

**Segregation Academies in Rural Alabama:  
White Resisters' Final Stand Against School Integration in Wilcox County**

by

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## Abstract

This paper examines the series of events leading to the establishment of segregation academies in Wilcox Academy, Alabama, followed by a brief analysis of how white resisters founded and built these white private schools. Following the federal enforcement of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, Wilcox County underwent a series of desegregation attempts that led whites in the rural county to adapt new resistance tactics such as “freedom of choice,” district zoning, and, finally, segregation academies. According to this research, segregation academies presented white resisters with the most successful method of white resistance and allowed them to override federal enforcement of integration in Wilcox for decades after *Brown* ruled to end segregation in school.

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In 1971, white members of the Wilcox County Board of Education (WCBE) operated and thought as many local school boards did. The federal government did not see day-to-day practices and actions within their school system, so who were bureaucrats in Washington to give vague, yet direct and ambitious orders on something as monumental and disastrous as integration? The WCBE members believed “the actions they [were] being forced to take [were] ‘fundamentally and constitutionally unsound’” and “‘it [would destroy] for all the very protection it seeks to make equal.’” Furthermore, they predicted that forced integration in Wilcox represented “the greatest possible potential for creation of all-black school systems.”<sup>1</sup> While the members sat in their meeting on September 21, 1971, whites outside the confines of the Board had already established two segregation academies in the county and were actively gathering the resources to create a third. By this time, local whites had already witnessed the county transition from a completely segregated public school system to a desegregated one. Now, however, they found themselves needing to worry less about federal enforcement; they had their own, locally run all-white schools for their children to attend. By 1971, Catherine Academy and Wilcox Academy had already demonstrated their effectiveness for continuing segregation, and these schools proved optimal choices for white students and their parents.

Wilcox County did not always reflect a white private school system alongside a Black public school system, however. For many years following Reconstruction, Black schools in Wilcox were privately owned and run by Presbyterian organizations while white education was rooted in the public system.<sup>2</sup> Between 1964 and 1972, however, Wilcox County’s primary and

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<sup>1</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, September 21, 1971, Camden, Alabama, 221. They were correct in their predictions—Wilcox County’s student population today reflect a percentage of ninety-nine, while less than one percent are white.

“Environment: Student Demographics.” Accessed October 2021.

<https://www.greatschools.org/alabama/camden/1505-Wilcox-Central-High-School/#Students>.

<sup>2</sup> These Black private schools were absorbed into the public school system in the early 1960s and shut down in the early 1970s when Wilcox was forced to integrate.

secondary education systems saw its biggest transition since Reconstruction, leading to a complete inversion between the private and public institutions. This reflected the relentless tactics of white resisters in the county who, seemingly overnight, established segregation academies throughout Wilcox. These segregation academies proved to be white resisters' *most* successful tool of resistance, allowing them to create their own, new white spaces that had originally been rooted in the segregated public schools.<sup>3</sup> These new spaces allowed whites to bypass federal laws and send their children to institutions that they themselves ruled without intervention from local, state, or federal governments.

This paper examines the escalation of events that led Wilcox's white resisters to establish three segregation academies in a county of only sixteen thousand people, most of whom were Black.<sup>4</sup> The majority of these events took place between 1964 and 1972. During these years, whites employed several tactics in an attempt to dilute and delay the implementation of integration, including blatantly ignoring federal orders to desegregate, sending families "freedom of choice" forms, establishing new district zones, and, finally, establishing segregation academies. Though the WCBE made decisions for the entire county, much of this paper focuses on Camden, the county seat where the WCBE's headquarters is located. Likewise, Camden saw the most activism from the Civil Rights Movement and is home to the last remaining segregation academy in the county, Wilcox Academy.

Methods such as freedom of choice and new district zones provided only temporary white resistance tactics—and ultimately failed. Both methods prolonged segregation while also

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<sup>3</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale discusses the idea of white spaces in her manuscript *Making Whiteness*. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> "Wilcox County, Alabama Population 2022: 1970," World Population Review. Accessed February 2022. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties/al/wilcox-county-population>

allowing the Board's white members to ostensibly claim they had achieved racial equality in schools, but both were simply another way to ignore federal orders to integrate. Segregation academies, however, quickly proved their effectiveness in the maintenance of segregation and ultimately turned out to be white resisters most successful form of resistance, creating a new model of segregation through privatized education in Wilcox County.

