



Washington History in the Classroom

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“**Washington History** magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”

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Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

Teachable Moment

The Rage of the Civil Rights Era

BY CHRIS MYERS ASCH

As the era of formal racial segregation in the District fades further into history, it can be hard for us to fathom the deep passions once aroused by the civil rights movement. Washington today is among the most liberal cities in the country, so we may be misled into thinking that toppling the city's racial barriers was a relatively simple process. In this issue's "Teachable Moment," we read a letter from February 1950 that captures the rage of civil rights opponents and reminds us that there was nothing easy or inevitable about ending segregation in our nation's capital.¹

The letter from Irene Paulus to Harry Wender, found in the Harry S. Wender Papers of the Historical Society's Kiplinger Research Library, was written when Washington was still very much a southern town whose white leaders upheld a segregated school system and Jim Crow practices. But that segregated world was under assault as an interracial phalanx of community activists challenged racial customs and forced local and federal officials to address serious racial inequities.

One major battleground was the segregated public school system. The city's Board of Education—by law composed of six white and three black members appointed by federal judges—defended the dual system instituted by Congress in 1862. It insisted, as Superintendent Hobart Corning testified repeatedly, that "segregation is not discrimination." On February 14, 1950, the U.S. Court of Appeals in *Carr v. Corning* agreed, ruling that D.C. school segregation was both constitutional and supported by Congress. It dismissed a class action suit brought by black parents protesting overcrowded conditions at Browne Junior High School in Northeast.²

Despite the ruling, school officials could not ignore growing racial disparities within the system. As African American migrants from the South poured into

Washington and white families left for the segregated suburbs, the black school system grew increasingly overcrowded, particularly at the secondary level. Black high schools operated at more than 50 percent over capacity, while white high schools were nearly 25 percent under capacity. Black Cardozo High School was located in a decrepit building at Ninth Street and Rhode Island Avenue, NW, that had been abandoned two decades before by the white system. Cardozo enrolled more than 1,700 students—double its capacity—and had no playgrounds or recreation areas. Classes were held in corridors, basement rooms, and even outside. After a scathing 1949 report by Columbia University Professor George Strayer documented the deficiencies of the black schools and recommended closing Cardozo and others, school officials contemplated a simple but politically perilous solution: transfer Central High School from the white "Division 1" to the black "Division 2."³

Nearly a dozen white schools had already been quietly transferred to black pupils between 1945 and 1950, but Central High School was no ordinary facility. Constructed in 1916, Central sat majestically on nine acres at the corner of 13th and Clifton Streets, NW, a site with panoramic views of downtown. The school was an architectural marvel, a community landmark, the pride and joy of white Washington. Its 47,000 alumni included FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Central resembled a small college, boasting an oak-paneled library, multiple laboratories, several gymnasias, an indoor track, even an armory and rifle range. Designed to educate 1,950 students, its enrollment had dwindled to 1,437 by 1948. Logically school officials eyed the spacious building as a solution to Cardozo's overcrowding.⁴

Civil rights groups strongly supported transferring Central. Some white conservatives agreed, seeing the transfer as a way to forestall full integration (one member of the segregationist Federation of Citizens Associations warned, "If you don't give [black people] equal opportunities, you will find equal opportunities forced upon you"). Most white Washingtonians, however, were horrified. "Cen-



A graduate of Central High School, Harry S. Wender publicly opposed its transfer at a school board hearing on February 16, 1950. But his support for gradual desegregation provoked the ire of segregationist Irene J. Paulus. Courtesy, Washington Star collection, DC Public Library, © Washington Post



Large crowds turned out to testify before the school board on the proposed transfer of Central High School on January 16, 1950. *Courtesy, Washington Star collection, DC Public Library, © Washington Post*

tral is not merely a tradition," wrote one aggrieved alumnus to the school board president. "It is a living force for good." Outraged white parents and alumni assailed the school board at public hearings in September 1949 and spent months mobilizing opposition to the transfer.⁵

