



# Back to Summerton

For someone who doesn't like cars much, I spend a lot of time behind the wheel.

Between commuting and long rides to far-flung places, the miles are starting to add up. I have to take my wallet out of my pocket, just like my dad did, or my back starts to hurt. I need to get out and stretch more often, even though that adds time to the drive.

I was thinking about these and many other things as I moved our daughter's things home from Florida to Northern Virginia — a 900-plus mile commute — last month in a Budget rental van. Because the van's top speed was 70 mph, no matter what the law allowed, common sense dictated that

Revisiting the town where school desegregation battle took hold shows that little has changed over the years

the ride needed to be broken up into two longish days.

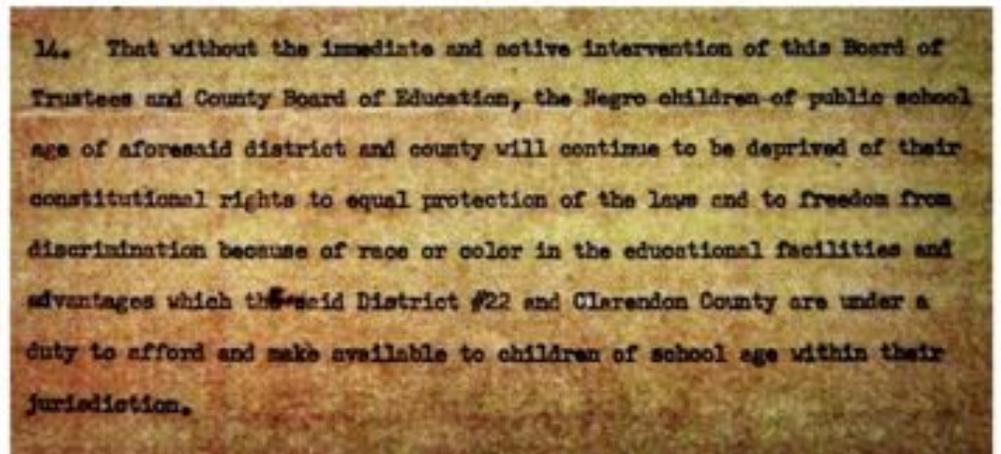
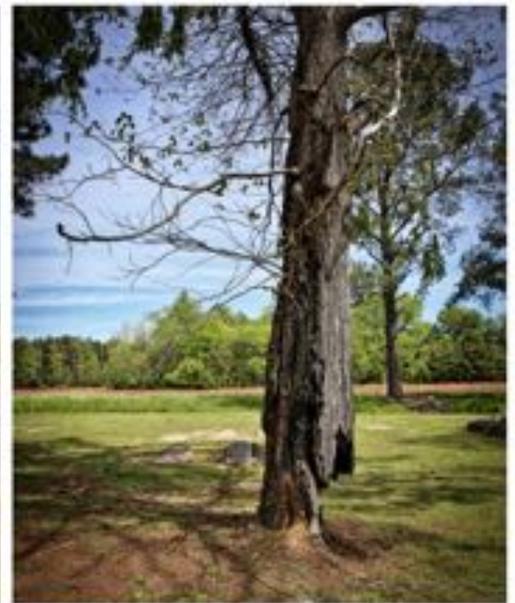
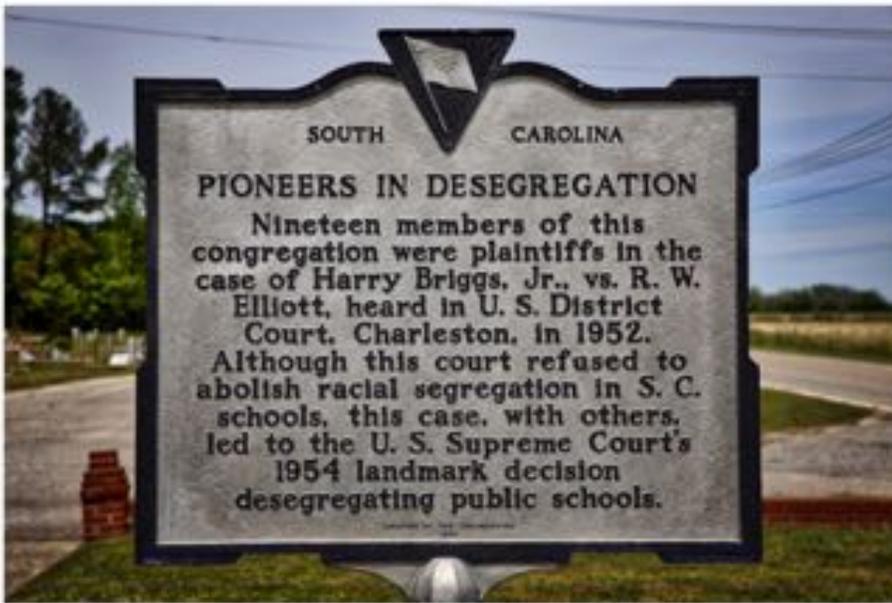
The advantage was that I had time to think

and ponder. I also could stop to take pictures at several places along the way.