This paper falls into two categories of historical research. One involves historical examinations of Wilcox County itself. The history of the county is small yet detailed, from the county's settlement until roughly the 1990s. Authors in this category tend to be those who have visited or lived in Wilcox County at some point, such as Maria Gitin. Only one trained historian, Cynthia Fleming, has studied the area in great detail, while other historians have used it as pit stops in their larger investigations into Alabama's history, such as Joseph Bagley. The second category of historical research is focused on the creation and evolution of segregation academies. Historians have studied this topic primarily in Mississippi, but the examination of these establishments in Alabama has been relatively overlooked by scholars. Only a handful of historians have discussed segregation academies in Alabama. This paper brings these two scholarly conversations together to better understand how and why segregation academies were established in Alabama.

Cynthia Fleming, a historian of African American history and the Civil Rights Movement, is the only trained historian to research Wilcox County and its historical significance. Her monograph, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, approaches the county like many scholars of the late 1990s and early 2000s—by examining how voting rights and the Civil Rights Movement impacted a rural county. Fleming approaches her sources from a bottom-up approach, using in-depth interviews to show how Black residents of

Wilcox fought alongside the Movement to secure voting rights. Education is only a small part of her research, with the bulk of her study focusing on the struggle for Black voting rights. Her work examines the desegregation process, but she ends her discussion of education by stating, “The white students enrolled in the private all-white academies that had just been established in various parts of the county. Thus in the fall of 1972, it seemed that the desegregation the black students had struggled so hard for just the previous spring remained just beyond their reach.”<sup>5</sup> Her research of segregation academies does not extend beyond this statement.

Two other works of Wilcox County are Maria Gitin’s *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* and Clinton McCarty’s *The Reins of Power: Racial Change and Challenge in a Southern County*. Neither of these books are traditional works of history, but in their own way they do offer important contributions to the literature. Gitin’s book combines her own experiences as an activist in the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Project in Wilcox and actual historical evidence, confirming the white supremacist tactics that intimidated so many Black residents throughout the twentieth century in and beyond Alabama’s Black Belt.<sup>6</sup>

McCarty’s work traces the shifts of political power throughout the history of Wilcox County. Part of this political shift from white power to Black power, he concludes, is because of the shift in school systems during the 1960s and 1970s. *Reins of Power* overlooks the issues that arose out of the split in public versus privatized schools, however; while many Black legislators in Wilcox came into local power, whites left the systems in which these new political powers ruled. Furthermore, he overlooks the fact that whites hold most land in Wilcox County, and

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<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 233.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2014).



therefore have major influence over issues such as tax codes even if they do not hold political seats in local government. While McCarty's book is important and provides useful information, it also neglects a lot of issues that arose from this split in Wilcox.<sup>7</sup>

Though his study is not as focused on Wilcox, Joseph Bagley's *The Politics of White Rights: Race, Justice, and Integrating Alabama's Schools* does briefly discuss the county's reluctance to integrate public schools to uphold racial segregation. His discussion focuses primarily on public institutions throughout Alabama, such as the WCBE, and their ability to uphold segregation. He only discusses segregation academies in his epilogue when he explains that courts dropped desegregation cases throughout Alabama "on account of there not being any white students left in public schools with whom to integrate" because of their flight to segregation academies—Wilcox included.<sup>8</sup> Bagley's study is a rare case among historians to merge Wilcox's history into a larger examination of the Movement and white resistance in Alabama.

The second historiographical category for this study is segregation academies. Historians of this topic have roughly limited their examinations of segregation academies to the geography of Mississippi. J. Todd Moyer's book, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986*, explores the Movement and the resulting opposition from whites. In Sunflower, whites began planning segregation academies as early as 1964 when it first appeared that the federal government might enforce integration. During a White Citizen's Council meeting, the members "launched a program to

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<sup>7</sup> Clinton McCarty, *Reins of Power: Racial Change and Challenge in a Southern County* (Tallahassee: Sentry Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Bagley, *The Politics of the White Right: Race, Justice, and Integrating Alabama's School* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2018), 227.

make public school desegregation irrelevant to them.”<sup>9</sup> When Indianola Academy opened in 1969—during the same time that U.S. district court judge W.C. Keady ruled that Sunflower County could no longer operate under a dual school system—the new school’s leadership accepted over 900 applications in less than a week’s time. Moyer argues that Mississippi’s transition from all-white public schools to all-white private schools happened “without a hitch.”<sup>10</sup>

Jason Sokol’s *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* examines white resistance to the Movement throughout the South, but his discussion of segregation academies remains restricted to Mississippi. He argues that segregation academies sprang up seemingly overnight and gained large support in Mississippi because of their ability to organize through the Citizen’s Council. According to Sokol, roughly 56,000 white students transferred to segregation academies, stayed home, or moved when their families took them out of their hometown to avoid attending desegregated schools.<sup>11</sup> Both Moyer and Sokol discuss the impact that integration and segregation academies had on Mississippi during the late 1960s and early 1970s, but neither extend their research beyond the state.