The controversy became deeply personal for Harry Wender, a Central High graduate and chair of the city's Board of Recreation. A Jewish attorney proud of his interracial community work in Southwest Washington, Wender saw himself as a moderate, mediating force between white segregationists clinging to the status quo and interracial advocates of immediate racial equality. While he publicly condemned racial discrimination, he believed integration should be "orderly and non-compulsory," a gradual process embraced by a slowly evolving community consensus—a stance that earned him the enmity of both sides. His commitment to gradualism led him to perpetuate segregation in recreation; in seven years under his leadership, the Board of Recreation steadfastly maintained segregated recreational facilities despite continuous protests by local activists.⁶

In the midst of the Central High controversy, Wender received the following letter from Irene J. Paulus, a white

woman disturbed by the growing power of the civil rights movement. Paulus's letter offers a glimpse into the worldview of white civil rights opponents. It expresses the deep anger that white conservatives felt at the erosion of what they considered a sacred way of life, and it encapsulates many of the key arguments that they used to defend segregation.

A month after Paulus's letter, despite the full-throated opposition of the city's most powerful local leaders, the school board voted 5-2 to transfer Central High School to Division 2 and relocate its students to the city's other white high schools. Two white board members joined all three black members in supporting the transfer.⁸ Angry Central alumni insisted that the building no longer bear the Central name. School officials complied as best they could, and Central High School was erased from the educational landscape; the building became home to Cardozo High School, which remains there today (though the etched "Central" is still visible above the entrance). Perhaps as much as any single event or court decision, the loss of Central convinced conservative white Washingtonians that the city was no longer theirs and helped break the back of white resistance to desegregation efforts.

Central

February 16, 1950 ¹

You allegedly opposed Central shift to colored - but in view of your biracial stand in re Central High controversy that segregated school systems must and shall go. Who do you speak for? Yourself? representative of the Jewish B'nai B'rith - Anti-Defamation League, of which you are a member according to previous press releases? the colored people? Certainly you do not represent the majority whites of D.C. who fight for their fundamental rights to restricted racial assembly in schools, recreational facilities, etc., which have always been recognized until the coming of the pressure-group era of Roosevelt-Truman administrations. I have noted time and again your immediate desire to catapult our recreational facilities into the biracial policy upon the demands of the colored and communist-front groups, despite the wishes of the majority whites to retain their separate facilities. The B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League is unalterably on record for compulsory racial checkerboarding, and therefore it is obvious that as one of their members you identify your group with all biracial movements of the pressure-groups and the colored people. Our Constitution does not dictate compulsory biracialism in every phase of our lives. We have always had the right to dual facilities, but in this left-wing era perverted groups attempt to shackle the whites to the negro ball and chain. This country is big enough for separate facilities for the two opponent races. This doctrine that we must all be poured into the same facilities is communistic, and it is very clear from Jewish groups and individuals, such as above-mentioned organization, Jewish Congress, etc., and yourself, that all too many Jews identify themselves with communism and the colored race. The colored, and all biracials who believe in consorting with the African black race, can erect the biracial facilities such as they profess to desire. But likewise the restricted facilities have the right of existence for those of us who believe in association with our own race. For instance, the negro pools may be biracial since colored desire not exclusively black pools, but white pools should remain white since the majority of us whites prefer to be discriminating of our associates. This same principle applies to restaurants, theatres, parks and schools. Senator Bricker, Republican from Ohio, recently condemned the Supreme Court for injecting ~~the~~ their personal left-wing views in judicial decisions to legislate reforms against the wishes of the majority white race in the social, political and economic field. How right he is. In other words, I think you should identify your remarks as being representative of the desires of the Jewish groups to which you belong and the colored people which you aim to place over the white race in D.C.