One such place was a return visit to Summerton, S.C.

## First to Footnote

Sixty-six years ago, a group of black residents from South Carolina's Low Country filed a lawsuit that eventually would change history. Four years and one day later, on May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court made sure of that.



The court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* led to the eventual desegregation of our nation's public schools and helped spark for the Civil Rights Movement. The roots of *Brown*, however, started in Summerton, a fact that is better known now than it was when I first went there in the fall of 2003, if only slightly.

I was collaborating with a longtime friend, Cecile Holmes, and a group of her journalism students from the University of South Carolina. Cecile grew up in Columbia, about an hour from Summerton, and as a longtime religion editor, was interested in the role of African-American pastors in the fight against segregation. I was interested in the history and in the effect it had on education in the Clarendon District 1.

Working with Cecile's students, we went to Summerton seven times between September and December 2003 to learn about the community, its schools and what led to the lawsuit. The results of our collaboration were published in my magazine,

*American School Board Journal*, as part of a 50-page special report marking the *Brown* anniversary.

My story, "[From First to Footnote](#)," looked at events before and after *Briggs v. Elliott*, the first of the five cases that eventually became *Brown*. The legal action started in 1947, when petitioners led by the Rev. Joseph A. DeLaine sought a bus so black children would not have to walk as many as nine miles each way to school.

A subsequent lawsuit, filed by farmer Levi Pearson, was dismissed, but service station attendant Harry Briggs and his wife, Eliza, sued to challenge the "separate but equal" status of blacks. They were represented by Thurgood Marshall, who later became the first African-American justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

For the story, we conducted extensive interviews with DeLaine's children as well as current Clarendon officials and Joe Elliott, the grandson of the school board chairman named in the lawsuit. At the end, Joseph DeLaine Jr. — the torch bearer for

his father and the lawsuit — said he might have to reach out to Elliott, who found himself ostracized when he started speaking in favor of integration.

It was a small sign of hope at the end of a long and tortuous saga, one that saw families lose their jobs and homes. DeLaine Sr.'s church was burned by segregationists; he fled the state and never returned. U.S. District Judge Walter Waring, who supported the plaintiffs, was forced to resign his position and leave South Carolina altogether.

## Kill 'Em and Leave

The year after the *Brown v. Board* decision, a man from Barnwell, S.C., released the first of his many hit singles and embarked on a fractured version of the American dream.

James Brown's "Please Please Please," released in 1955, started a six-decade career that saw him crowned as the "Godfather of Soul," the father of funk and the forefather of hip-hop. He is the most sampled artist of all time.

Brown's childhood — he was born to a teenage mother in a small wooden shack near the Georgia

border, about 100 miles northwest of Summerton — was not unlike many black children in the South. Growing up in extreme poverty, moving from town to town and house to house, he left school after the sixth grade, had a brief career as a boxer, and spent time in a juvenile detention center after a robbery conviction.

"Nothing is simple when you're poor," author James McBride writes in *Kill 'Em and Leave: Searching for James Brown and the American Soul*. "Poverty, for example is very loud. It's full of traffic, cussing, drinking, fisticuffs, wrong sex, anguish, embarrassments, and psychic wounds that feed all sorts of inner ailments and create lots of loose ends."

What makes McBride's book, released this spring, such a fascinating and gripping read is that it's not a traditional biography, but a series of profiles of the people who played a role in Brown's life. What emerges from the book is a man full of contradictions, driven by such an unshakable fear of loss that he trusted no one.

"Behind the looking glass, behind the bluff and the ranting, the rages, the hollering, and the



School, and Negro children forced to attend the Scott Branch High School, the Liberty Hill Elementary School or Ranney Elementary School solely because of their race and color.



6. That the said schools attended by Negro people have an insufficient number of teachers and insufficient class room space, whereas the white schools have an adequate complement of teachers and adequate class room space for the students.

7. That the said Scott's Branch High School is wholly deficient and totally lacking in adequate facilities for teaching courses in General Science, Physics and Chemistry, Industrial Arts and Trades, and has no adequate library and an adequate communication for the support and maintenance of the students.



shouting, was a man so torn by conflict that he snuck off to smoke cigarettes so that no one would see him," McBride writes. "Here was a man who rarely drank or cursed or let down his guard in public — which meant in front of people, in front of anyone, period; an incredibly lonely, overwrought, and sensitive man. A man who lived alone inside himself."

