural areas. In 1955 a severe tornado passed through DeSoto County and touched down near Lewisburg, a small community in the eastern portion of DeSoto County. The tornado touched down and destroyed the Wiggins School, which was a small one-room school that shared the property with the Wiggins Church building. The article says that the school and the church were “literally

19 *The Heritage of Tate County Mississippi.* Curtis Media Corporation, 1991.
exploded by the decreased outside pressure... which moved roof and floor... to the center of the side road 50 feet away.” Three had been killed by the tornado. One was the teacher who ran the entire school, Gladys Jones, and the other two were students in the school. The school had been in session and the newspaper reported that many other students were severely injured and rushed to the hospital in Memphis.20

Mr. Vernon Jackson started school in a segregated school in Tate County. In the summer before his eleventh grade of high school, he moved to Waterloo, Iowa, to live with his sister and brother-in-law. This was his first time seeing an integrated school and he was able to attend there for his entire eleventh-grade year. He was then drafted into the United States Armed Forces in July of 1966. Because he was drafted before his senior year began, he was not able to graduate from high school. He said, “I probably could have [finished high school], but I didn’t challenge the situation. I just obeyed the order that I received from Lyndon B. Johnson.” He was drafted into the infantry where he served for twelve months in Vietnam. He was trained to work with the eighty-one-millimeter mortar, M16, and M14. He said, “We spent most of our time in the field in the jungles in Vietnam.” He served in an integrated force during this time period. Mr. Jackson said that his time in the armed forces was “probably better than most.”21

Mrs. Bernice Jackson, who attended segregated schools until tenth grade, explained that whenever the students at Hernando Central (what the Black school in Hernando came to be called) received new textbooks, they would always have seven or

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eight names already written in on the front cover. She said, “The fact was that these books were at one time in the white school, and then after seven, eight years passed on down to the Black students.” Mr. Michael Cathey, who was in segregated schools until the seventh grade, also saw these same conditions. He also had an inside look, though, because his father was the principal at the Black school in Senatobia. If Mr. Melvin Cathey, his father, attempted to order new books for his school, the new books were always delivered to the white school and then their second-hand books were then delivered to the Black school. It even got so bad that one time when Mr. Melvin Cathey ordered a mop bucket, the new one was delivered to the white school, and the old, used one was delivered to the Black school. Because of these inequities, the community had to do a lot of fundraising for the school just to be able to buy simple things that the school needed to be able to function. These inequities also show the lack of equality between the Black schools and the white schools. While the schools across the state were attempting to create a façade of equality, the truth was lying right below the surface that the experiences were not equal.

While students in Mississippi faced hardships of segregation every day, the students in DeSoto and Tate Counties did not have it staring them in the face constantly in the same way. DeSoto and Tate Counties did not typically have signs up that signified things were for Black or white people. The first time that Mrs. Bernice Jackson saw

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22 Bernice Jackson, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Municipal School District Professional Development Center, February 8, 2023.

anything like that was when she was in middle school. Mrs. Jackson was in a club at the Black Hernando School called the Tri-Hi-Y. In either seventh or eighth grade, the club went on a field trip to South Panola High School which is located in Batesville, Mississippi, and is commonly referred to as the gateway to the Delta. This was her first time going that far south. The bus stopped for gas and when all of the students unloaded from the bus, the teacher noticed a sign at the water fountain that said, “Colored Water.” The teacher immediately loaded the students back on the bus and said that they were not drinking any “colored water” and that the students would have to wait until they got back to Hernando to be able to drink any water. Mrs. Jackson remembers this event clearly because it was the first time that she had ever seen a sign like that in her life. In Hernando, where she had grown up, there were differentiated water fountains in the DeSoto County Courthouse, but she explained that there was not ever a sign, people just knew where they were supposed to go. It was the same in the bathrooms at the courthouse and Mrs. Jackson said that she was sure that the facilities that she had to use were lesser in comparison to the white facilities. There is still a stark difference between just knowing which bathroom to use and having a sign up that barred you from the bathroom. The areas of DeSoto and Tate Counties were unique in the fact that they did not blast their segregation in public in the same way as the Delta towns.

Hernando also has a local ice cream shop that is called Velvet Cream, but is locally referred to as “The Dip.” The shop served everyone at its walk-up style windows,
but it was commonly known in the town that the front window was reserved for the whites, while the side window was for the Black customers. This was the same principle at the dentist’s offices and doctor’s offices. Mrs. Jackson remembered having to use separate waiting rooms at both the dentist and the doctor. Her personal experiences at the medical offices were very different, though. At Dr. Wadsworth’s doctor’s office, she was treated with respect and kindness and never felt any ill will when she had to sit in the section for Black patients. Even after segregation ended and she was able to sit in the white waiting room, she shared that it was an odd experience and she still always felt like she should go to the right instead of going straight. At the dentist, though, the doctor treated her with no respect and was especially rough with his Black patients while also being very rude to them. This treatment made the fact that she was segregated from the other patients worse. She said, “I think it was the fact that after I went through the back door, he treated me like I wasn’t human. And that kind of bothered me, but it wasn’t like that with the doctor, Dr. Wadsworth. They were like family.”

Mrs. Bobbie Banks highlighted the oddness of this time with the segregated facilities. She explained that when she was growing up in Senatobia, she had to use separate waiting rooms at the doctor’s office, but then she would go into the same examination rooms as the white patients and would be seen by the same doctor as the white patients. Many supporters of segregation tended to support the theories that

said that Black people carried diseases and that was why they could not touch the same things and use the same facilities.\textsuperscript{27} This argument seems to go against itself, though, when the patients are kept in separate waiting rooms, but they then use all of the same facilities, but just do not see each other.

This was a common argument that was used throughout the entire United States to keep Blacks and whites from mixing. Whites stereotyped African Americans as being unclean and as disease carriers and thought that by touching the same things or coming into contact with each other, they risked contamination. This belief was seen in all places where white and Black citizens may interact. It played a role in the control of public swimming pools in the North, public beaches in the South and the West, and amusement parks all across the United States. This same belief also impacted the lives of Black citizens when they went into different places like the doctor’s office, the dentist’s office, or shops and eateries.\textsuperscript{28}

Mrs. Carole Stigler was a white woman who also saw these same segregated facilities. She grew up in Memphis, though, and experienced a more explicit form of Jim Crow than what was in existence in DeSoto and Tate Counties. She explained that she remembered always seeing public water fountains in the area that were labeled white or colored. She also remembered going to the movies where the Black customers had to sit in the back and the white customers had to sit in the front. The Orpheum, which is a


historic performing arts center in downtown Memphis, was also segregated with the white theatergoers sitting in the orchestra area and the Black theatergoers having to sit upstairs. She explained that the buses they frequently rode in downtown Memphis were similar to this as well because the white riders sat in the front and the Black riders sat in the back. When thinking back to this time period, she said, “I just never thought about anything that they were being forced to do. That was just how I grew up. That’s how it was.” This shows that while segregation was constantly on the minds of the Black citizens that were being oppressed, it was not on the minds as much of the white citizens because they did not realize that other people were not getting the same things as them. Mrs. Stigler did not have any hatred for Black citizens, in fact, she would choose to teach at the formerly all-Black school when schools first integrated. But when she was growing up, it just never occurred to her that any sort of favoritism was being shown to her.29

Her remembrances also show the difference between life in Memphis and life in DeSoto and Tate Counties. In the two more rural counties in Mississippi, Black and white citizens commonly had to share the same facilities even though there may be a different entrance. This did not happen in bigger cities such as Memphis. In larger cities, the segregation was there and was much more prominent around everyone. These larger cities also commonly had large areas of the city that were either primarily white or primarily Black and because of this, the businesses would be even more segregated because of the people that naturally surrounded them. In the smaller, more rural areas,

this was not the case because many of these towns would only have one grocery store or one clothing store, so the entire town, whether Black or white, would all shop in the same place.

These experiences in Memphis were more similar to other portions of Mississippi, especially in the Delta than to DeSoto and Tate Counties. In Claiborne County, there were two distinct streets where Black businesses and white businesses were operated. Black businesses were typically located on Fair Street while the white businesses were typically located on Main Street. In DeSoto and Tate Counties, the businesses were typically interspersed amongst each other without as clear of a distinction. The days of shopping were also typically segregated as well. White people typically shopped Monday through Friday and then Saturday was left available for Black shoppers to come into town. This was such a phenomenon throughout the state that Edgar Crisler Jr. wrote in a newspaper, “Saturday in Mississippi... means Negro Day, when the streets are so packed with negroes that you can’t walk in a straight line down the street.”³⁰ These experiences of citizens in Delta towns were more similar to the experiences of Black citizens in Memphis and were not as similar to the experiences of Black citizens in DeSoto and Tate Counties.

When integration did finally hit these places, it came at a very slow pace. Mr. Vernon Jackson says, “It was a slow process... Because basically most segregated places, the owner... really didn’t want to be the first one to walk out and allow that to happen.”

He continued with, “They were afraid too. I’m sure from the standpoint of what the power to be expected.” He also said that it was not just the white business owner’s reluctance, the Black community was also hesitant to break that line. He said, “Those of us who were being discriminated against, we had to sort of... find our way into being comfortable and crossing that line.”

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31 Vernon Jackson, February 8, 2023.

From the time of 1954 to 1964, integration was completely delayed throughout Mississippi. After years of hard-line segregation, Mississippi school districts finally began to desegregate their schools through freedom of choice. This was the idea that students could choose to attend whatever school they wished to attend that was located within the attendance zone of the student. While freedom of choice began in 1964 in Mississippi, it was not until the fall of 1966 that Desoto County began to desegregate its schools through the plan, but Tate County had not yet complied. Because of this lack of participation, many Black Mississippians called this plan “very little choice and no freedom at all.”¹

In the 1969-1970 school year (which was the final school year before the Mississippi schools were officially forced to desegregate), the white Hernando school had a total of forty-three Black students attending between the 1st and 12th grades. There were twenty-eight girls and 15 boys. The girls were spread out across the different grades but had higher groupings in the elementary grades. The boys were only between the grades of first grade and seventh grade with no male students being in the eighth grade through the twelfth grade.² Tate County had a total of two Black students that were attending.³

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¹ Bolton, Hardest Deal of All, 139-143.
³ Sharon Hale, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Public Library, June 6, 2023.
Mrs. Deloise Oliver was one of the first Black students to integrate the formerly all-white Hernando schools. DeSoto County Schools staggered its freedom of choice plans. It first started with allowing first through fifth grade to have the choice of which school to attend. Then the next year it allowed sixth through eighth grade and the next year ninth through twelfth grade. Mrs. Oliver was able to enter the previously white Hernando school in 1968 when she was in the sixth grade. There were approximately fifteen other Black students who started with her in the middle school grades. She says:

I think it was quite a few of them that went that year. But what happened that next year, quite a few of the parents also pulled them out... They didn’t send them back. [It] probably had to do with the fact, like I told you with my dad, they got a lot of threatening information from people... It was about fifteen of us who went at that age group... But a lot of them that next year didn’t go back... They went back over to Hernando Central... Back to the Black school.\(^4\)

From the time that Mrs. Oliver first stepped onto the bus, she was aware that she was not wanted nor welcomed at the school. She said, “Riding on the bus... everybody else was moving back, didn’t want you to touch them.” Mrs. Oliver’s

\(^4\) Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.
situation was mitigated, though, because she did not have to endure this alone. Several of her neighbors and cousins all attended the white school together. They all lived close by as well so they were able to sit together on the bus and give each other strength and company. Her older sister also later attended the high school for her senior year once it opened for freedom of choice. Many of the students that went to the white Hernando school were from the same few families. The Jackson family had seven children, the Williford family had five children, the Taylor family had six children, the Bell family had five children, and the Dobbins family had six children. The students that were going through this typically had family members that were also going through it as well.

