

Background

Brown v. Board of Education is a Supreme Court case that marked the beginning of the end of systematic segregation in the United States. The landmark decision of 1954 sparked feelings of hopeful anticipation for some Virginians, and outrage in others. Consequently, the Massive Resistance movement gained traction as an attempt to halt school integration. Public schools across Virginia began closing their doors to avoid desegregation. In response, brave African American students filed lawsuits against their school districts. The legal process was lengthy and messy in areas of Virginia like Warren County. The literature on *Brown v. Board* and the generalities of the Massive Resistance Movement is vast, but research on the monumental cases that dissolved the efforts of segregationists is limited. Particularly, the personal stories of those who tirelessly fought for their right to attend the same public schools as White students are less widely known. Hoping to highlight the voices of those who lived through this challenging time, the researchers compiled the facts and first-hand accounts into a multimedia documentary. This made their findings more accessible to the public. The final film shares the deeply emotional and inspiring story of the fight for school integration in Warren County, Virginia.

Research Questions

How did the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954 affect the fight for school integration in Warren County, Virginia?

How did the men and women involved in the fight for school integration impact the outcome of *Betty Ann Kilby, et al. v. Warren County Board of Education*?

Is it possible to effectively share the story of school integration in Warren County, VA in the form of a short documentary?

Introduction

Brown v. the Board of Education in 1954:

This Supreme Court decision declared school segregation unconstitutional.

Brown II Decision in 1955:

The follow-up ruling ordered schools to integrate with "all deliberate speed." While many states integrated schools immediately, Virginia took advantage of the Supreme Court's ambiguous phrasing to avoid desegregation.

Massive Resistance in Virginia:

Virginia Governors Harry F. Byrd and James Lindsay Almond legalized massive resistance and forced school closures to evade the consequences of the Court's ruling (Clark, p. 1123, 2021).

Fight for school integration:

A few Black and White families across Virginia came together to fight the discriminatory laws passed by members of the Massive Resistance Movement. NAACP lawyers, Oliver Hill and Spotswood Robinson, worked on behalf of Virginians across the state to file lawsuits against school districts that refused to integrate.

Betty Ann Kilby, et al. v. Warren County Board of Education:

In 1958 a group of plaintiffs brought action against Warren County School Board. Betty Kilby's father, James Kilby, was motivated by the desire for his daughter to experience a better education (Fisher, 2002).

Method

- 1. Gathered and Read Primary Sources**
 - Read *We Face the Dawn* by Margaret Edds → Provided a general overview of the history of school desegregation.
 - Visited local libraries to look through newspaper archives on microfilm
 - Read *Wit, Will, and Walls* by Betty Kilby Fisher → Mrs. Fisher was the lead plaintiff in the case against the Warren County Board of Education. Her memories and experiences are recorded in this book.
- 2. Prepared for Interviews**
 - Made a list of all the potential interviewees and began reaching out
 - Formulated a list of interview questions, while keeping in mind the sensitivity and weight of the topic.
 - Wanted interviews to feel like a conversation, not an interrogation
- 3. Conducted Interviews**
 - Started by interviewing State Judge John Paul → He is the nephew of Federal Judge John Paul, the man responsible for ordering the integration of schools in 1959.
 - Interviewed Betty Kilby Fisher Baldwin, Ann Rhodes Baltimore, Suetta Dean Freeman, Faye Coleman, and Delores Coleman → They were part of the first group of African American students to integrate Warren County High School.
 - Also interviewed June Jeffery and James "Jim" Jordan → White students who attended Warren County High School when it was shut down due to resistance efforts.
- 4. Gathered Additional Footage & Images**
 - Visited the building that used to be called "Warren County High School"
 - Toured the United States District Court in Harrisonburg, Virginia where the case was heard by Federal Judge John Paul
 - Recorded Reverend Harold Brown for the narration of the script
- 5. Created Documentary Film**
 - Transferred all interview footage and audio from the camera to the computer
 - Drafted a storyboard to create an outline for the film
 - Imported all footage into WeVideo for video editing → WeVideo is a free, collaborative video editing software
 - Used Canva to compile and edit images to enhance the film
 - Trimmed and rearranged footage to form a cohesive, 30-minute documentary
 - Overlaid background music and narration