On one hand, Brown valued the promise of education for poor children — black and white — and helped calm communities inflamed by violence during the Civil Rights Movement. On the other, he treated his band members, wives, and children terribly and distrusted banks so that he left gigs with paper bags stuffed with cash.

"If you want to keep your money," he told one of his band members, "bury it in your yard."

## No Outsiders

I was in a rental car with Illinois plates the first time I drove through Summerton in the fall of 2003.

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We were just starting our reporting, and I wanted to get a feel for the place before we met with DeLaine's children. I quickly found that outsiders weren't welcome.

As I drove down U.S. 301 and then onto Main Street, a police car pulled in behind me. I was heading toward the old Scott's Branch High School, where there's a small marker honoring the original plaintiffs, and had moved into the "other side of town."

The patrol car's lights flickered and I pulled over. The officer checked my driver's license and asked what I was doing. I explained and then was allowed to leave, but the random check shook me. The officer looked me in the eye and told me to "be careful"; I wasn't sure what he meant.

This past April, no one stopped me as I drove down the same street in the moving van. I'm not sure if folks weren't paying attention, or whether the fact that the van had Georgia plates on it was a sign.



Eventually, I found my way to Liberty AME Church, the site where the original petition that became *Briggs v. Elliott* was signed. I had to navigate around roads that were partially or fully closed due to floods last fall that devastated the Low Country. Even though 19 people died statewide in what was described as a 1,000 year flood, no one from Clarendon County perished. Many lost homes and property, however.

As several men worked in and around the church, I introduced myself to the Rev. Robert China, who became Liberty Hill's pastor in November 2014. China, a South Carolina native who is not from Clarendon County, showed me around the church and talked about the hardships of his parishioners. He showed me with pride the original petition, which was framed and hanging on the wall.

"There are a bunch of roads still out, even though it's been six months," he said, referring to the flooding. "You'd think they could have done something to fix them and help our folks get back on their feet, but that's not how it seems to work around here."

China talked about the church members attending a play in Charleston on the case, and how a museum in nearby Sumter is featuring an exhibit on *Briggs v. Elliott*. Later, when I mentioned that Joe DeLaine Jr. and Joe Elliott appeared on a panel together after the play, one of the church members shook his head.

"Well, what do you know? I guess time does change some things."

### **Words, Context Matter**

In May 2004, after my magazine story was published, Cecile invited me to speak at a *Brown v.*

*Board* panel in Columbia. Also on the panel was Edwin Darden, a longtime friend and colleague who has taught me more about race and race relations than I would have imagined possible.

Ed, who was raised in New York City, has worked with schools for years, helping to ensure that boards, administrators and teachers look at education through an equity lens. We don't always agree, in part I'm sure due to our backgrounds and past experiences, but my trust and respect for his opinion is paramount.

I took Ed to the Summerton Diner, the white restaurant in the middle of town. Despite the mid-May humidity, there was a palpable chill in the room. The waitress was polite, but like the officer I had met months before, it was obvious that Ed — who is African American — and I weren't necessarily welcome. When we left, he was visibly shaken; at the time, I'm not sure I fully understood why.

You could say that children of my generation don't know what it's like to be part of a segregated education system. At 51, I'm part of the first group of students who went to integrated public schools starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so if you're threading the needle of the truth, you would not necessarily be inaccurate.

But as one of my first editors reminded me: "Words matter." More important, as Ed likes to say, "Context matters."

## Race and Power

Naively, I grew up thinking that integration was how things worked, that segregation and overt

racism were going away. After all, wasn't that the law?

My hometown district was racially mixed, increasingly so as I moved from grade to grade. The prism I used to evaluate people was not based on skin color, but on attitudes, work ethic, and the like.

As a kid, I had no frame of reference or understanding about the deep, ingrained attitudes and beliefs of the people around me.

I was reminded of that again that day with Ed at the Summerton Diner.

Even though institutionalized racism was no longer legal, the institution had not been taken away completely. Far from it, in fact. And all it takes is one look at the many regressive practices and policies of the past two decades to see what should have been obvious all along.