Overall, only a small portion of Black families chose to send their students to the white Hernando High School. Altogether there was a total of fourteen families that sent their children to the white Hernando school.

Somewhat surprisingly, all of the Black students who were attending with her were female. She says, “My brother who was next to me... he didn’t go... More girls went soon... I don’t know why. The boys probably wouldn’t have put up with stuff like us girls maybe... I have one brother who’s two years older than me and he didn’t go.” Mrs. Oliver suggests that it could have been because the male students may have not handled situations like the female students would or maybe it was because the other boys would pick on the Black boys more. But it could also be because these families

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5 Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.
7 Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.
knew that many white families were scared of their white daughters being raped or abused by a Black male while at school. This was one of the main reasons why white parents and white legislators claimed that they were against school integration. The Black families that were sending their children to the white school were more than likely consciously doing this to help protect their children from harsh allegations, but also to keep the white population from finding reasons to keep it from happening. By doing this, the Black parents had a personal hand in creating a situation that would ease the white community into being more accepting of integration. This is seen as well because at the higher grades, there were only Black female students, but at the elementary grades there were more Black male students. Mrs. Oliver had an older brother that could have gone, but her parents chose to not send him. She did have two younger brothers who were in the elementary grades, and her parents chose to send them. This is because young Black male children were less threatening to white parents than a Black male high schooler.\footnote{Hernando High School Wildcats Yearbook, 1969-1970 yearbook.}

Many of these students felt like they could only rely on each other. Mrs. Oliver said, “Yeah, we did at that time... but we didn’t understand... being young... and our parents just told us just to be careful and just watch yourself... We just kind of watched each other.” When compared to other places, though, Mrs. Oliver said that they did not have it as bad as other people. She said:

A few times I remember them throwing paper at us, they would be sitting behind us and throwing paper up at you, but it wasn’t just an everyday rough, bad experience. Just typical children being children... They didn’t know any better
either. I’ll be honest with you, our friend who lived up on the other street, they didn’t take it. And they fought a lot. They didn’t come back the next year.9

Mrs. Oliver did tell about one issue from the freedom of choice years. She was in the seventh grade and had been in study hall. As she was walking out of study hall, a white girl grabbed her hair and they ended up getting into a fight. She explained that back in that time if a student was suspended from school, the principal took the student home so that they could speak to the parents. The principal, who was a white male named Mr. Purvis, explained to her parents that she was not the one who instigated the fight and even though he did have to suspend her, he would not penalize her grade which was typical at that time period. She said, “I know a lot of places went through a lot of difficult times, but... the principals... I’m not saying they did us pretty, but I think they were pretty fair to us.”10 This could have been a potentially very different situation for Mrs. Oliver had Mr. Purvis not been fair with her. This was a white man who had authority over her, and she was put into a situation where she was alone with him for an extended amount of time. In the Deep South, Black women (and Black girls) were seen as sexualized beings that white men could easily take advantage of.11 By being alone in a car with a man of authority, any number of things could have happened to Mrs. Oliver. Instead, though, Mr. Purvis was an honest and decent man who took her

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9 Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.

10 Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.

straight home and did not punish her as strongly as he could have. This also is different than other parts of the Deep South. For example, when the first Black students attended Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, Minnijean Brown fought with a student and was immediately expelled from the school.\textsuperscript{12}

While many of the individual teachers and administrators at the school were overall kind and decent to Mrs. Oliver, she also still had to combat a system of racism that was stacked against her. This is seen in her experience of playing basketball in seventh grade. She and a friend tried out and made the basketball team. After a practice one day, “the coach told us we were pretty good, but he couldn’t play us, though, because we were Black.” She explained “That was one of the most hurtful experiences.” She and her friend both decided to quit the team after that experience because they were not going to go to all of the practices and work hard just to have to then sit on the bench during games. She explained, “We were told he wanted to play us, but he couldn’t.”\textsuperscript{13} This was very common in the days of early integration. Just a few years earlier in 1963 Mississippi State University (MSU) was invited to participate in the NCAA tournament for basketball. At this time, Mississippi had a “rigid color line in sports, which prohibited any mixed competition between white and Black athletes.” The governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, and many legislators were hard-core segregationists at this time, so they would have rather had MSU drop out of the NCAA


\textsuperscript{13} Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.
tournament than play a team that played a Black athlete. When legislators found out that MSU was still planning on playing in the tournament, they tried to find a judge that would “issue a temporary injunction that barred university officials from allowing the team to participate in the NCAA playoffs.” The school administrators, coaches, and the players had to sneak out of Starkville, Mississippi so that they would be able to play in the tournament. The MSU NCAA tournament situation happened only about five years before Mrs. Oliver was told that she could practice with the team, but she would not be able to play during games with the team. Mississippi had changed throughout that time, but at the end of the day, racism was still prevalent.

Mrs. Oliver credits her success in the freedom of choice schools and school in general to her parents. She says that her parents “were advocates of education.” Even though her mother only received an eighth-grade education and her dad only received a sixth-grade education, her parents were pushing them every day to be successful in the classroom. Her mom would give them practice spelling words that they were not even learning in school to practice; her dad was good at math, and he practiced it with them every night. Her parents were farmers, but they still put every single one of their nine children through college, even if that meant that they had four children in college at one time. She explained that other students were not as lucky to have that sort of influence in their lives. She said, “I think they [the school] kept the same [standards]... It was up to the children whether or not they were gonna... I’ll be honest, I have some friends who didn’t wanna put forth their effort. The same things [they did in Hernando Central] were

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too hard. This work is too hard. I can’t do this... I talked to several of them who they were ready to just drop out.” She later explained their reasoning:

They were saying I can’t do this work. This work is harder than what... they had been doing... Some of them had been able to get by with some certain things... having white teachers, they wouldn’t let them get by with anything... but not only white teachers, but we had a black teacher who just didn’t let [you get away with anything]. If you made a sixty-eight, you got a sixty-eight.

Mrs. Oliver was able to choose to be more successful in her life and at school. Other students did not make those same choices and because of that, they were less successful in their lives. 15

Other students across the state were not as lucky as Mrs. Oliver. Alean and John Adams chose to send their children to the white Brandon High School during freedom of choice. Their children did not have the same positive experiences that Mrs. Oliver had. Their oldest son, Kenneth, was in high school during those years, and he had the worst experience of all of his siblings. Because he was a Black male, he was feared, and when white people fear something they typically lash out in violence. Alean remembered, “It’s always been worse for Black boys than it is for Black girls... But boys- they always have a tendency to say, ‘they’re big, they’re Black,’ and they have a fear of them.” Her children struggled through their years of freedom of choice and were even resentful toward their parents for forcing them to be the sacrificial lambs. Her youngest son was only in elementary school during it and was forced to see a teacher every day who hated him and did not believe that she should have to teach Black students. Her daughter was put off the bus one day on a busy road and was abandoned to fend for herself. The biggest

15 Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.
question that many of these families faced was “Do you let them fend for themselves and fight their own battles, or do you step in to fight for them?” The parents had to walk a very fine line during this time to make sure that their children were taken care of and protected, but also that they were not causing too much of an issue that their children would get kicked out of school. This was a different situation when compared to what was happening in Hernando and the rest of DeSoto County. There was violence and mistreatment on behalf of the white teachers, students, and administration in other areas of Mississippi, but in DeSoto County, there was less of a chance of these things happening. It still was not the best situation in DeSoto County, but it was better for these students in DeSoto County than it was in other areas of the state.

In Mrs. Carole Stigler’s second year of teaching, she moved to DeSoto County Schools and began to teach at the white Hernando High School. This was in the 1969-1970 school year, which was still freedom of choice, but also the year that the *Alexander v. Holmes* decision was made. On October 29, 1969, the Supreme Court through *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* officially stated that schools had to immediately desegregate. The next month in November of 1969, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) ordered DeSoto County Schools to create a plan that would terminate their dual school system. The plan had to be submitted by December 17th. The statement from HEW read:

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The Fifth Circuit Court of the United States has ordered that school districts similar to yours must implement methods to terminate their dual system by December 31, 1969. Under these decisions, we are obliged to ask that you please prepare and submit to us in writing within 30 days of receipt of this letter a description of the methods which you are implementing to terminate the dual system by the date established by the Fifth Circuit Court.\footnote{18}{"County Board of Education Gets Directive from HEW." \textit{The Times-Promoter}, November 21, 1969.}

Mrs. Stigler remembered the anxiety and the stress after those announcements and decisions. She said, “I bet that’s when I started having blood pressure problems... I was twenty-two... I had some jack legs in junior English.”\footnote{19}{Stigler interview, March 29, 2023.} This created a very trying time because there was talk that over Christmas break the school would be forced to completely desegregate, so in January the school would be completely mixed with Black students and white students. Many of the white students were very upset about this decision and were saying hateful things about their future classmates. She remembered saying, “Whoa, whoa, whoa... I can’t control what you say when you’re not in this room, but I can control it when you’re in this classroom and I don’t wanna hear that. We’re not talking about that. We’re strictly staying with what’s in the textbook.”\footnote{20}{Stigler interview, March 29, 2023.}

This first year at Hernando schools was when she first began to see true hatred and racism. She said, “It began that first year I was in Hernando, I began to see it [racism] in my face. Those kids. Which they got it from home.” The months leading up to desegregation were a hot and turbulent time in Mississippi. Mrs. Stigler shared that it was at this time people began voicing opinions that she never would have expected from people whom she had previously thought of as friends. In her mind, the worst part
was that many people believed that if someone was not actively voicing the hateful comments, then they must have been with the other side. Mrs. Stigler was given verbal abuse and was called many racist names by her fellow white citizens because she saw it as her job as a Christian to love all of God’s children. This abuse only became worse after desegregation because she chose to be one of the white teachers who was sent to the previously all-Black school, Hernando Central, to teach. 21

While Mrs. Deloise Oliver was attending the white Hernando school, her parents regularly received threatening letters that were threatening to harm her and her family. Mrs. Oliver explains, “They [her parents] never let us know how our lives were being threatened because they held that from us.”22 She was lucky to not be aware of the threats and possible harm that was always lurking around the corner, but her parents were not that lucky. They would have had to live with the constant knowledge that people wanted to do them and their family harm because they were choosing to send their daughter to the white school.