Harry Wender
D.C. Recreation Board
City

Mrs. Irene J. Paulus, 2674 Minnesota Ave SE

- 1 Paulus wrote the letter just two days after the *Carr v. Corning* decision affirmed the constitutionality of D.C.'s segregated schools and one day after a raucous school board hearing on the proposal to transfer Central High School to the black division.
- 2 Wender took the white conservative position against the transfer of Central, but his general opposition to segregation in principle outraged Paulus and others who asserted that white people should be united in opposition to all civil rights initiatives. Many white opponents despised civil rights advocates, especially those who were white. Though civil rights activists condemned Wender for his unwillingness to end segregation in recreation, he also angered white conservatives who suspected rightly that he was not fully on their side.
- 3 In 1950 D.C. was still majority white, but that was changing rapidly due to black migration and white suburbanization. In 1940 black residents were 28 percent of the population; ten years later, they were 35 percent. By 1957 Washington would be the first major city in America with a black majority.
- 4 Paulus and her allies resented the power of national organizations that opposed segregation, including civil rights groups (e.g., the NAACP), religious groups (e.g., American Jewish Congress), liberal foundations (e.g., Rosenwald Fund), and some labor unions (e.g., Congress of Industrial Organizations). Many of these had collaborated to produce *Segregation in Washington*, an incendiary 91-page report published in December 1948 that dissected Washington's racial practices and revealed the full extent of discrimination. Those who condemned the report feared that it confirmed that the momentum of elite public opinion had shifted decisively in favor of civil rights, at least at the national level.
- 5 This term did not mean "mixed ancestry," as it does today. Instead, it was used as a synonym for "integrated." Opponents used it as an epithet to demean civil rights efforts.
- 6 Anti-civil rights rhetoric often was laced with sexually charged language because the fear of interracial sex and intermarriage—particularly between black men and white women—underlay many white objections to integration.
- 7 Opponents of racial equality sought to discredit civil rights efforts by linking them to communism. With Cold War fears spreading rapidly in the wake of the Soviet Union's detonation of an atomic bomb the year before, charging someone with being a "communist" had deep resonance, akin to being called a "terrorist" in early 21st-century America. Communists and former Communist Party members, including Eleanor Nelson of the United Federal Workers of America, had pushed for racial equality in the 1930s and '40s. By the late 1940s, however, civil rights leaders such as the NAACP's Charles Hamilton Houston distanced themselves from left-wing movements to avoid accusations of communism.
- 8 Paulus and other white segregationists, who often were anti-Semitic as well as anti-black, criticized Jews for being among the most prominent white supporters of civil rights, both nationally and locally. Wender was visibly active in local Jewish affairs. In Washington Jewish attorneys Joseph Forer and David Rein worked with Charles Hamilton Houston and other black lawyers in the successful fight against racially restrictive covenants in housing; Jewish activist Annie Stein joined with aging black leader Mary Church Terrell to drive the Coordinating Committee for the Enforcement of the D.C. Anti-Discrimination Laws, which targeted segregation in public places.
- 9 Until the end of the 1930s, white conservatives could rely on the federal courts to protect white supremacy; indeed, the judiciary was the most conservative of the three branches of government. That began to change during and after the war, however, as several key decisions eroded the judicial bedrock of segregation. In Washington the first major case to support civil rights was *Hurd v. Hodge* (1948), in which the Supreme Court ruled racially restrictive housing covenants unconstitutional.
- 10 Paulus and other civil rights opponents worried that legal equality would lead to black power, a fear with deep roots in Washington history. During the Reconstruction era (1865-1877), black men gained the right to vote and immediately became a strong political force, but allegations of corruption combined with lobbying by powerful white leaders spurred Congress to block black power by stripping the city of all self-government. Lingering myths about Reconstruction and fears of black power still animated white conservatives into the mid-20th century.
- 11 At this time "subversive" was synonymous with "Communist," and Paulus accuses Wender of being deviously strategic in his "alleged" opposition to transferring Central. If Central were not transferred, the logic went, then the disparities between the conditions of white and black schools would continue to worsen, which could trigger federal intervention or inspire the Supreme Court to rule segregated schools unconstitutional.
- 12 Paulus lived near the intersection of Minnesota and Pennsylvania Avenues in what was called "Far Southeast," across the Anacostia River. The area burgeoned with white war workers during the 1940s, but already by 1950 its demographics were beginning to change—in 20 years, the area would go from 83 percent white to more than 85 percent black.⁷