Steve Suits’s *Overturing Brown: The Segregationist Legacy of the Modern School Choice Movement* is the most recent scholarship to examine the lasting impacts of private schools on modern education, but his research extends beyond Mississippi and the southern region and discusses private education apart from segregation academies. In his four-page chapter “For God and Private Schools,” he argues that Ronald Reagan’s presidency in the 1980s

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<sup>9</sup> J. Todd Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 177.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 171.

opened new possibilities for whites to drain resources from public education. Private schools throughout the U.S. received federal funding and support from the Reagan administration based on the President's belief that schools should return religion to the classroom; furthermore, Reagan believed "private schools were the engines of diversity."<sup>12</sup> Suitts's study of these private schools almost a decade after whites founded them shows how they continued to impact public schools, taking funds that would go to public institutions and instead rationing them off onto private schools.

Both of these fields of scholarly research appear limited in their analytical and topical reach, but both are important when understanding the broader Civil Rights Movement. This paper brings the two fields together to understand how the Movement led to new white resistance tactics in the form of segregation academies in rural Alabama, specifically in Wilcox County.

### Wilcox Prior to 1964

The territorial legislature created Wilcox County on December 13, 1819—just one day before the United States admitted Alabama as a state. Its boundaries originally expanded beyond today's geography and consisted of territory in neighboring Clarke, Monroe, and Dallas Counties. Its founders placed its roots in the heart of the Black Belt because most of the white settlers brought the enslaved people they owned with them, and the soil was well-suited for their agriculture purposes, especially their reliance on cotton which was booming in the early nineteenth century. White life in Wilcox County reflected many of the Old South's archetypes, with residents partaking in elite balls and riding through Camden on horse and carriage. More

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<sup>12</sup> Steve Suitts, *Overturning Brown: The Segregationist Legacy of the Modern School Choice Movement* (Montgomery, Alabama: NewSouth Books, 2020), 69.

important than their events and transportation, the size of their enslaved population displayed the wealth of the county.<sup>13</sup>

Like many rural counties throughout the South, Wilcox's white residents were far outnumbered by the Black enslaved population. White enslavers remained in power, however, because of the violence enacted on the enslaved. According to Cynthia Fleming, Wilcox County's slaves were subjected to backbreaking labor and poor living conditions, a combination of which often led to outbreaks of illness. Their punishments were often public and harsh, with some never recovering from their injuries. James Carmichael, an enslaved man in Wilcox explained that "I have seen many Negroes whipped within a inch of his life at these posts. I have seen them whipped so badly that they had to be carried away in wagons. Many never did recover."<sup>14</sup> But many enslaved people were not intimidated by these violent tactics. One enslaved man refused a whipping from his overseer, stating "he had taken the last whipping he would take from a white man. He wouldn't mind being shot; he had been shot twice already. But he would not be whipped."<sup>15</sup> His enslaver then shot and killed him when he tried to escape.<sup>16</sup>

When federal troops reached Wilcox towards the end of the Civil War, many whites attempted to continue enslavement by fleeing to Texas, but most knew slavery was coming to an end; however, the majority of white residents did stay in Wilcox. Likewise, most freedpeople stayed in the area. In fact, many Black men, women, and children from other counties began moving to Wilcox, and the county saw the largest population gain in Black residents—more than any other county during Reconstruction—providing a 26.9% increase.<sup>17</sup> By 1867, there were

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<sup>13</sup> Cynthia Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Stone, *Fallen Prince: William James Edwards, Black Education and the Quest for Afro-American Nationality* (Snow Hill, AL: Snow Hill Press, 1990), 188. Fleming, 5.

<sup>15</sup> James Benson Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1950), 248.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma*, 8.

only 499 white voters and 2,376 Black voters registered in Wilcox. There were a number of Black state legislators during the 1870s, along with some white Republicans, but white Democrats quickly joined the Redemption Era's political schemes and reconstituted a new power structure in Wilcox, their own work of "reconstruction" as they built anew the edifice of white supremacy<sup>18</sup> This racial divide and power structure continued in Wilcox for decades.