These experiences show that the freedom of choice era was a scary experience for the children who were sent to the previously all-white schools. The main goal to stay out of trouble was to just keep their head down and tolerate any abuse that may have come their way. It was a very lonely experience for these students as they were the first to walk the previously all-white halls and to sit in classrooms that were full of students who had been taught their entire lives to hate them. Fortunately, at Hernando High

22 Oliver interview, March 27, 2023.
School there were some bright spots in these experiences and most of them were thanks to the staff members who reached past the color barrier to try and welcome these students. 

Mrs. Sharon Hale was a white student enrolled at Senatobia City Schools during the freedom of choice years. During the 1969-1970 school year, the Senatobia City School had two Black students. They were both little girls and one was in the first grade and the other was in the second grade. Mrs. Hale remembered seeing those two girls every day on the playground. They would always be by themselves and they would not be interacting with the other students. Mrs. Hale said, “I felt sorry for them, I really did. They were pretty isolated.” Mrs. Hale said that she was never aware of any bullying or harassment of the two students, but she did know that her fellow white students were very sheltered and did not know how to interact with the students of a different color because they had never been around them or interacted with them in any sort of way. The two students had it especially rough because unlike Mrs. Oliver, who was able to have family members and neighbors attend the white school with them, they were forced to endure the new school completely alone and with no support. They were also extremely young and more than likely were not completely aware of what was happening and why it was happening around them.23

While some Black students were beginning to attend the white schools through Freedom of Choice, the counties were still acting under their plans of equalization from 1955. In 1964, the DeSoto County Board of Education reached out to the state

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government for funds to build fourteen new classrooms at the three Black schools in the county. The classrooms were spread out across the county with the Delta Center in Walls getting four classrooms, Hernando getting four classrooms, and the East Side in Olive Branch getting six classrooms. Mr. Walter S. Carter, the superintendent of DeSoto County Schools, emphasized the growth of the student populations at these schools by saying that in the previous school year, there had been 4,696 students enrolled in the Black schools, and in 1964 there were 4,859 students enrolled at the same schools.²⁴

The schools were also equalizing in other ways as well. The 1964-1965 school year was also the first year that the Black schools did not have a cotton-picking recess in the fall and the schools started around the same time as the white schools. The Black schools began on September 1st with the white schools starting on August 27th.²⁵ In September of 1964, DeSoto County was quite even in its racial populations. The white schools altogether had a total of 3,428 students²⁶ and the Black schools had a total of 4,011 students.²⁷ This overall even enrollment of both races of students would eventually make it easier for DeSoto County Schools when it came to equally integrating the different schools. Senatobia Schools were also sitting at a place where the schools were overall even. In the 1969-1970 school year (the year before desegregation), the Senatobia City School (the white school) had 682 white students and two Black students.

²⁴ “Funds Assured for 14 Classrooms to Add to County Colored Schools.” The Times-Promoter. March 6, 1964.


(one in first grade and one in second grade) who were attending the school through Freedom of Choice. The Melvin Cathey School (the Black school) had 709 Black students and no white students during the same school year.28

Desegregation Orders Hit Tate and DeSoto

In May of 1970, DeSoto County was officially given the order to desegregate completely for the 1970-1971 school year. At this point, the county still had not submitted its plan for desegregation, and the superintendent, W. S. Carter, the school board president, J. O. Thompson, and the school attorney, W.E. Wilroy, Sr., were told that if they did not eliminate the dual system then they would face a suit in federal court. The school officials were given a list of three things that had to happen for them to be able to avoid court. 1) They had to eliminate the dual system and have a unified system that did not include Black or white schools. 2) The teachers had to match the same ratio of Black to white as the district. This meant for DeSoto County that “for each ten teachers assigned to a school, between three and four must be black.” 3) The students should be assigned to the nearest school to the student. This meant that the schools may need to use “pairing and zoning” so that the “ratio of the races [stays] as near the same as the total ratio for the county.” It was also expected for the county to send in its plan within ten days to be approved by the federal government.29

28 Desegregation Files, Senatobia Municipal School District, Report of total enrollment numbers for the 69-70 school year.

In June it was reported that HEW had accepted DeSoto County’s plan for desegregating its schools. By June 19th it was reported that “11 out of the 40 Mississippi school districts under orders to desegregate [were] to have their plans accepted,” but “25 school districts will have to comply with the federal requirements in order to have a planned statewide school desegregation suit dropped.”

On April 2, 1970, Senatobia Municipal School District had its desegregation plan approved. They planned to still segregate, but this time to segregate by sex instead of by race. Their plan was so that in the 1970-1971 school year, the school that had previously been referred to as Senatobia City School (the all-white school) would become known as the North School and the school that had previously been referred to as Melvin Cathey School (the all-Black school) would become known as the South School. The North School would become an all-girl school that would teach girls between 1st and 12th grade and the South School would become an all-boy school that would teach boys between 1st and 12th grade. In court documents, the district stated that it wanted to separate this way so that there would be no need for any additions or construction to the current schools. The court documents explain:

The Melvin Cathey School... has a campus housing five buildings, including gymnasium and modern athletic field. The rated classroom capacity of these facilities is 621 students. As designed, constructed and equipped, South School can serve students of all grades... without renovations or other reason for expenditure of funds.

The documents go on to explain that Senatobia City School is set up in the same way. It:

- has a campus housing four buildings, including gymnasium, which are, like the South School, of modern construction. Facilities for all twelve grades exist at this school and have been so designed, planned and equipped. As at South School, there are specialized rooms for children of small age, intermediate years, and of high school age, including science, home economics and other special use areas.

The rated classroom capacity of these buildings would allow for 673 students.\(^{31}\)

The school district had four reasons why it wanted to segregate by sex instead of doing a pairing and zoning plan like other schools were submitting. The first reason was that the school district was using the current buildings without the need for expensive repairs or risking just not using parts of the different schools. The next reason was so that the schools could have better discipline from the students because they would have fewer distractions that could keep them from learning. The third reason was so that teachers would accept the plan better and would be more willing to stay in the district. The final reason was so that fewer students would drop out and/or quit coming to school.\(^{32}\)

The final reason for the desegregation plan of Senatobia Schools was possibly the most important to the school board members. The superintendent and other administrators of the district knew that if they combined the sexes and the races, they could potentially have a large percentage of white students leave the school district and

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\(^{31}\) Desegregation File, Senatobia Municipal School District, Memorandum Opinion.

\(^{32}\) Desegregation File, Senatobia Municipal School District, Memorandum Opinion.
they did not want that to happen. This was a large possibility at this time because there was an implicit taboo around the sexes of different races intermingling. Parents as well as policymakers were terrified of the thought of having Black male students around white female students. People had been speaking out harshly over the years that if Black males (male students, male coworkers, male workers) had any sort of access to a white female, they would not be able to control themselves and they would rape, assault, or somehow hurt the white female. These beliefs can be traced back to Tom Brady’s manifesto *Black Monday*, but they had been felt by many white Americans before the Civil War.  

According to the enrollment data of Senatobia Schools during this time, this potentially did happen. In April of 1970, the school district projected that their white enrollment would be a total of 690 students with 341 being boys and 349 being girls in the 1970-1971 school year. In the 1969-1970 school year, the white enrollment was 682 students. In the 1970-1971 school year, Senatobia ended up with 262 white, female students between the grades of first and twelfth and 326 white male students in the same grades. This was a total of 588 white students between the North School and the South School. This was a difference of 15.96% between what the school district thought would enroll in school and how many students ultimately enrolled. While the data could seem like that means that close to one hundred white students chose to not go to the

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desegregated school, it could also be that birth numbers were less than what the school had accounted for or there could be other possible reasons as well.\textsuperscript{34}

It is also worth noting that the Black enrollment numbers also dipped at this time. In the 1969-1970 school year, there was a total of 711 Black students enrolled in Senatobia Schools (two were attending Senatobia City Schools through Freedom of Choice and 709 were attending Melvin Cathey School). The district projected that the 1970-1971 school year would have 701 Black students enrolled. In 1970, though, the school reported only 637 Black students enrolled. This is a difference of 9.57%. This shows that the projected enrollment of both races was off, but it also shows that the white population was more drastically wrong when compared to the Black population and this could point to the possibility of many students being pulled from the school due to desegregation.\textsuperscript{35}

Mrs. Sharon Hale was one of these students who left the public school system for the private school system during the 1970-1971 school year. After her sixth-grade year, she went to Hillcrest Academy, which is located out in a small community called Thyatira, east of Senatobia. She was one of the white students that Senatobia Schools would have projected to return, but instead of returning to attend the North School, her parents decided to pull her out so that she could go to Hillcrest Academy instead. Hillcrest Academy was a very small school that had just begun enrollment for the 1970-

\textsuperscript{34} Desegregation File, Senatobia Municipal School District.

\textsuperscript{35} Desegregation File, Senatobia Municipal School District.
1971 school year. The school lasted only a few years and was never able to set up a large group of students that could financially support it.\textsuperscript{36}

The 1971-1972 school year is also interesting to look at. This was the year after what is commonly considered the year of desegregation in Mississippi schools, but it was the first year of full desegregation in Senatobia. The school tried to segregate by sex for one year, but for the next school year, it mixed the males and females. In the 1969-1970 school year, the district had a total of 1,391 students. It projected to have 1,391 students again in the 1970-1971 school year. It had 1,225, though. Then in the 1971-1972 school year, the enrollment dropped to 1,178 students. That year the total white enrollment dropped from 588 to 521. The Black enrollment that year went up from 637 to 657. Again, this could be on account of dropping birth rates within the white population or possibly by families moving out of the area, but it could also be because of families choosing to remove their children from desegregated schools and putting them into all-white private schools that were popping up around Tate County.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Sharon Hale, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Public Library, June 6, 2023.

\textsuperscript{37} Desegregation File, Senatobia Municipal School District.
Black vs White Enrollment in Senatobia City Schools
1969-1972

# of Students

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<th>Black Students</th>
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<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1971</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1972</td>
<td>400</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Desegregation (1970-Present Day)

On July 3, 1970, DeSoto County Schools first released its official desegregation plans to the county. The plan divided the county into four attendance zones. The four zones were Horn Lake Attendance Area, Southaven Attendance Area, Olive Branch Attendance Area, and Hernando Attendance Area. While the school district’s ratios of Black versus white students would vary through the different attendance zones, the total number of students across the county was 4,612 Black students and 5,898 white students. Because of this attempt at creating a desegregation plan, the county was able to receive federal aid.¹

While there were more white students enrolled in DeSoto County Schools, the majority of the schools had higher Black populations than white populations. The only two schools that had higher white populations were Hope Sullivan Elementary, which had 1,074 white students and 27 Black students, and Southaven Elementary, which had 606 white students and 200 Black students. The enrollment totals are listed in the graph below for each school.