Figure 1
The Former Warren County High School



Note. (Photo taken by Beau Dickenson)

Figure 2
The Former Warren County High School



Note. Only white students attended Warren County High School until 1959 when Federal Judge John Paul ordered the admittance of black students. (Photo taken by Beau Dickenson)

Important People

Figure 3
Betty Ann Kilby Fisher Baldwin



Note: Betty Kilby was just a teenager when she was denied an education at Warren County High School due to her skin color. After schools were integrated, she suffered horrific harassment. She shared her story and how she overcame tremendous hardship. (The image is a screenshot of interview footage)

Figure 4
Federal Judge John Paul



Note: John Paul was the judge ultimately responsible for forcing Warren County to integrate schools in February of 1959. He interpreted and applied the law without bias despite strong public opinions. (Photo courtesy of Federal Courthouse in Harrisonburg)

Figure 5
Ann Rhodes Baltimore



Note: Ann Rhodes was one of the original 21 students to integrate into Warren County High School. (Screenshot of interview footage)

The Process

Figure 6
The Team Conducting an Interview With Delores Coleman



Note: (Photo taken by Owen Longacre)

Figure 7
The Team Spending Time With the Interviewees



Note: (Photo taken by Beau Dickenson)

Figure 8
WeVideo Software

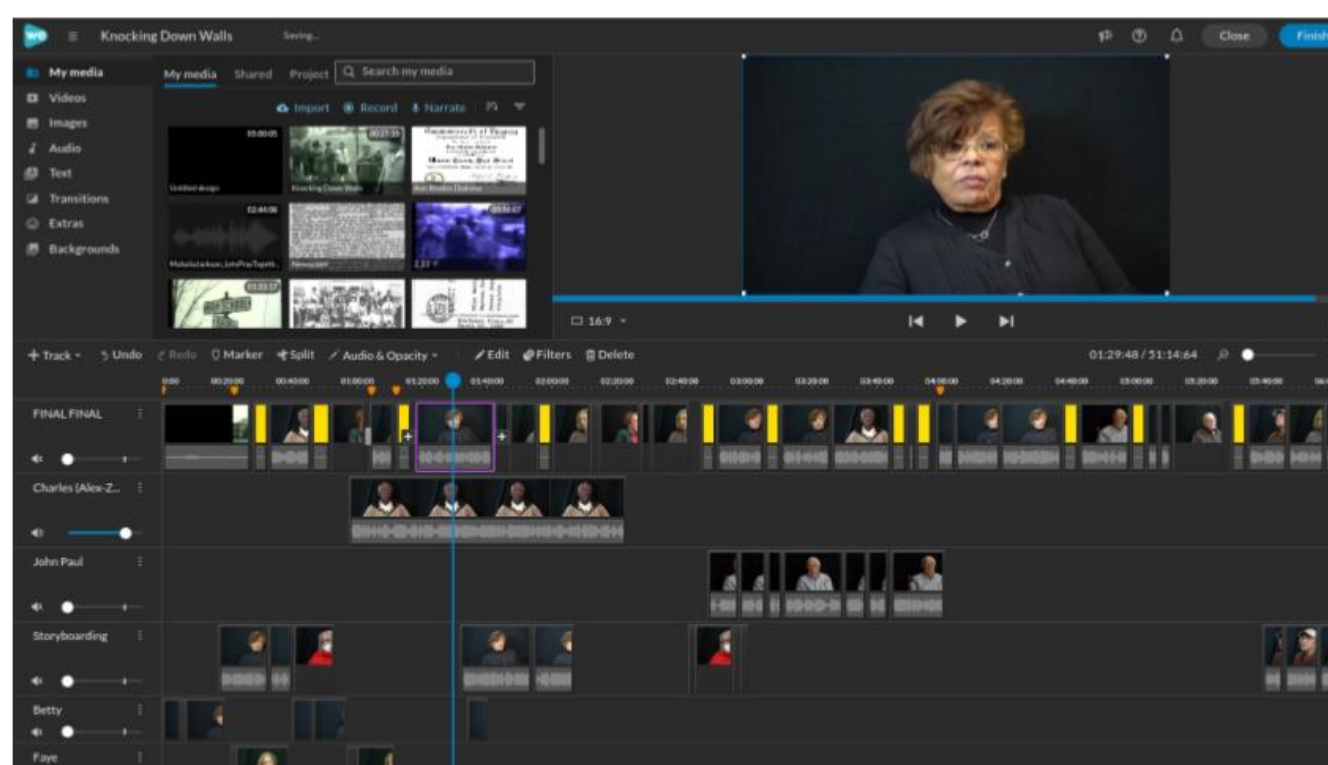


Figure 9
On-Stage at the Court Square Theater in Harrisonburg, VA



Note: The full 30-minute documentary was played for the public. Interviewees and their family members also gathered to watch the film. (Photo taken by Jennifer Moyers)

The Debut

Figure 10
The Final Film Posted on YouTube



Results

Interviews:

The response was overwhelming. People had a desire to share their stories. Many of the interviewees had never shared their high school experiences with anyone.

Some of the plaintiffs have already passed on which increased the importance of uncovering and sharing this important history.

Discovered that Betty Kilby and her father were instrumental in the fight to end school segregation. James Kilby did not want his children to have to travel outside the county each day to go to school.

The black students tried to attend Warren County High School in the Fall of 1958, but the school had been closed to avoid integration. While Warren County High was closed, local politicians used taxpayer funds, to build an academy for the white students. Warren County High School was closed until February of 1958, when Federal Judge John Paul ordered the reopening of Warren County High on an integrated basis.