After Reconstruction, two classifications of Black families existed in Wilcox: those who were able to get out from under the control of their former enslavers, and those whom whites kept caught in the system of sharecropping. Some Black families successfully created their own Black spaces, particularly in the form of Camden Academy where some parents taught, and Black students enrolled and lived. Some families lived on campus or just outside its boundaries, and their children were not allowed to wonder past the edges of this Black space. Other Black families, however, were not as fortunate to experience this leeway. Most Black families in Wilcox County were subjected to sharecropping and forced to live on the same land which whites forced their ancestors to work. Here, like in many areas throughout the South after Reconstruction, Black sharecroppers were forced into a continuous cycle of debt—a new way of enforcing slavery in Wilcox. When Eliza B. Wallace, originally from Ohio and a Presbyterian missionary, visited Wilcox in 1893, she wrote of the atrocities she saw among the sharecropping class:

These people do not own the land, that is owned by white men in tracts of a thousand or more acres; each is rented out to the colored people. While the crop is growing, the rich planter provides for the families of the colored men. ...when the crop is gathered, each one's work is figured up at a shamefully low rate per day, and when the books are balanced, it generally turns out that the renter is in debt to the planter. This happens from year to year, and the [Black] man is too poor to get away and better his condition. He can neither read nor write and so cannot keep accounts and has never handled enough money to learn by practice.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 10-12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

In addition to keeping Black sharecroppers in debt, white landowners exerted much control over Black families living on their property. White landowners encouraged Black parents to keep their children out of school to help work the fields, and many took the suggestion because they needed the extra hands to meet quotas. Some sharecropping parents sent their children to school and found ways to make up for the lost labor. Cynthia Fleming argues that “black farmer laborers in Wilcox County were hemmed in on all sides, from the cradle to the grave,” allowing whites to perpetuate Black poverty and ties to their land from one generation to the next.<sup>20</sup> Harsh living conditions presented another reality of Black sharecropping. Landowners assigned many sharecroppers and their families to one room homes, which the property owners did not feel the need to build well and provided them with the bare minimum to survive.<sup>21</sup> These poor living conditions were the reality for most Black residents in the county and represented a visual disconnect between the wealthy whites, who often lived large antebellum homes and the poor Blacks, who lived in shacks.

Sharecropping represented only one way whites were able to maintain economic and social control in Wilcox. They also used intimidation. Many Black residents understood their place in society and did not overstep because of the well-founded fear of white violence. Some, however, participated in what historian Robin Kelley referred to as “infrapolitics.”<sup>22</sup> Nellie Williams Abner, a native of Wilcox, recalls tricking her way into bypassing racial etiquette, “you tell the clerk what you want, and she’d invariably ask you fifty times. ‘You want two yards of

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Letter from Eliza B. Wallace to “my dear young friends,” April 25, 1893, Wallace Letter Book, Knoxville College Archives, Knoxville Tennessee.

<sup>20</sup> Fleming, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> Robin Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 77.

blue material?’ I’d say, ‘two yards of blue material.’ ...I just kept repeating whatever she asked me. I never said yes ma’am or no ma’am to any of them.”<sup>23</sup>

Though whites attempted to subdue Black rights in Wilcox, primary and secondary education in the county flourished for both its white and Black students. Alabama’s residents during the mid-to-late nineteenth century understood the Wilcox Female Institute and Moore Academy to be two of the best schools in the state. Both schools provided education to whites—the Wilcox Female Institute provided a boarding school for girls—and both eventually closed in the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> Most white students in Wilcox attended the public schools. The county also had schools for Black students; these were privately owned until the 1960s when the WCBE acquired and accredited them to operate as the Black public schools.<sup>25</sup> William James Edwards, a graduate of Tuskegee University, founded the Colored Literary and Industrial School which was later renamed the Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute.<sup>26</sup>

The most prestigious of Wilcox’s Black schools, however, was Camden Academy. Founded in 1886 by the Freedman’s Board of the United Presbyterian Church, Camden Academy quickly emerged as one of the best schools for African American children in the state because of its high standards for both the teachers and students.<sup>27</sup> Many students who attended Camden Academy early in its establishment did not continue their education past the secondary

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<sup>23</sup> Nellie Williams Abner, interview by Cynthia Flemings, August 15, 1999, Washington D.C. Accessed February 2022.

<sup>24</sup> “Wilcox Female Institute Building at Camden, AL,” Rural SW Alabama. Accessed September 2021. <https://www.ruralswalabama.org/attraction/wilcox-female-institute-building-1849/>.

“Moore Academy at Pineapple, AL in Wilcox County,” Rural SW Alabama. Accessed September 2021. <https://www.ruralswalabama.org/attraction/moore-academy-at-pine-apple-al/>.

<sup>25</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 60.

Unfortunately, these schools were shut down after having operated as public Black schools for only roughly a decade due to forced integration.

<sup>26</sup> “Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute located in Wilcox County,” Rural SW Alabama. Accessed September 2021. <https://www.ruralswalabama.org/attraction/snow-hill-institute-at-snow-hill-al/>.