As previously stated, in the 1969-1970 school year, Senatobia Municipal School District put a plan into action for the 1970-1971 school year so that instead of segregating students by race they would begin to segregate the students by sex. All of the male students went to the previously Black school which had been named the Melvin Cathey School and was located on Gilmore Street in Senatobia. The name changed to the South School. All of the female students went to the previously white school which had been named the Senatobia City School and was located on College Street in Senatobia. The name changed to the North School. Melvin Cathey, a Black man, became the head principal at the South School, while George Ayers, a white man, became the head principal at the North School. The district would completely integrate the next school year and grades one through five would go to the school located on Gilmore Street, which became Senatobia Elementary School, and grades six through twelve would go to the school located on College Street, which became Senatobia High School.3

The Senatobia school board was also integrated in November of 1970. Leon Anderson and Archie Towns were the first two Black members of the school board and they joined Mills Carter, Bill Perkins, and Floyd Haywood. Archie Towns would serve one term and then James Jackson would replace him on the school board.4

Schools listed (left to right): Eudora Elementary, Hernando Junior High, Hernando High, Olive Branch Junior High, Olive Branch High, Delta Center, Horn Lake Elementary, Horn Lake Junior High, Hope Sullivan Elementary, Southaven Elementary.

3 The Heritage of Tate County Mississippi. Curtis Media Corporation, 1991.

4 The Heritage of Tate County Mississippi. Curtis Media Corporation, 1991.
From 1970 to the present day, there have always been three white school board members and two Black school board members. After succeeding Archie Towns, Mr. Jackson would serve on the school board for fifteen years beginning in 1974. By serving, he wanted to help create a better educational situation for his children. His children were in the Senatobia Municipal School District during the time of integration. He explained that he did not just try to serve on the school board, but also wanted to be an active participant in their lives and in their education. To achieve this, he would make sure to show up at open houses, and he made sure that he signed all of his children’s report cards because he wanted to make sure that the school and the teachers knew that his children came from a two-parent household. He explained his reasoning when he said:

Now, the reason for signing them was just to let the folks in the school system know that I was aware of what my child was doing... In our race... in our city, the school with so many of the children coming out of the housing projects... the
school system generally just sees the mother name on the child report card and I wanted to make sure that these folks know that I know what my child’s doing.  

When Carole Stigler first graduated with her teaching degree from Union University, her parents begged her to not become a teacher. She said, “When I graduated... integration hit and they were horrified. They just knew I’d be killed... They were both very fearful and said please don’t do this. And I said, I have to do this. I want to do this... I’m part of history... This will make a big difference.” In her third year of teaching, true desegregation finally hit in DeSoto County. Mrs. Stigler was one of the white teachers who elected to go to what had been the all-Black school in Hernando, but was now third grade through ninth grade.  

Hernando split its schools in a very interesting way. The previously all-white school had an upper part which was called Hernando High School. Some distance away, but on the same campus, was Hernando Elementary. These buildings are still in use today in Hernando but are now the DeSoto County School District’s district offices. The previously all-Black school was located a few blocks away and was called Hernando Central. It served all students from first through twelfth grade. It is also still in use and is now known as Oak Grove Central Elementary School. Once Hernando integrated its schools, it put grades first through second in the Hernando Elementary School, grades three through nine in Hernando Central, and grades ten through twelve in Hernando

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5 James Jackson interview, January 30, 2023

High School. Mrs. Stigler chose to go to the previously all-Black school to teach ninth-grade English, and she remembered her reasoning well, “It just never occurred to me not to go over there. All I can think about is those children, who’s gonna teach the children? I mean somebody’s got to teach the children.”

The schools were not as integrated as they appeared to be, however. During the years immediately after integration, the schools attempted to use ability grouping to minimize white and Black interactions. Ability grouping is explained by saying, “Black students experienced ‘second generation segregation,’ or tracking into lower-opportunity classes or courses of study, remaking unequal opportunity within statistically desegregated schools.” These problems were primarily seen in larger, more metropolitan school districts, but they were also seen to a certain degree within the more rural school districts as well. Mrs. Stigler encountered this while working at the previously Hernando Central School. The school administration used achievement testing to group the students. She explained that her 9-1 class (the top tier students of 9th grade English according to the achievement testing) would be majority white with three or four students that were Black. Then the 9-2 class would have a few more Black students, but would still be primarily white. 9-3 would have a fair mixture of both students. 9-4 would be primarily Black. 9-5 would be entirely Black and she explained that many of them would be reading on a second and third-grade reading level.

7 Stigler interview, March 29, 2023.


9 Stigler interview, March 29, 2023.
Achievement testing is not an accurate way to group students. It typically consists of a large test that is given on one day to see how a student does. It does not take into account if a student was a bad test taker, it does not take into account any daily grades, it does not take into account anything except for exactly what the students did that day. The achievement testing was standard across the board for all students to take. This caused a huge discrepancy between the white students and the Black students because the Black students were working with outdated textbooks and fewer resources which caused a testing gap between even the brightest Black students and their white counterparts.\(^{10}\)

Ability grouping was a way for the white administration to keep the students as segregated as possible. It also lasted much longer than most other forms of segregation that occurred during this time. It led to racial disparities and academic disparities that would impact these groups long after segregation finally ended.\(^{11}\) As Mrs. Stigler noted, it is hard to teach the same concepts and items to a classroom full of students who have done well in school and to a classroom full of students who have not done well. Students also typically flourish when they are grouped in corresponding ability groups within the classroom because many times, their fellow students can explain it to other students much better than a teacher could.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Carole Stigler, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia High School, March 29, 2023.


\(^{12}\) Stigler interview, March 29, 2023.
School administrations around the nation kept students segregated in other ways as well. A prime example was to just build schools in either predominately white areas or predominately minority areas and draw attendance zones that would keep students the most segregated. White students and their families also had some control to maintain segregation and to keep the schools from being fully integrated. One was for the families to move out of the cities and into the suburbs. Typically called “white flight,” it led to a mass exodus in many schools across the nation, but especially in the south, of white students leaving the intercity schools and moving to more rural, suburban schools so that they could be with fellow white students. DeSoto County Schools more than likely benefitted from this since it is part of the suburbs of the metro area of Memphis. Many white families left Memphis and sent their children to DeSoto County Schools to avoid the busing that was happening in Memphis. Another way that white families could maintain segregation was to completely pull their students out of public schools and enroll them in private schools. The last way to try and maintain segregation was to control within the school. An example of this is ability grouping, but that was only within the classroom. White parents also pushed their students to only join extracurricular activities and sports that were predominately white so that their students did not have to interact with Black students.13

DeSoto County and Tate County were guilty of some of these loopholes around desegregation, but not all of them. DeSoto County did use ability grouping to keep

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students separate and they did have some students leave to go to private schools, but overall the county was able to integrate students more smoothly than many other counties in Mississippi. This is especially seen in sports, where in the year of desegregation all of the sports are seen to be mixed between both white and Black athletes. DeSoto County Schools also had other extracurriculars such as Choir and the Babysitting Club that gave opportunities for students to integrate as well. Senatobia Municipal School District did not use ability grouping, but it did have more students leave to attend private schools. The district also did one year of segregating the students based off of sex instead of race. Tate County School District used more of these methods than the other two school districts. They used ability grouping within the classroom and they drew up school attendance zones that created high minority populations within the school.

1970-1971
Hernando High Cheer Team
1970-1971 Hernando High School Junior Varsity Football Team

1970-1971 Horn Lake High Boys Basketball Team
While Mrs. Stigler was teaching during the first years of integration, Mrs. Deloise Oliver was still attending school. She had previously attended Hernando schools during the freedom of choice years, so when the schools were fully integrated, she said that...
she was like the translator for the white community. Many times, Black students would come to her to question things and to find things out because they believed that she knew the white community better than them because she had been in it for a few years by that point. She said that even after integration, she still had some great teachers who tried to treat all of their students equally. She remembered her eleventh-grade history teacher the most, Mr. Johnson. She said, “He was a very good man. He tried to treat us like we were somebody.”

Mrs. Bernice Jackson, who also attended Hernando schools during this time, was able to integrate schools in her tenth-grade year of high school. That year she took Spanish with a teacher named Mrs. Maria Coleman. She explained about Mrs. Coleman, “She hadn’t been in the United States long. I always said that nobody told her that she was supposed to treat the Black students differently. She didn’t… She was the greatest teacher. Just the way she made us feel.” She remembered that year when her mom went to the open house at the school. She said that her mom had been being pushed aside and blown off by many of the other teachers, but Mrs. Coleman talked to her mom like a normal person. Mrs. Jackson recalled, “It was like she took the time and she treated my mama like she was a somebody. She was the same way in the classroom… I made up my mind then that I wanted to be able to impact young people the way she was able to impact young people.” All of her interactions with the white staff at Hernando were not always as positive, though. She recalled a story when she went and spoke with the white guidance counselor about her attending college. The counselor

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told her that she was not college material. Mrs. Jackson proved that guidance counselor wrong because she went on to get a bachelor’s and a master’s degree and at the time of this writing, she is working on a doctoral degree. \(^{15}\)

Even though the school was desegregated, the students were not. Mrs. Jackson had conflicts with fellow students as well. In her senior year of high school, she decided to run for the Black class president. At this time Hernando had Black class officers and also white class officers. She remembered “the only reason I was selected class president was because the white kids voted for me... I was a nobody, but I had the support of the white children... I won.” While many of the white students spoke to her in class, it was a very different story if she saw them over the weekend outside of school. She said:

The separatism was there... There was times when people who would speak to me at school, and we would be at town on Saturday and they’d be with their parents and they wouldn’t speak... I had one friend, and I asked him... and he said that his mama would’ve gotten mad at him... so he was not going to speak.

She also explained that at times the white students were more willing to talk, but the white teachers were dead set on keeping it from happening. She said, “There was this friend of mine... we were in geometry class, the teacher, if she saw him talking to me, she would move him... and one day she told him, you need to stop talking to that Black girl.”\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Bernice Jackson interview, February 8, 2023.