"We were only young children. [We] didn't know half of what was going on, but all we wanted was an education." – Ann Rhodes Baltimore

Ann Rhodes was the lone senior of the Warren County Class of 1995. Shockingly, she did not receive her high school diploma until 19 years after she graduated.

The interviewees recounted their experience of finally integrating Warren County High School in 1959. However, this was an extremely hard time because the racism and harassment worsened.

Faith is what sustained the students despite the resistance they faced. Betty Kilby shared that she recited Psalm 23 before she got out of the car on her first day of school and afterward, she "wasn't afraid anymore."

"I would talk to God, so that I could have God's protection... They had taught us if God be for you, then you've got the Big Man upstairs watching over you." – Betty Kilby Fisher

Documentary:

Had fourteen hours of footage and zero video editing experience when this project started.

The final documentary is not perfect, but it shares the stories of so many brave men and women fighting for equality.

Premiered the documentary at Court Square Theater in Harrisonburg, VA. Hundreds of community members showed up to support the film.

The documentary film is now available to the public on YouTube, and is being used as educational material in local schools.

Future Work

In the future, more research could be done on the other localities in which the Massive Resistance Movement was strong.

Historical markers could be placed at the former Warren County High School and Federal Courthouse to highlight and honor the important moments of history that occurred at each of these locations.

"The legal system can force open doors and sometimes even knock down walls. But it cannot build bridges. That job belongs to you and me."- The Honorable Thurgood Marshall

References and Acknowledgements

Clark, J. B. (2021). From massive resistance to quiet evasion: The struggle for educational equity and integration in Virginia. *Virginia Law Review*, 107(5), 1115-1164. <https://www.virginialawreview.org/articles/from-massive-resistance-to-quiet-evasion-the-struggle-for-educational-equity-and-integration-in-virginia/>

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