<sup>27</sup> “History: A Brief History of Camden Academy,” Camden Academy National Alumni Association. Accessed September 2021. <http://caanational.org/history.html>.

level because of the limited resources available to Black students. Because of this, the school provided its students with the best possible education. Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews enrolled at Camden Academy in the second grade and continued there until the eighth. She remembers the high standards for the school's education: "they compare that to being a college graduate. The caliber of education was just that high."<sup>28</sup> It was considered the "crown jewel" of Black schools founded in the state.<sup>29</sup>

Under this split education system, there were clear differentiated spaces between Blacks and whites. It reflected only one of the many visual separations between races in Wilcox. Of course, these spaces were not restricted only to Wilcox County. In her book *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, historian Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that white and Black spaces were crucial to culture throughout the South after Reconstruction, and whites relied heavily on them to enforce segregation and racial inequalities. Outsiders and locals alike could look at a society and identify their role. Hale's framework about space holds true for Wilcox.<sup>30</sup> For most of its history, the ability to maintain these segregated spaces provided whites with control in the county. By the mid-twentieth century, however, whites recognized the federal government's ability to jeopardize this security and threaten the segregation of the races in the realm of public education.

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<sup>28</sup> Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews, interview by author, February 3, 2022, Zoom.

<sup>29</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

Though Hale's argument of spaces holds true in Wilcox, many of her other arguments also demonstrate racial conditions in the county. For example, she argues that some spaces were purposefully integrated, such as the domestic home life. Most Black women in the South found work as domestic workers in white homes. This model allowed whites to keep a paternalistic foot in Black life while also reminding Black women that they worked *for* whites, not *with* them, and only when whites *allowed* them to. Like much of the Southern region, this was also true in Wilcox County. Most Black women worked in white homes. Hale argues that this was a norm throughout the South, and it proved true in Wilcox.



After the NAACP's lengthy legal struggle, the United States Supreme Court required that government funded public schools desegregate with its landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. However, the Court's justices never set a timeline for school boards to follow. Their vague language "with all deliberate speed" in the 1955 *Brown* follow-up ruling on implementation of desegregation gave white leaders of school districts throughout the country enough leeway to find new ways to uphold the old regime. Alabama, along with many other southern states, simply ignored *Brown* for almost a decade. It was not until 1963, when fourteen Black students sued Macon County to attend Tuskegee High School, that white Alabamians began worrying about desegregation.<sup>31</sup> The case made its way to the Alabama Supreme Court, where the judges declared the ruling as a blanket decision for the entire state, finally forcing Alabama public schools to follow the *Brown* order. Along with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *Lee v. Macon County Board of Education* began a frenzy in Alabama among school boards and white parents alike who now saw integration as their near future. Wilcox County was just one of Alabama's many counties whose white residents now had to reckon with the effects of *Brown* and *Lee*.

### Ostracizing the Civil Rights Movement in Wilcox

In order for Wilcox County to ignore the *Brown* decision, the members of the WCBE had to justify their actions. Throughout the 1960s, Wilcox County's white population relied heavily on the members of the Wilcox County Board of Education to prolong segregation and keep their racial order in place, and the meeting minutes of the Board clearly show the success in their ostracization of the Civil Rights Movement and its activists. It started as early as 1964 when the

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<sup>31</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of the White Rights*, 1-11.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began sending workers for their Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Project, and it continued years after the establishment of Wilcox County's segregation academies.

The white men who ran the Wilcox County Board of Education were locals who were born and raised in the county. They understood their positions in society as officials tasked with upholding segregation. These white men continued to dominate the WCBE until 1980 when Black voters finally succeeded in electing two Black men— K.P. Thomas and Frank Smith— to serve on the Board.<sup>32</sup> Prior to desegregation, the WCBE spent almost a decade fighting the federal government by employing tactics of white resistance while trying to prolong what seemed inevitable. A large part of their resistance was in reaction to activists helping to bring the Civil Rights Movement into the county and activate local residents. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, both the federal government and civil rights activists from the SCOPE Project flooded the WCBE with questions about how desegregation might be achieved. Because of civil rights activists' persistent demands for voting rights and integration in the county, these outside men and women took up a large portion of the Board's conversations.<sup>33</sup>

The Board never shied away from their feelings about civil rights activists. They used stigmatizing language whenever discussing the outsiders who came with the express purpose of changing their racial regime; this was partly to separate themselves from civil rights workers, whom they deemed threats, but it also isolated the workers to potentially prevent them from winning support among voters. In a 1966 resolution sent to all public-school principals, they

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<sup>32</sup> McCarty, *The Reins of Power*, 228.