\(^{16}\) Bernice Jackson interview, February 8, 2023.
While Mrs. Jackson was in Mrs. Coleman’s Spanish class, they took a field trip to Memphis to go to a Mexican restaurant, order the food in Spanish, and learn a piece of Mexico’s history. Many of the students had never been to a Mexican restaurant so this would be a new experience for most of them. Mrs. Jackson and her friends did not have a car, but a white male student offered to let them ride up to Memphis with him. So, four Black female students piled into the car with one white male student and they left Hernando High School bound for Memphis. They were pulled over in Memphis by the police and questioned about what they were up to before eventually being allowed to join their classmates at the restaurant. None of them had ever expected something like that to happen, because it just did not happen in Hernando, but in Memphis, it was something alarming. Their teacher could not believe it when they first told her and was in complete shock that the police would even pull them over for something like that.17

Sam Jones, a white student who attended Hernando schools and was a senior when they integrated, also told of these conflicts. He grew up on a farm and remembered fondly his years of childhood when he, other white children, and Black children would all gather together to play baseball and touch football. Mr. Jones remembered in his senior year of high school, a Black male student came up and tried to shove him, telling him that he was going to beat him up. Another Black male came up and pushed the first student and told him not to touch him. The second man was Leroy Paine who was a guy that Mr. Jones had grown up with playing sports together. They

17 Bernice Jackson interview, February 8, 2023.
had stayed friends through the years, and when Leroy first saw an issue he came up and protected Sam, his friend, to make sure that did not happen again.\textsuperscript{18}

Interracial racial play was very common throughout the southern states after slavery and even up until the 1970s. When families lived and worked on farms, they would commonly play together regardless of skin color. Many of the sharecroppers and the tenants had children that lived on the land that they worked and all of their children would play cohesively. Even the landowner’s children would come out and join the children of the sharecroppers and the tenants. Children of both sexes would also commonly play together. The time together would be spent outside or in common areas of a house like the kitchen. The interracial group of children would not cross the threshold into private areas of the house together. This shows that even while the children played as equal, they understood on a deeper level that they were socially unequal. This relates to Mr. Jones’ memories because he remembered him and the other kids playing outdoor sports together in a similar way that was seen across the south on farms. Other people that I interviewed did not have the same experiences. Many of them did not remember interracial play at all. Mr. Sam Jones and Mr. Gerald Chatham were the only two that remembered participating in interracial play as children. They both grew up on farms that were worked by tenants that were both Black and white. The others that I interviewed grew up with families that did not farm, or if they did then they worked their own land and did not have to rent a lot from a white farmer. Both of these groups would have been considered middle class when compared

\textsuperscript{18} Sam Jones, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, 330 Commerce St., February 2, 2023.
to the many families that solely relied on farming other people’s land. Middle class families not participating in interracial play was a common phenomenon across the southern states. The children of middle-class families would often have very little contact with people that were a different race than them. Josephine Dobbs Clement was one of these children. She grew up in a middle-class Black family and her father worked hard to maintain segregation. He did not allow his children to go anywhere where they would have to accept lesser accommodations due to their skin color. Instead she grew up in a world completely surrounded by other Black people and because of that she considered herself to have a “happy childhood.” These friendships that the white and Black children formed were not long lasting, though, by puberty the friendships would be dissolved and the rules of racial etiquette would be expected to exist between them. Black children would be expected to begin calling the white children Miss. and Mr. and other barriers would also begin to be built between them.19

Mr. Jones’s story, as a white student, stands out in comparison to the stories of Black students who lived in the same time period. Mr. Jones remembered very little from his senior year of high school. He remembered that he was not able to have prom, the school did not have any pep rallies, and normal high school things like that. He remembered very little about his fellow students and even less about the Black students who joined him that school year. This was not the case with the Black students who were also going to school with Mr. Jones. Many of the Black students remembered

distinct moments, people, and slights against them, as well as joyful moments. This was highlighted in the length of the interviews. The interviews with Black students lasted two plus hours in most cases, but the interviews with the white students only typically lasted between twenty minutes and an hour. The same questions were asked, but the white students would answer many of the questions with the fact that they had no remembrance of it and it would be passed on. The Black students, on the other hand, were able to tell of discrimination, fears, thoughts, and challenges. This shows that integration for Black students was a monumental action, but for white students, it was not as large of an issue.

While the students did not always see any underlying issues, the schools still had many fears of allowing the races to come together fully. For at least three years, the students of Hernando High School lost out on being able to make memories and create lifelong bonds with their fellow students because the administration was worried that something negative would happen if they allowed the students to have a prom. Mr. Sam Jones and Mrs. Kay Chapuis were seniors and juniors in high school, respectively, during the desegregation year. Both remembered that many of their privileges were taken away during those years. They lost break, pep rallies, and also prom. Mr. Jones remembered being promised that they would not lose prom during his junior year and the principal told them that even if integration did happen, they still would not lose prom.\(^{20}\) The principal was wrong, though, and they did lose prom. Mrs. Chapuis also

\(^{20}\) Sam Jones, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, 330 Commerce St., February 2, 2023.
remembered that they did not have prom and remembered that she was just completely devastated because she had looked forward to that night for years.\textsuperscript{21} Mrs. Bernice Jackson, who was a sophomore during integration, also did not get to have a prom her junior and senior year.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1976 Senatobia High School crowned its first Black Homecoming Queen. Mrs. Bobbie Banks was a senior in high school and was elected to the Homecoming Court. At this point, it was tradition for the football team at Senatobia to vote on the Homecoming Queen. The 1976 Senatobia Warriors had an even racial makeup. The team had fifteen Black athletes and fifteen white athletes. The entire team agreed to vote for Mrs. Bobbie Banks and they all carried through with it. That night at the game, the entire stadium was packed. Rumors were swirling around that Mrs. Banks might be elected. The whole town turned out to see it. Mrs. Banks said, “It was packed because, dang... we never had one. So, they were probably coming out to see if this was really going to happen.” During the halftime presentation, the entire football team stayed on the side of the field to make sure that she was called and named as queen before they would go into the locker room. Some of the football players later told Mrs. Banks that they told their coach that they would all boycott the game and not play if their pick was not elected.

When her name was called and she was allowed to step forward, almost all of the white people in the crowd instantly got up and began to file out of Varner Field. This

\textsuperscript{21} Kay Chapuis, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Public Library, April 27, 2023.

\textsuperscript{22} Bernice Jackson interview, February 8, 2023.
did not bother Mrs. Banks, though, because “I was on the field. I was the one with the crown. You can do whatever you want to. It didn’t bother me.” Shortly after her name was called, the lights went out across the stadium. This kept Mrs. Banks from being able to get any pictures with her family on the field, but then they came back on once it was time for the game to resume. Mrs. Banks never knew if they were turned off on purpose or if it truly was a glitch in the system.23

Six years after schools desegregated and five years after Senatobia ended their policy of segregating based off of sex, the Senatobia High School football team elected a Black Homecoming Queen to represent them on the field. This was a bilateral decision made by both the white and the Black football players because they wanted Mrs. Banks to represent them. These actions show that the students and the younger generations were handling desegregation much better than their parents and the older generations. The parents were upset by the announcement and left the field while the football team was ready to boycott the rest of the game if she was not elected. From this perspective, desegregation was slowly becoming a success in Senatobia, because the students saw each other as equals and they wanted each other to win and do well, regardless of skin color. They were learning this at school because it was not getting taught to them by the people who left the stadium after the announcement.24


While many of the students that I had the pleasure to interview were able to go on to college and achieve great things, not every student had this opportunity. With the larger schools, some students were able to slip through the cracks. Years of being kept under the poverty line also impacted many students because they lacked the structure of a home that put education first and allowed them to succeed. Students also struggled during integration because many lacked motivation and did not want to work for the newly integrated schools and their white teachers. Mr. James Jackson said, “It seems to me that our people as [a] whole, were doing better under the leadership of people that
looked like them... When you got the integration thing, it looked like they kind of backed off. They stopped respecting their self and stopped respecting others.”

Mrs. Oliver saw the same issues after desegregation hit and the other Black students joined her at Hernando High School. She said, there were “some people I knew [that] didn’t wanna put forth their effort... The same things were too hard ... I talked to several of them who they were ready to just drop out.” She explained their reasonings saying that they told her, “I can’t do this work. This work is harder than what [we’ve done].” She did not agree with this and said that the work was just as hard at Hernando Central as it now was at Hernando High. She did say, though, “I think some of them had been able to get by with some certain things, and, of course, having white teachers they wouldn’t let them get by with anything... but we had a Black teacher who just didn’t let, if you made a 68 you got a 68, you know?” Some of the Black students initially had a hard time adjusting to going to an integrated school, but Ms. Oliver explained that she was able to bring some of the students around. One was a close friend who wanted to drop out during their senior year because they could not keep up with the high demands of the teacher. She explained that he realized that he was not going to give up after working all of those years toward a diploma. 

Desegregation in Tate County

In the 1954 school year, school districts in Mississippi were mandated to consolidate. Before that happened there were many small school districts all around

\[25\text{ James Jackson interview, January 30, 2023.}\]

\[26\text{ Deloise Oliver, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Hernando Public Library, March 27, 2023.}\]
Tate County, but with the mandate, all of the Tate County schools decided to combine into one school district. When the district consolidated there was Independence School and also the Independence Black School. After desegregation, these schools were paired, with Independence School becoming the high school and Independence Black School becoming East Tate Elementary. There was also Coldwater School and Coldwater Black School, which were paired in a similar way as the Independence schools, and Strayhorn School and Strayhorn Black School, which were paired after integration.

When the school district consolidated these schools, it ended up having to shut down many of its one-room schools. Some of these schools were Coleman School (a Black school located in the eastern part of the county), Crawford School (another Black school located near Senatobia), Crockett School (a white school that was located in between Independence and Senatobia), Bowman School (a white school), Crossroads School (a Black school located in Looxahoma), Freedonia School (a Black school located east of Senatobia), and Pilgrim’s Rest School (this was the school that Mr. James Jackson attended and had been built by his father and two others). 27

These were not all of the schools that had been in existence before the 1954 mandate, but they reflect how these schools were scattered throughout the county. Most of the schools (aside from the big three of Strayhorn, Independence, and Coldwater) consisted of one classroom and typically just one teacher. The schools also typically only had first through eighth grade and the students would have to attend one of the big three schools to be able to go to ninth through twelfth grade. With

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desegregation in the 1970s, Tate County chose to sell some of these older schools for citizens to create private schools for their students to attend. This is how Hillcrest Academy, the school that Mrs. Hale had attended after desegregation, came to be. It was an older school owned by Tate County that was sold to private citizens and was turned into an all-white private facility.\textsuperscript{28}

DeSoto County and Senatobia acted somewhat quickly when they received their desegregation orders. Both counties had plans set up and running by the time that the 1970-1971 school year started. Not all of the schools in Tate County complied as quickly with desegregation. On April 27, 1970, a group of citizens from Tate County filed a complaint saying that the Tate County School District had not properly integrated and was still creating a dual education system. The parents were Jeffie McNeal, Jessie Mae Carter, Pearlene McGhee, Adell Davis, Timothy Lee, and Minnie Mae Moore. Because of this suit, on August 4, 1970, the United States District Court put the Tate County School District under a desegregation order and declared that the attendance in the schools needed to be because of “Easterly, Northwestern, and Southwesterly.” This meant that the court drew lines through the county and based on those lines, the students would attend the schools in their attendance zone. For the next five years, Tate County Schools tried to avoid genuine integration by doing things like ability grouping and selling off schools, but in 1975 the federal court put an end to that as well. While the case lay dormant until 2010, the schools never completely desegregated as they had been

\textsuperscript{28} Sharon Hale, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, Senatobia Public Library, June 6, 2023.
ordered to. Strayhorn Schools (the Southwesterly School) and Independence Schools (the Easterly School) were split with approximately 50% Black students and 50% white students. The Coldwater Schools (the Northwesterly School), on the other hand, was 100% Black throughout this time period.\textsuperscript{29} The case was only picked back up in 2010 because Tate County Schools was looking to redraw attendance zones. This court case is still going on to the present day and because of it, the students at Coldwater High School lack avenues of success. The school consistently fails in accountability ratings for the state and has periodically suspended all extracurriculars. The school also struggles to hire new teachers and retain current teachers. In the 2023-2024 school year, the Tate County School District officially shut down Coldwater High School and dispersed the students to either Strayhorn Schools or Independence Schools based on where they lived within the county. The Coldwater Elementary School is still currently functioning in the 2023-2024 school year.

