

Schools and the Turbulent 1960s to 1980s

WWII saw an end to tolerance of racism in Newtown and the surfacing of years of quiet anger. The African-American community felt as a whole that because African-Americans had fought and died for the Country, they deserved equal treatment. Throughout the 1950s, this emerging anger became the impetus for change across the Country, including Sarasota. In 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote his landmark Supreme Court decision in the Brown v. Board of Education case, which prohibited racial segregation in U.S. public schools.

By 1960, Newtown was home to about six percent of the County's population, or about 7,000 people. In the 1960s, Newtown flourished with several restaurants, grocery stores, service stations, a drug store, repair shops, beauty parlors, barbershops, and a doctor's and a dentist's office.

Three years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision, schools were still segregated in Sarasota. The NAACP asked the Sarasota County School Board to voluntarily desegregate. In 1961, after four more years of inactivity, they filed a desegregation lawsuit in federal court. In the 1962-63 school year, the first African-American students enrolled in previously all-White Sarasota Schools, the first school integrated was Bay Haven Elementary.

In 1964, Roland Rogers, who had been Principal of Booker through twenty years of progress and change, was appointed to the administrative staff of the County schools. By 1965, the U.S. Government had tied federal dollars to compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The federal government ordered all schools to integrate by 1967. The Sarasota County School Board came up with a plan to comply, consistent with most school district approaches, by closing the black schools and busing black students to white schools. In 1967 Booker High School was closed, in 1968 Booker Junior High School followed.

Originally, the community supported busing as a step forward however, eventually; many felt that closing the schools had taken away community pride and identity. On May 4, 1969, a total of 2,353 African-American students (85% of the County's African-American students) boycotted the Sarasota County public schools in protest over the proposed closing of Amaryllis Elementary School. Instead, students attended freedom schools in local churches taught by New College and high school students.

In spite of the turmoil of the 1960s and the segregation/desegregation conflict, several local youths achieved national recognition during this time. Howard "Slick" Porter, a Newtown resident, was the best high school basketball player in the region for the season of 1966-1967. Porter signed a scholarship to play college ball at Villanova, later playing with the NBA's Chicago, New Jersey, and Detroit teams. Booker High School also won the State basketball championships in 1966-67, repeating this success three more times in 1977-78, 1981-82, and 1984-85. The reestablishment of the schools within the community was an important step in reclaiming community identity.

From The History of Newtown:

<http://www.ci.sarasota.fl.us/Newtown/history.html>