<sup>33</sup> Civil rights activists coming to Wilcox County was not much of a surprise. Activists had already begun work in Lowndes County, Wilcox's neighbor, and made a large impact by ignoring Martin Luther King, Jr.'s non-violence methods and openly carrying guns to protect themselves. For more on this, see Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

referred to the civil rights workers as “agitators” while “praying” that they could file an injunction to stop the workers from mounting their protests. They found the demonstrations “explosive” and worried about the discomfort white citizens felt when having to face the inequality Wilcox forced onto its Black residents.<sup>34</sup> Maria Gitin, a white civil rights worker who came to Wilcox County with SCOPE during Freedom Summer of 1965, referenced this rhetoric in her book. She came to the county to register people to vote, and she recalls being referred to as one of the “outside agitators” and being targeted by whites who did not like them being there.<sup>35</sup>

By 1971, the Board was even more dismissive of civil rights workers, refusing to meet with members of the Movement because they believed “that no good can come from negotiating with these people.”<sup>36</sup> They argued that the activists had come to Wilcox to “destroy education” and threatened Black parents, coercing them into protesting.<sup>37</sup> That same year, protests began outside of the Board with students boycotting school and using “ugly” language against the superintendent, Guy S. Kelley.<sup>38</sup> White Board members continued to use this rhetoric throughout the Movement during their meetings when discussing Black activists, whether they were locals or outsiders.

Of course, it was never only Board members who took issue with the Movement, nor was smearing the only tactic whites used to try and stop the civil rights workers. Local authorities also manipulated the county’s infrastructure in their attempt to maintain white segregated spaces. As early as 1962, activists began coming to Wilcox County to register people to vote. The same year, local authorities shut down the ferry connecting Gee’s Bend to Camden to stop Gee’s

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<sup>34</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, August 30, 1966, Camden, Alabama, 56: “A Resolution,” 7.

<sup>35</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 58.

<sup>36</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, September 28, 1971, 224.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Bend's large Black population from voting. By shutting down the ferry, whites forced Black citizens of Gee's Bend to have to drive over forty miles to Camden to register to vote at the courthouse, and drive over forty miles back; in contrast, a ride on the ferry would have taken fifteen minutes. Whites in the county did not restore ferry services to the Gee's Bend area until 2006, over forty years later.<sup>39</sup>

The Board did not always speak lowly of the Movement and its workers, however. The earliest activists to come to Wilcox spoke with the Board about using Camden Academy as their local headquarters; many SCOPE workers lived in the dorms on campus and used the space for daily meetings. In August of 1965, Dan Harrell, a field director for the SCLC, asked the Board for permission to use Camden Academy for civil rights rallies and demonstrations. The Board granted him permission, allowing Harrell to use the school grounds for the Movement until his protests began affecting the daily operations of Wilcox County High School (WCHS), the white school in Camden.<sup>40</sup> The Board began to take issue with Harrell and his protests when he began transporting Black students to WCHS so they could demand to be enrolled immediately. This was during the time that the Board was distributing "freedom of choice" forms to students who wished to transfer. These protests, along with the freedom of choice forms, further upset many white parents in Camden who were already worried about the impending school desegregation. Harrell's actions prompted the Board to send a resolution to all teachers in the county, encouraging them not to persuade Black or white students to get involved with actions brought on by the civil rights leaders.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gitin, 51. "Gee's Bend Ferry (old cable ferry shut down during the Civil Rights Movement; ferry service resumed in 2006)," Rural SW Alabama. Accessed September 2021. <https://www.ruralswalabama.org/attraction/gees-bend-ferry/>.

<sup>40</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, August 9, 1965, 21. Wilcox County High School was later renamed Wilcox Central High School.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, August 9, 1965, 21; Ibid, August 30, 1966, 56: "A Resolution," 6.

Harrell's interaction with the Board is one example of how race relations operated in Wilcox. The white Board members granted permission to Harrell to use their property for protests as long as civil rights activists stayed restricted to that property. When Harrell exceeded those boundaries, however, the Board and other whites took issue with him. Another example is Reverend Richard Dickinson, who also lived in the dorms to partake in the Movement. He met with the Board after observing the campus and having grown concerned that many Black students were not staying in school. The Board found the conversation "pleasant and constructive" but ultimately not a priority, taking no action to help Reverend Dickinson.<sup>42</sup>

Dickinson's concern was legitimate. Ruby Abercrombie, a Black teacher from Birmingham, took issue with the drop in the number of Black students coming to class; attendance was down because of sharecropping. As discussed earlier, many Black sharecroppers kept their children from school to work in the fields. When Abercrombie confronted the landowners about their harsh quotas and how they impacted the children living under their control, they only replied, "you don't understand our way of life...you're from Birmingham."<sup>43</sup> The Board likely dismissed Reverend Dickinson's concern because they did not want to interfere with white landowners who suggested the Black students stay home to work the land with their parents. This situation shows how members of the Movement interacted with Wilcox's racial regime. In as late as 1965, sharecropping still plagued Black lives of both parents and children.