**White Flight**

In the 1970s as schools desegregated, there was a dash to create segregation academies. These were schools that typically used the rhetoric of Christianity to explain their existence, but in reality, most schools were created to keep segregation alive as schools were forced to desegregate. Tate County had its segregation academies that were formed at the beginning of the 1970-1971 school year, which is also the same year that the Senatobia Municipal School District integrated and when the Tate County School District began to drag its feet toward integration.

The main school that came up during this time is called the Magnolia Heights School, located in Senatobia. It had 223 students attend the first year. According to the school’s website, it was set up because “a group of citizens... felt the need for alternative education in the Tate county area for any child interested in a college preparatory education.” At the time of the school year starting in 1970, Magnolia Heights was not an accredited school. Magnolia Heights did not receive its accreditation until April 1971 according to the Tate County Democrat.

Another school that opened in the 1969-1970 school year was called Hillcrest Academy. Hillcrest was able to purchase the Thyatira Elementary School building which had previously been owned by Tate County Schools, but had been shut down when it consolidated the schools in 1954. It was in existence for several years before eventually shutting down in the 1977-1978 school year. Northwest Academy was another school that opened in the 1970-1971 school year. The school building was also purchased from the Tate County School District. It was the Arkabutla Schools building that was located in the western portion of the county. It also shut down after several years.

Tate County was not the only county to have segregation academies appear during this time period. DeSoto County also had its fair share of segregation academies. In the fall of 1970, the Ark Academy in Olive Branch, Mississippi opened its doors to the

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32 The Heritage of Tate County Mississippi. Curtis Media Corporation, 1991, 143-144.
first set of students. In August of 1971, an advertisement appeared in *The DeSoto Times* (a newspaper that was created after the merger of *The Times-Promoter* and *The DeSoto News* in 1970) that announced that the Ark Academy was enrolling students for first through twelfth grade.\(^{33}\) Unlike other private schools that appeared during this time, the Ark Academy was able to survive and last. In 1974, it changed its name to the DeSoto County Academy and then changed it again to the DeSoto Christian Academy which is the name that it still operates under today.\(^{34}\)

Across the state, private schools were created almost overnight. In 1970, a group of parents in Jackson decided to open up a private school for their children to attend and within twenty-four hours, the parents were operating a school. In Canton, a private school opened in a facility that had been used as a tent factory. After this school opened, there were very few white students enrolled in the Canton public schools. Churches were also locations for private schools to operate. In 1972 there were 19,662 students in Mississippi attending different private schools that were affiliated with Protestant churches. The mass exodus of white students is seen especially in the total private school enrollment numbers. In 1966 there was a total of 21,333 students in private schools. In 1969, there were 44,497 students in private schools. In 1970, there were 63,242, and by 1971 there were 64,196.\(^{35}\)

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By 1970 there were private schools in fifty-six of the eighty-two counties in Mississippi. The private schools mainly formed in the Mississippi Delta, the southwest portion of Mississippi, and in Jackson. Luther Munford studied the phenomenon of white flight in 1971 and concluded that “White children abandoned public schools... roughly in proportion to the percentage of Black population in each district, no more and no less. Every district with a population 20 percent or more Black lost white students; districts with populations almost 70 percent Negro lost almost all their white enrollment.” According to this theory, the DeSoto County School District and the Senatobia Municipal School District were somewhat unique. DeSoto County School District in the 1969-1970 school year had 4,612 Black students and 5,898 white students. This means that the Black population for DeSoto County Schools was 42.88%. In the same school year, Senatobia Municipal School District had 682 white students and 711 Black students. This means that the Black population for Senatobia Schools was 51.04%. Neither school district had a large number of white students that exited in the 1970-1971 school year. This stands in opposition to Munford’s conclusions because while Senatobia and Desoto County had less than 70% of a Black population, they did have more than 20%, but they did not see the same sort of mass exodus that other school districts across the state had.


38 Desegregation File, Senatobia Municipal School District.
In September of 1971, the federal courts began to realize what these private schools in Mississippi were doing. In the *Green v. Connally* case, the US District Court required that if Mississippi private schools wanted to be able to have tax-exempt status, they would have to submit documents that showed their “racial composition of students, applicants, faculty, and scholarship recipients.” The federal government was aware of the purpose of these schools, even though many schools tried to use the guise of Christianity to cover up their real purposes. In the court case, it lists the representatives as “parents and children who support or attend private, nonprofit hitherto tax-exempt schools in Mississippi having an enrollment consisting only of members of the white race and established as an alternative for white students seeking to avoid desegregated public schools.” During the trial the IRS announced that “It can no longer legally justify allowing tax-exempt status to private schools which practice racial discrimination nor can it treat gifts to such schools as charitable deductions for income tax purposes.” This was not the case to end this issue as many would have thought. Most private schools were able to continue to exist how they already had and only had to issue a declaration of nondiscrimination and it would then still have tax exemption. In 1979 it was estimated that 3,500 private schools were started in answer to desegregation, but only 110 of them lost the tax exemption. In 1979 the IRS revised the

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rules concerning tax exemption status, but Congress was able to block these rules by attaching riders to them.\textsuperscript{41}

1987 Boycott

On February 5, 1987, a school and business boycott was threatened by the State NAACP Education Committee Chairman Morris Kinsey. Dr. Kinsey promised, “We will come here and close the schools down until we get justice, until we get respect and until we get equal treatment.” At the Senatobia Municipal School District school board meeting, the NAACP and approximately forty members of the Black community were upset because they felt like the Black population in the school was not being represented by the administration of the district. Dr. Kinsey pointed out that the district administration lacked any Black employees. He said, “It has been 16 years since segregation. We have watched how whites steadily increased in administration and how blacks have decreased.”\textsuperscript{42}

This meeting occurred because C. R. Rials, who had been the superintendent of Senatobia Schools throughout integration, had retired in December of 1986. Mike Waldrop was named to be the new superintendent. On January 8, 1987, Waldrop announced that he was promoting Howard Riales to assistant superintendent from middle school principal. James Jackson, who was serving on the school board as one of the two Black board members, claimed that he and Maurice Batemon (the other Black


\textsuperscript{42} “NAACP Threatens Boycott.” \textit{The Tate County Democrat}. February 12, 1987.
school board member) were promised in October of 1986 that a Black person would be appointed to the assistant superintendent position. Riales was white. At this point, the high school and middle school principals were both white and the elementary school principal was Black.  

On Tuesday, February 17, 1987, the boycott was held. According to the superintendent of Senatobia City Schools, approximately 90% of the Black students participated in the boycott. While the Black community was holding a boycott, the students at Senatobia High School held a march in support of the schools. A few Black students participated in the march, including a Black senior at the high school named Delois Harris, but the march was predominately held by white students. Delois Harris believed that many of the Black students did not participate because their parents

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would not allow them. She explained that she did participate because she wanted to graduate, she said, “But I want to stay in school. I want my education. In about two months, I plan to graduate.” Kelly Ross, a white student at Senatobia High School said, that “the purpose of the march was to show that we can go to school together... The parents are the ones who disagree with the school officials and the students should not have to be involved.” Mike Waldrop, the superintendent of the schools was quoted saying that “he viewed the march as an act of unity among the students.”

In 1987, Mr. James Jackson was on the school board. He remembered the boycott quite clearly. He explained what happened when Mr. Rials, the former

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superintendent announced that he was retiring to the school board, “We were sitting around this table and we all decided that we were going to elevate the assistant superintendent that was in there at that time, which was white. We were going to replace his position with a Black. We all agreed on that.” When the time came to announce the decisions, the school board said that it could not find a Black person who was qualified for the job. Mr. Jackson said that the two Black school board members tried to debate this decision, but eventually, the board voted on it, and because there were three white members and two Black members the white members were able to get their way. He was then told by one of the members that if they tried to protest this decision that the “Black community didn’t have a leg to stand on.”

The Black community then decided to show that it did have a leg to stand on. It came together to start the school and economic boycott against the town of Senatobia. The boycott lasted six weeks before the Black community won some concessions. It was able to get a Black administrative assistant, a Black guidance counselor, and stricter guidelines on putting Black students into special education. The Black community had noticed that the schools were putting Black students that had discipline issues straight into the special education curriculum which would keep those students from being able to get diplomas. The school board also promised to reopen its search for a Black assistant superintendent, but this was not able to be fixed right away. All of this together was an important victory for the Black community. The Black guidance counselor was an important victory because with it, the Black students could now have

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someone that would encourage them to go to college, to reach for achievements, and to accomplish great things in their lives. The white guidance counselors were known to not do these things and to instead tell Black students that they did not believe that they were college material.

