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# Correspondence

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*To the Editors:*

Professor Garrett Epps has related an important component of the story of how James Jackson Kilpatrick transformed the “evolving regional debate about how the South should respond to the Supreme Court’s decision in *The School Segregation Cases*.” (Volume 10, No. 1 of *Constitutional Commentary*). The account was a trenchant reminder of growing up after *Brown v. Board of Education* in Petersburg, Virginia, a sleepy southern town.

I remember as if it were yesterday the one-inch-high headline in the *Petersburg Progress-Index*, screaming that the Supreme Court had struck down “separate but equal,” thus doing what all so-called right-thinking white Southerners considered unmentionable. It was one of those sultry, hot May days that make residents of Southside Virginia wonder whether they actually live in the temperate zone. My mother (who was a Yankee) and I were riding in our green ‘52 Ford sedan past Walnut Hill Elementary School, which white middle-class children attended. I asked her what the headline meant, and she explained that the Court had required integration of the public schools. I said that I didn’t want to attend school with niggers, and she administered the worst tongue-lashing that I had received in my seven short years on the planet.

Thanks to the efforts of Kilpatrick and others, I nearly realized my uninformed, youthful wish. I completed five years of segregated public education at Walnut Hill Elementary School, three years at Anna P. Bolling Junior High School, and three years at Petersburg High School. It was only in September of 1963, at the commencement of my senior year, nearly a decade after *Brown*, that five African-American students peacefully integrated the Petersburg public school system.

Between May of 1954 and September of 1963, much transpired and conspired to maintain segregated public institutions in my hometown. In 1958, under the threat of desegregation, the City Council closed Wilcox Lake, the public swimming hole of choice for whites. In the summer of 1960, the City Council closed the public library, which had an upstairs section for whites and a basement section for African-Americans, after African-Americans conducted several sit-ins in the white section.

Massive Resistance, instituted at Kilpatrick’s instigation, pre-

served segregated schools for a time. In 1958, Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker and others filed suit against the Petersburg School Board in federal district court in Richmond seeking to end segregated public education. In 1959, the federal court in Norfolk invalidated the scheme established under Massive Resistance. Governor Lindsay Almond suggested that the General Assembly adopt milder forms of resistance, an act for which many Virginians permanently ostracized him.

The City Council reopened the public library five months after its closure and the day before the nation elected John F. Kennedy President. The Petersburg public schools managed to block integration until September 1963. The Council never reopened Wilcox Lake for swimming.

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