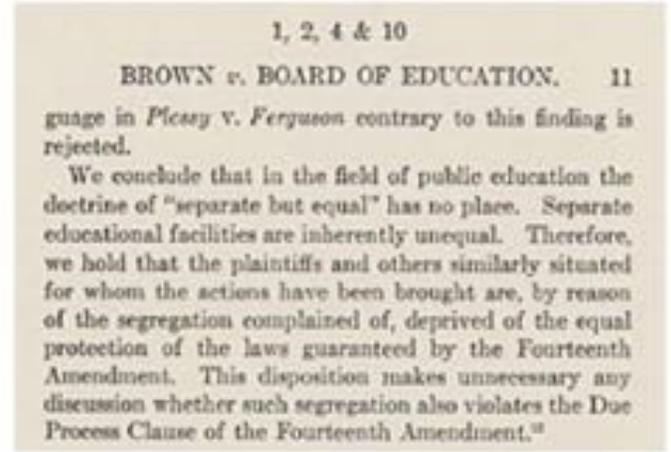
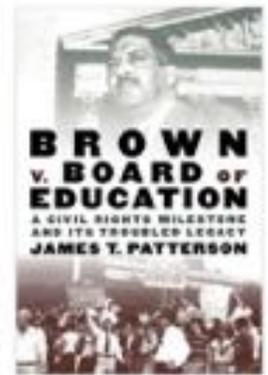
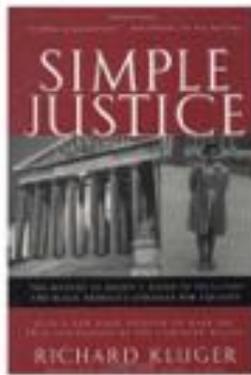
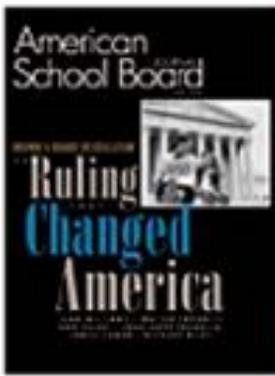
Racism, at its very core, is about power. It's about holding on to power and using it to control others. It's about dictating movement in the status quo on your terms, a distorted version of "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." And when that power is threatened, when the shifts in the status quo go against our beliefs and values, we fight rather than adapt. At that point, power matters more than words or context ever could.

Thank God some people — in Clarendon County, in Topeka, Kansas, and in other places across the U.S. — chose to fight the power.

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*The pictures accompanying this story, with the exception of the historic photos on the opening page, were taken during my visit to Summerton in April 2016.*





## Postscript

If you read my story, [“From First to Footnote.”](#) about the *Briggs v. Elliott* case, you might be interested to know what has happened to many of the sources mentioned in the piece.

- In September 2004, Congressional Gold Medals of Honor were awarded posthumously to Harry and Eliza Briggs, the Rev. Joseph A. DeLaine, and Levi Pearson.
- DeLaine’s children — Joseph Jr., Ophelia, and Brumit — spent years talking about the case and its impact on their family. Joe DeLaine Jr., 82, who served on the presidential commission that oversaw the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of *Brown*, lives in Charlotte and remains active with the BDP Foundation, the nonprofit that is working to help educate Clarendon school children about the case and improve opportunities for the district’s students.

Ophelia DeLaine, now 79 and living in Florida, wrote a book on her father and the case. *Dawn of Desegregation* was published by the University of South Carolina Press in December 2011 and remains in print. Brumit, also known as B.B., died in 2012 after several years of poor health.

- U.S. District Judge J. Waties Waring, whose dissent in the original *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit was the first against “separate but equal” schools and served as the foundation for *Brown*, was honored with a life-sized statue at the courthouse in Charleston, S.C., in 2014.

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- The Levine Museum of the New South’s interactive exhibit, “Courage: The Vision to End Segregation, The Guts to Fight for It” debuted in Charlotte in 2004 and was shown in New York, Baltimore, Los Angeles and other locations before returning to Charlotte again in 2011. It is on display now at a museum in Sumter, S.C.

- Sadly, it’s no surprise that desegregation failed miserably. Today, signs in Summerton point you to Clarendon Hall, a private, almost all-white school promoting “Excellence in Education in a Christian Environment.” No mention of *Briggs v. Elliott* is found on the Summerton website, although you can read about it on the Clarendon County website.

- The public school district, Clarendon 1, is all but ignored. But thanks to the efforts of Rose Wilder, who was recognized as South Carolina’s Superintendent of the Year in 2014, Clarendon 1 now is the second highest performing among South Carolina’s high poverty schools.

The ongoing challenge for the district, in addition to the high poverty rates of many of its students, is to increase enrollment. Because Clarendon County’s overall population has declined, so has enrollment, which is down by more than 30 percent over the past decade and now stands at just under 900 students.

The district has started advertising with billboards along Interstate 95, using the theme “Come Grow With Us.” Ironically, a majority of the children on the advertisements are white.