In the four years following Paulus's letter, the pillars of segregated Washington crumbled under the pressure of ceaseless community agitation, powerful interracial alliances, key Supreme Court decisions, and strategic support from federal authorities, including Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. Despite their lack of voting power, black Washingtonians and their white allies across the nation used a variety of political and legal strategies to rouse public opinion and force Congress and the courts to abandon Jim Crow. Segregation in the nation's capital collapsed half a decade or more before similar changes happened elsewhere in the South. By the end of the 1950s, the institutions of public life in Washington—schools, hotels, restaurants, theaters, recreation facilities, government agencies, professional associations—had been officially desegregated.⁹

Though the anger and the ideas expressed in Paulus's letter may seem distant to us today, the city we now inhabit is in some ways a product of that divisive era. As the civil rights revolution took hold, many white people left the city—the white population dropped by more than one third in the 1950s and nearly 40 percent more in the 1960s. Those who remained tended to be older, wealthier, and more geographically concentrated, nestled primarily into neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park or in the redeveloped complexes of Southwest, all areas protected by high real estate prices.¹⁰ They sent their children to lightly integrated schools, public and private, and lived a life largely segregated by race and class. Few blue-collar white people remained anywhere in the city—they abandoned the Far Southeast and many decamped for Prince George's and Calvert Counties in Maryland. The loss of the white working class meant that race and class were more closely correlated in late-20th-century Washington than ever before. Whereas once white people of all classes lived in every quadrant, often in residentially integrated areas, by the end of the 1960s few white people lived in the eastern two-thirds of the city. Only in the early 21st century have they started to return to those areas. The legal barriers to racial equality may have tumbled, but Washington remains largely segregated by race and class.

Chris Myers Asch is Editor of Washington History.



The Board of Education's 1949 proposal to transfer Central High School from the white division of the D.C. Public Schools to the "colored" division triggered intense opposition from white segregationists. Courtesy, *Washingtoniana Collection, DC Public Library*

Notes

1. Irene J. Paulus to Harry Wender, Feb. 16, 1950, Central High School Alumni Association, Box 1, Harry S. Wender Papers, Kiplinger Research Library, Historical Society of Washington.
2. *Carr v. Corning, Superintendent of Public Schools*, 182 F.2d 14 (D.C. Cir. 1950); *American Bar Association Journal* 36 (April 1950): 313.
3. George D. Strayer, "The Report of a Survey of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia" (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), 332–337, 339–340.
4. Carl F. Hansen, *Miracle of Social Adjustment: Desegregation in the Washington, D.C. Schools* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1957), 24; Bell Clement, "Pushback: The White Community's Dissent from Bolling," *Washington History* 16, no. 2 (fall/winter 2004-2005), 90-91.
5. "CENTRAL for CARDOZO," *Evening Star*, Feb. 14, 1950; "Federation Splits on Central Use As Negro School," *Evening Star*, Oct. 2, 1949; "Board Weighs Partial Lifting of Racial Ban," *Washington Times Herald*, June 11, 1948; Edward T. Dunlap to Melvin C. Sharpe, Dec. 13, 1949, Central High School Alumni Association, Box 1, Wender Papers; Dunlap to members of the Alumni Association and FRIENDS of Central High School, Aug. 20, 1949, Central High School Alumni Association, Box 1, Wender Papers; Dunlap to Stephen G. Spottswood, Aug. 1949, Central High School Alumni Association, Wender Papers.
6. "Recreation Head Suggests Mixed Use of Negro Schools," *Washington Post*, June 11, 1948.
7. Thomas J. Cantwell, "Anacostia: Strength in Adversity," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 49 (1973-74): 348.
8. Coit Hendley, Jr., "School Heads Prepare to Shift Central High to Colored Use," *Evening Star*, Mar. 9, 1950.
9. Isaac Franck, "Racial Integration in the Nation's Capital—An Introductory Statement," in *National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials, Civil Rights in the Nation's Capital: A Report on a Decade of Progress* (Annandale, VA: Turnpike Press, 1959), 3.
10. Eunice S. Grier, *Understanding Washington's Changing Population* (Washington: Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies, 1961), 19-22.