Keeping Black students out of the special education curriculum was also important because many school leaders would commonly just put kids that were not learning fast enough or were not behaving well in the classroom into special education. Once the student was put into special education, they lost all access to education and were not able to get a high school diploma. This was an issue that was seen across the state of Mississippi shortly after desegregation occurred. In 1975, an original lawsuit was filed in *Mattie T. Et Al. v. Johnson*. In this lawsuit it was stated that the Mississippi Department of Education failed to make sure that the schools “identified, evaluated and provided appropriate educational services to students with disabilities.” In 1979, the court case was settled by creating a Consent Decree that would make sure that Mississippi schools had to follow the federal guidelines for special education. Across Mississippi, though, schools refused to comply and the Mississippi Department of Education refused to enforce the requirements. It was common for Black students to be put into special education for no reason other than to help enforce segregation. Special education classrooms were predominately Black or in many cases fully Black. This caused a huge inequity of access to education because Black students were outright denied an opportunity for education as well as a chance to receive a high school diploma. This was the standard in Mississippi until 2003. At this time, the case was
reopened and a new Consent Decree was decided upon. This decree made improvements in the “areas of Child Find, Least Restrictive Environment, and Nondiscriminatory Assessment of Minority Students for Special Education.” This means that schools had to use an extensive system of research proven methods to come to a decision of if a student qualified for special education services (Child Find). The school also had to meet with the family and have research and data to prove if a student required self-contained (no diploma options), resource (no diploma options), or inclusion (opportunity to receive a traditional high school diploma) services (Least Restrictive Environment). The schools also had to keep minority populations in the special education program within a certain percentage that matched the percentage of the school (Nondiscriminatory Assessment). The decree also decided that the Mississippi Department of Education would hire experts that would assist the schools and the state in implementing the requirements. This was in effect until 2011. In 2012, the court met again and decided that Mississippi had fully complied with the decree and the case was dismissed. This court case shows that this was a problem across Mississippi, but the local citizens of Senatobia fought against it long before any action was taken at the state level. This is an impressive feat for a community and it made a lasting impression on the educational system of Senatobia Schools.46  

During the boycott, the community came together within the many Black churches across Senatobia. Many of the meetings were held at Mr. Michael Cathey’s

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church, the West Gilmore St. Church of Christ, but some were also held in the Baptist church. Mr. Jackson explained, “The people were turning out, and that’s what you wanted. Everybody was on the same accord.” The meetings always began with a prayer and Mr. Jackson explained that this is important because by starting with a prayer they were showing that they were sincere about this. The meetings would then center around discussing the issues but also discussing togetherness. He explained, “That was the focus of our thing. We also were saying that we were not going to give in.”

Mrs. Carole Stigler worked in the district office for the Senatobia Municipal School District during this time. She was able to give a different perspective about the boycott. According to Mrs. Stigler, the way that the school district first found out about the boycott was on its first day. She said, “I’m parking in the parking lot and I get out... We got channel five, channel three, we’ve got all these people and they stuck a mic into my mouth.” She explained that it was known in the district that if anything ever happened the superintendent was expected to be the only spokesperson for the district and that everyone else was expected to stay silent. While they were asking her questions, the reporters also pushed a piece of paper into her face. She asked what it was, and the reporter told her that it was the demands that “they walked out over.” She explained the sheet of paper by saying, “It was single [spaced], about twenty generic NAACP demands... Not vague, but not specific... then there were, like, three or four added at the bottom in a completely different font.” She explained that at the very

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47 James Jackson Interview, January 30, 2023.
bottom of the sheet the final demand said that there was not a Black assistant superintendent.48

The boycott was posted about in a white magazine that Mrs. Stigler could not recall the name of and suddenly Senatobia City Schools began to receive letters from all over. Surprisingly the letters were not in support of the protesting group. She explained the letters by saying, “We got the most threatening letters.” Mrs. Stigler explained that the letters said things like, “Don’t you let those blankety blanks run you... I can be in your town in a pickup truck with as many guns as you need.” She explained that they would receive ten of these hate-filled ones and then one might say ‘you’re standing up to them, what can we do?’49

_The New York Times_ reported on the end of the boycott on March 16, 1987. This article shows that when the Black community decided to end their boycott, they met at the Senatobia Church of Christ and roughly 350 of them voted to end the school boycott, but to continue the economic boycott until the changes were finalized. The school board told Mr. Cathey and other protest leaders that within six weeks they would hire a Black administrative assistant and a school counselor.50

While Mr. Michael Cathey and Mr. James Jackson boasted about the percentages that were participating in the boycott, Mrs. Stigler saw a reason why it was so successful within the community. She explained that Mr. Cathey and other ministers throughout

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Tate County were preaching from the pulpit about the boycott and it caused people to be terrified to go against them. Mrs. Stigler had a lady who would come in one day a week and clean her house in the afternoon. She did not say her name to keep anonymity. There was a grocery store near Mrs. Stigler’s home and she would commonly take her there because she did not have a car and it assisted her with getting her groceries for the week. During the first week of the boycott, Mrs. Stigler asked her if she needed anything from the store like she typically did. What she said next was gut-wrenching for Mrs. Stigler to hear. She said, “Yes [she needed groceries], but if I go in there, they’ll kill me.” Mrs. Stigler asked who would kill her and she said, “They’re watching. They’re everywhere.” According to this anecdote, the people were not necessarily behind the boycott but were instead terrified to break the boycott and stand against the community. Mrs. Stigler took her straight to the grocery store and offered to walk her in and assured her that she would not be killed with her there. She was still scared so Mrs. Stigler eventually ended up going in there and purchasing things for her from a list. This became the norm for them for the weeks that the boycott lasted and Mrs. Stigler said that she was aware of other white families that did the same thing for the people who worked in their households as well.\footnote{Carole Stigler, March 29, 2023.}

This fear of being targeted if they did not participate in the boycott was also seen in other areas of Mississippi as well. In Claiborne County, the Black citizens had an economic boycott and employed many of the same tactics that the boycott organizers
of Senatobia did as well. This boycott also did not have full participation. Those who did not participate were targeted for ostracism, name-calling, destruction of property, and physical violence. Charles Evers was quoted during this boycott saying, “If we catch a Negro at any store, we will get his name, address, and phone number and take care of him later.” The threat of violence was very plausible during this time period and it shows why there was a possibility that some Black citizens would not necessarily support the boycott, but they would still be terrified to shop.  

Unrest about the boycott in Senatobia was showing up in other ways in the community, as well. The woman who worked for Mrs. Stigler recounted a story to her. Her daughter could not get groceries because they lived in Coldwater and did not have a car to be able to get out of Tate County to go grocery shopping. One night she finally got fed up enough that she called Michael Cathey herself and told him that if he wanted her to keep boycotting places then he needed to drive to Coldwater and take her to Southaven himself so that she could purchase groceries for her family. He never took up that challenge.

While the goal of the boycott was to put pressure on the schools by the students not coming and to also put pressure on the town by the Black community not spending their money within Tate County, the economic side of it was lessened by people from around the area coming into Senatobia to purchase goods. White citizens from

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Hernando, Coldwater, Batesville, and other nearby towns all came to Senatobia to help support the economy during that time.
Chapter 5: Lasting Impacts

When Hernando schools first integrated, they tried to combine the schools. Hernando Central’s mascot was the Tigers with purple and gold for their team colors. Hernando High’s mascot was the Wildcats and their colors were black and gold. When the two schools combined, they became the Hernando High School Tigers and their colors were black and gold.\(^1\) While combining school colors and school mascots seems like a small detail, it was huge to the students. The white students never fully accepted becoming Tigers and still considered themselves Wildcats. This was a part of the school culture that had been built over time. The school colors and the school mascot were seen as a badge of pride by people while they were in school and even after they graduated. Other schools were not as fortunate when they combined. Senatobia, for example, did not fully integrate the culture of the team like Hernando did. Melvin Cathey High School was the Tigers and its colors were green and gold. Senatobia High School was the Warriors and its colors were blue and gold. When the two schools were integrated it became the Senatobia High School Warriors and their colors were (and still are) blue and gold.\(^2\) The students from Melvin Cathey High School lost their school culture and the school pride because none of it made it over to Senatobia High School. After desegregation, the school stayed what the white school had been, which was the Warriors and the colors were blue and gold.

\(^1\) Bernice Jackson interview, February 8, 2023.

\(^2\) Cathey interview, January 28, 2023.
While Hernando did a better job of trying to integrate the culture of the two schools, it did not have the lasting impact of making the students feel like they were all in it together. Nearly fifty years after Mrs. Jackson’s class graduated and fifty-three years after they were first thrown together and told to just do school, Mrs. Jackson was trying to plan their reunion. She said, “To be honest with you, my classmates and I are working on our fiftieth-class reunion, and we won’t have any white people there... It is my understanding that they’ve got a separate thing going on because they said they will never be Tigers. They will always be Wildcats.” Even after three years of being together, many students still do not see them as all being in the same class and being together. These students played together on the football team, cheered together on the sidelines, voted for each other for the student government association, and interacted daily in classes, but now almost fifty years later, these students still see each other as separate and different.

Tate County Schools are still dealing with the lasting impacts of court-ordered desegregation to this day. Since 2010, the district has appeared before a federal judge at least three times. In 2010, the district asked to redraw attendance zones that had been federally mandated in 1970 and they were granted permission. Then in 2016 the school tried to redraw attendance zones and to get rid of Coldwater High School, but was denied. In 2019, the Mississippi Board of Education discussed shutting down Coldwater High School because of the school’s repeated failing accountability rating, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state decided to stop those plans. Then in 2021,

3 Bernice Jackson interview, February 8, 2023.
the parents of the district came forward because they were upset that Coldwater had stopped offering any extracurricular activities to the students. The school district, again, asked to be able to shut down the school and to send students from Coldwater Schools to either Independence Schools or Strayhorn Schools. It was announced in May of 2023 that Coldwater High School would be shut down for good and that the students would be dispersed between schools.

As of this writing, it is unclear how this will impact the demographics and the cultures of the remaining schools. Before the shutdown of Coldwater High School, Tate County Schools still had not reached full integration, though, because Coldwater Schools are still majority Black while the other two schools are not. Strayhorn High School is currently 22% Black and Hispanic and 78% white. Independence High School, on the other hand, is 46% Black and Hispanic and 54% white. Coldwater High School was 79% Black and 21% white and Hispanic in the school year before it closed down.

In many ways, the integration of schools in both the DeSoto County School District and the Senatobia Municipal School District was very different when compared to even the rest of Tate County, but also the rest of the state. Gerald Chatham, the son of the District Attorney who worked on the Emmett Till case, summed up well what


made the difference between the DeSoto County School District and the Senatobia Municipal School District and the rest of the state and the nation. He said, “I’ve gotta say we had good leadership. When the schools merged... and they [the leadership] did what had to be done and got the job done. Wasn’t always a popular decision, but they did what they had to do.” DeSoto County Schools and Senatobia City Schools both overall had a relatively smooth transition from segregated schools to integrated schools. Both districts had school boards that put into place easy transition plans that allowed the schools to merge with no drama and no violence. The people in these counties knew that they just needed to have school, and because of that, they did. The schools also benefitted from unique demographic, economic, and geographic factors as well. Both counties had overall similar ratios of Black vs. white citizens. The citizens also depended less on farming than other counties in Mississippi which made the two populations less dependent on each other. This allowed the Black citizens to be able to move more freely throughout society because they were not as concerned with financial sabotage. The counties are also located near Memphis which assisted the citizens to have access to more jobs than just farming, but it has also allowed the citizens to have access to more liberal viewpoints that are not as commonly seen in small insular towns. Senatobia and DeSoto County also were more urban when compared to the rest of Tate County. Senatobia had the larger grocery stores (Sunflower Grocery and Walmart), it had restaurants, and it had some factories and larger businesses that offered jobs and opportunities. The rest of Tate County was more rural and did not have these same

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7 Gerald Chatham, in person interview, Breanna Johnson, DeSoto County Courthouse, March 8, 2023.
privileges and had to go into Senatobia to do these things. This allowed Senatobia to develop at a faster rate than the rest of Tate County and it also caused Senatobia to have a more similar experience to DeSoto County than to the rest of Tate County.