Members of the WCBE ostracized the Movement by creating a negative narrative around activists, but they also knew they would have to interact with them at some point. Allowing them to attend meetings to voice their concerns gave the impression that they were willing to work

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, April 20, 1965, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ruby Abercrombie, interview by Cynthia Fleming, November 1, 1999, Detroit, Michigan. Accessed February 2022.

with them, but they never did. Instead, they spent years trying to separate themselves from the workers. Using this negative language also helped them justify their actions, or lack thereof, during integration. By placing a bad mark on Black civil workers, they could do the same to the Black students who worked with them, allowing them to keep those Black students out of white schools for the supposed safety of white students.

### The Board Prolongs Segregation

While civil rights workers sought to desegregate Camden, the WCBE constructed and implemented multiple plans to stall integration. Initially, they blatantly ignored requests. As the federal government became more adamant on the imperative of desegregation, however, they began sending more requests for plans of integration. To these, the WCBE answered explaining that their plan was a work in progress without actively producing one. When the members of the Board asked Wilcox's Superintendent, Guy S. Kelley, for his desegregation plan in March 1966, he told them that he "did not have the plan completed sufficiently to take up at [that] time."<sup>44</sup> The Board successfully failed to create and implement a plan for roughly four years, allowing them to extend segregation in their school system until June of 1966 when they finally submitted a formal plan. Whites on the WCBE were crafting their own version of "deliberate speed" with an emphasis on deliberate and a stunning lack of urgency.

They chose, like many other school boards throughout the South, to implement a "freedom of choice" plan. Many school boards pursued this route because it allowed school boards to retain all the control; they could strategically pick which students could transfer. According to William H. Chafe, Greensboro, North Carolina, the home of the Greensboro Four

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<sup>44</sup> WCBE Meeting Minutes, March 22, 1966, 44.

and the start of the sit-in protests, also used this strategy to keep Black students out of white schools. In Greensboro, the school board chose to desegregate only the first grade in its first year of enforcement.<sup>45</sup> Their school board had an acceptance rate of 0.026%, which was lower than most southern states. Greensboro's freedom of choice plan was so successful that a white Arkansas official wrote them stating that "[they] like the way...North Carolinians have solved the school desegregation problem. Why if we could be half as successful as you have been, we could keep this thing to a minimum for the next fifty years."<sup>46</sup> Freedom of choice was successful in North Carolina, but it also proved successful throughout the South, including in Wilcox County.

Though the name suggests students had the choice to attend the school of their choosing, a number of factors went into the admissions process. The first factor was the Board members themselves; anyone could apply to transfer to the white school, and vice versa, but the Board chose who did, creating a token scheme which gave the appearance of integration. Furthermore, the act of submitting a freedom of choice form was not as simple as asking parents which school they would like their children to attend. The Board made the transfer process more difficult. For one, the schools distributed the forms to students directly on September 6, and required them to return the paperwork by September 12, meaning families only had six days to return the forms.<sup>47</sup> The second factor was limited access for certain ages. When the Board announced this plan, they stated students entering the first, second, third, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades could apply for transfer.<sup>48</sup> This gave only about half of the student body an option for freedom of choice.

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<sup>45</sup> William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>46</sup> Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> WCBE Meeting Minutes, 56: "A Resolution," 2.

<sup>48</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, August 30, 1966, 56.

The third factor laid outside the control of the Board; intimidation from the white population kept many Black students from submitting a freedom of choice form. Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews was one of the only eight Black students to enter Wilcox County High School in 1966. She remembers the anticipation of finally gaining the right to attend whichever school she wanted, thinking that many Black students would feel the same. Rather than registering among a sea of friends, Threadgill-Matthews registered with only eight. “We were thinking we had worked for this so long and so hard. I was just looking for a huge number, and I just remember just being so disappointed.” She credits the menacing race relations for this turnout. “There were a lot of students that of course couldn’t go—wouldn’t; [they] felt like they couldn’t go because sharecropping was still a really big thing. ...a lot of students had probably wanted to go but parents just were afraid.”<sup>49</sup> The father of a classmate and neighbor of hers had recently been killed by white men in front of Antioch Baptist Church, a Black church in Camden, and his mother refused to let him enroll in WCHS because of fear that she would also lose her son to the same racial violence that had claimed her husband’s life.<sup>50</sup>