The lasting impacts of this time are still seen today. DeSoto County Schools can now boast of being an A district with many of the individual schools in the district being ranked in the top five. Senatobia Municipal School District has also been one of the top districts in the state. Both districts have incredible legacies that showcase their ability to work through hard times and ensure that the kids can just have school and because of these legacies, they are now able to be some of the top in the state. Tate County Schools, on the other hand, cannot boast of the same progress. Tate County School’s accountability shows that the district is currently a C district with some schools, like Coldwater High School, failing with an F grade.

While DeSoto County and parts of Tate County had a smooth transition to integration, there still has been a lack of Black citizens in leadership positions. This problem is noted in the 1987 boycott of Senatobia Schools, but it is also noted elsewhere throughout history. One prominent place is the lack of leadership within the police department and the sheriff’s department. Mr. Cornelius Webb, Mrs. Bobbie Banks’ father, was the first Black police officer in Senatobia, Mississippi, but he did not

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9 “Senatobia Schools Among Best,” Tate County Democrat, October 1, 2019.

10 “Tate Schools hold C rating in accountability results,” Tate County Democrat, October 1, 2019.
become a police officer until 1965. This left one hundred years from the time of Reconstruction until the first Black police officer served in Senatobia. He was able to become the assistant chief under Chief Fred Sanders during his nine years at the police department.\textsuperscript{11} Tate County has never had a County Sheriff who was Black in all of its years of existence.\textsuperscript{12}

![Image of Officer Cornelius Webb]

Officer Cornelius Webb-The first Black police officer for the Senatobia Police Department.

The DeSoto County Sheriff’s Department did have a sheriff who was elected in 1873. His name was Jefferson J. Evans and he was elected at the age of 29 years old. There were only twelve other sheriffs across the state that were elected at this time that were also Black. Evans was a former slave who had been freed after the Civil War. He would only serve one term as sheriff because after the federal troops were removed,

\textsuperscript{11} “Webb Succumbs to Illness at 83,” \textit{Tate County Democrat}, May 2, 2006.

the vote was slowly taken away from Black voters.\textsuperscript{13} For the next 150 years, the county only had white sheriffs, but on August 8, 2023, Thomas Tuggle was elected as the next sheriff. Sheriff Tuggle ran against Michael Lee and they were both running through the Republican Party. August 8 was the primary election and since there was not a sheriff running under the Democrat ticket, that allowed Sheriff Tuggle to automatically win without any further elections.

Another lasting impact of desegregation was the loss of culture. Once Mrs. Bernice Jackson graduated from Hernando High School, she chose to attend Jackson State University (JSU). She chose Jackson State University for a variety of reasons. One was because it was far enough away from home that her parents would allow her to stay on campus instead of having to commute, but another reason was the fact that she had missed the culture of Hernando Central. She said, “When schools integrated, we lost some of the cultural things that we had done at the Black school, and so I wanted to go and recapture the majorettes and some of the other cultural things.” She had expected to have all teachers who looked like her but was surprised to find so many white teachers. She was also surprised because many of her professors were from Africa and she had expected everyone to act and speak like she had been raised to do. She loved her experience and was thankful for her four years at a majority Black university. Through that university, she was given amazing opportunities, like going to do a summer program in Mexico to fully immerse herself in its language and culture, and she was also

\textsuperscript{13} “DeSoto County’s First African-American Sheriff was a Former Slave,” \textit{DeSoto Times}, May 9, 2022.
able to make many lifelong friends. She had a hard, rigorous program that gave her the necessary skills to be able to be an amazing Spanish teacher.14

Mr. James Jackson’s kids had similar paths. They all had been in school during desegregation and once they graduated, they all chose to attend a predominately Black school so that they could experience the culture of the schools and also revisit the family experience that they had known at their segregated schools during childhood. He explained that all of his children went on to get advanced degrees. One received her Ph. D. at the age of 27 and another received two master’s degrees. They all had accomplishments within what he referred to as the “Black institutions.”15

Mr. James Jackson’s story also shows another lasting impact from the time of desegregation. Many of the lower-income families in that time period were Black because the odds were stacked against them and the entire system worked against them. Mr. Jackson worked with the Youth Corps and had a first-hand experience of seeing how this impacted students and recent graduates. Through the program, Mr. Jackson worked on two things. People were eligible for the program based on their income and Mr. Jackson said that it was predominately Black people that were accepted in the program. The program had two focuses. The first focus was on people who were currently in school. They could work after school as well as during the summer to earn money and to also learn a skill to be able to do after they graduated. The second focus


of the program was for young people who were no longer in school but had not attained their high school diploma. This focus in the program would help the people attain their GED and then would also help them get into a work assignment so that they could find a job. Mr. Jackson worked as the director of this program for the Tate County area. He explained, “It helped Black and white... but the way that things fall, with the way the cards was stacked, it was more beneficial to Black. Cause there was so many of them... This thing was designed, you had to be in a certain income level. But there were some white kids. I hired some white kids too.”

This program mainly helped young Black people because they were part of the community that was mainly living with low incomes and were struggling more often. This was a direct result of the lack of education that had been made available to them through the years as well as the lack of opportunity. There were also white students and young adults who benefitted from this program but were proportionally less impacted by low incomes and the struggles that this program was designed to assist with.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Desoto County and Tate County were both counties that were located in a state that was run by hard-line segregationists. The counties were unique when compared to the rest of the state, though. They were both situated very close to the state line between Mississippi and Tennessee. This proximity to the metropolitan area of Memphis allowed them unique access to a different culture that kept the counties from being as insular as other counties in Mississippi. The proximity also allowed the citizens of these two counties to have more access to jobs that were not as dependent on farming and on keeping the Black race in a subservient and dependent role. The ability to branch out into different trades allowed both races to have more upward mobility and to be more economically independent. This situation combined to make it so that citizens of both races were not dependent on each other in the same ways that they were dependent on each other in other counties in Mississippi. This uniqueness also created a situation where many experiences of the citizens and students of these counties were not as bad when compared to other places around Mississippi, but they still were not great. These Black citizens still struggled with slights against them, they still combatted racism regularly, and there were still moments of tension and stress. While some white citizens were friendly to the Black students and Black citizens, there were still members of the community that supported violence and were against peaceful integration.

Even within DeSoto and Tate Counties, though, everything was not similar. DeSoto County was more of a suburban area than Tate County which shaped the
interactions of its citizens and how the schools desegregated. All DeSoto County Schools combined into one school district which was called the DeSoto County School District. Tate County did not consolidate in the same way. The Senatobia Schools decided to consolidate into a separate school district called the Senatobia Municipal School District. The rest of Tate County (Independence Schools, Coldwater Schools, and Strayhorn Schools) consolidated into one school district that was called the Tate County School District. The Senatobia Municipal School District desegregated in a similar pattern as the DeSoto County School District. They both consolidated quickly after the Alexander vs. Holmes ruling and created plans so that the schools would be equal between Black students and white students. The Tate County School District did not follow the lead of the other two school districts. It took its time with desegregation and did not draw up a plan until after the parents of students filed a claim against the district. Even once it did begin to desegregate, it still kept the schools segregated as much as possible. Two of the schools were integrated more evenly, but the Coldwater Schools were still not desegregated. These actions continue to impact the Tate County School District and it still has a court case that is impacting its progress. The District also regularly fails state testing which leads it to fail according to state accountability rankings.

Both of these counties are commonly forgotten about when the Civil Rights Movement is discussed because it is assumed that not much happened or that the two counties were identical to other counties across the state. This was not the case.

A major distinction between DeSoto and Tate Counties and other areas around the state was the fact that there were not many implicit signs of Jim Crow. Many of the
oral interviews all shared that they did not remember seeing “Colored Only” or “White Only” signs around the two counties, but they did see them whenever they ventured out of the area. The separatism was still there, for example, in the doctor’s clinics, where the patients had two separate waiting rooms, or at Velvet Cream, where there was a window for whites to order and a separate window for Blacks to order, but it was never implicitly stated on signs for all to see. Instead, it was an understanding that was passed down generationally.

Another difference was the fact that in DeSoto County, freedom of choice was much more successful than it was when compared to other areas. Many Black children had to face violence, intimidation, and harassment each day that they attended the white school, but that was not the case in DeSoto County. Many of the students were able to keep their heads down and were able to successfully attend the white school without large incidences and threats of violence. Yet even though from the outside it seemed like the situation was calmer than in other counties, there was still a rippling of violence. Ms. Oliver found out later, after she reached adulthood, that her parents had received threatening letters from fellow citizens and were terrified of what might happen to their children who were attending the white schools. The threat of violence in DeSoto County was much more underhanded and invisible, but it was still threatening just like other places.

When the schools finally desegregated for the 1970-1971 school year, there was not any violence, boycotts, or even a mass exodus of white students. The newspapers that published articles about this time stated all facts about the desegregation in a very
straightforward manner without any added bias or personal opinions. There were not any Op-Eds written during this time that lambasted desegregation, the government, or the school districts. While the creation of the segregation academies during this time showed that there were people who were against desegregation and did not want their white children in school with Black students, they were not in the majority, as they were in other areas. Overall the majority of white students stayed in public schools and they learned to coexist with their fellow students.

Even the economic and school boycott of 1987 shows the difference between these two counties and other areas. The boycott was because the Black community believed that it lacked representation within the district’s administration. When the schools desegregated in the 1970-1971 school year, the Senatobia Municipal School District decided to have three white school board members and two Black school board members. After this, the district did not have a Black person in a leadership position as a superintendent or assistant superintendent and did not have a Black person in any district leadership position. Many schools across the state lacked any representation or leadership within the school board or the school district, so the fact that the Black population of Senatobia had some is noteworthy. Unfortunately, though, some representation is not enough, especially when the representatives were still in the minority and could not get anything passed or accepted. When the Black community did boycott the schools and the stores, they were not met with violence or threats, and instead were allowed to have their boycott, and eventually were able to get their demands met. This was also something unique to this area because some areas did not
always get their demands met and were forced to end their boycott because of violence, threats, or harassment.

The schools merged as one and the students and their teachers also had to merge and learn to work together. While neither school district was perfect, they both were able to create avenues for success for their students and they were able to teach students who did great things after leaving high school. All of the students that I was able to interview were able to go on to college and receive undergraduate as well as graduate-level degrees. This shows that these school districts were able to still keep a high level of achievement and expectation even amidst the chaos of desegregation.
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