At every stage of the freedom of choice plan, the Board attempted to slow its progression. Ultimately, they did admit a small number of Black students who requested to transfer, which they understood as an appeasement for the federal government. They admitted token Black students but ignored the problems that Black students encountered while attending white schools. For example, the Board discussed issues regarding lack of transportation for Black students during multiple meetings without ever coming to a solution. These brief discussions lasted

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<sup>49</sup> Threadgill-Matthews interview.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



months into the school year, so many Black students were left finding a way to school without the same assistance as their white counterparts.<sup>51</sup>

Though the Board initiated the freedom of choice plan in 1966, the WCBE made little progress towards integration for the next five years. Documents from October 1971, over five years after the first freedom of choice forms were sent to students, show that almost no progress had been made. Black schools continued to be fully Black. White schools remained overwhelmingly white. For example, in 1971, Moore Academy enrolled 263 white students and no Black students; Pine Hill High School also had 263 whites, along with only 25 Blacks enrolled; Wilcox County High School had 352 whites and 27 Black students. Though there were 3,865 Black children enrolled in Wilcox County's public school system, only fifty-two were allowed to transfer to the white schools, either because of the Board or because of their own hesitancy.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps there was a reluctance among Black students to transfer to white schools because of the violence they faced in the school. Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews remembers enduring the constant threat of violence, something she and the other seven high school students encountered every day that they remained enrolled in WCHS. In her science class, one white boy told her "Nigger, if you make more than me on this test, I'm gonna kill you."<sup>53</sup> When they received their grades, he discovered she made higher by turning her test over. When the class dismissed, she walked into the hallway and "was struck between the eyes with some kind of object and knocked unconscious. My father had to come and pick me up and take me...to Selma to the doctor. That was the kind of treatment we encountered on a daily basis."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, August 8-29, 1966, 87-93.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, October 29, 1971.

<sup>53</sup> Threadgill-Matthews interview.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Threadgill-Matthews never saw the inside of the cafeteria because on their first day of school, one of the boys, Erskine Scott, had his lunch tray thrown on him. Instead, they ate lunch outside of the principal's office, balancing their food on a radiator. They received hostile treatment from the teachers as well. Threadgill-Matthews recalls that the teachers "would turn their back and just allow students to physically attack us in the classroom. Going to school...it was almost like a warzone."<sup>55</sup> She did, however, have one teacher she found solace in, Bonnie Mitchell, her English teacher. Mitchell did not tolerate mistreatment of Black students and encouraged them to excel in her class. The eight Black high school students endured such hostility that all six male students left before the end of the school year; only the two females remained enrolled because they had a small measure of security in their gender.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps this malice was the reason desegregation numbers were so low in the Board's 1971 summation of the student population.

Black students in white schools were not the only people harassed. In 1971, the Board received letters from principals of Coy Public School, Wilcox Training School, Snow Hill Institute, and Alberta Junior High School, all of which were all-Black schools, stating that their parents and students had been threatened.<sup>57</sup> By this time, two private academies had opened and successfully enrolled a large number of white students. The parents of these white students continued to understand public schools as white spaces even though many white children no longer attended and refused to allow Black students to occupy those formerly all-white classrooms. The Board read the letters received by the principals of the Black schools and wrote

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, November 10, 1971, 235.

a resolution, blaming the civil rights activists and protests—not whites—claiming they used threatening behavior towards students and Board members.<sup>58</sup>

### District Zones

The freedom of choice plan proved to have little success, and after roughly four years, the federal government forced the WCBE to submit a more inclusive plan with the hope of actual integration in Wilcox County. White Board members then shifted their focus from freedom of choice to district zoning. The first mention of this proposal came during a meeting on September 7, 1971. The members discussed what they considered to be a plan for desegregation and planned to print 10,000 copies of their new “desegregation map and zone plan” to distribute to students and parents throughout the county.<sup>59</sup> This new plan had many shortcomings. First, the school year already began, meaning the plan would take effect after students started class—perhaps the Board members hoped parents would find it too difficult to transfer their children after the academic school year had already started.

Second, the desegregation map they drew clearly failed to desegregate anything. Evidence of this is shown in student protests. Throughout the first few months of the 1971-1972 school year, the Board held many discussions involving Black students who refused to attend their assigned schools. In early September, Black student protestors arrived at Wilcox County High School and demanded to be enrolled in the white school immediately. Kelley, the Superintendent, arrived and “discussed with these students the fact that the Board had not had time to comply with the order but the order would be implemented forthwith, and they would be

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, September 7, 1971.

notified as to their new assignment, if a new assignment as to each of them was required....”<sup>60</sup> He then reported that all the students left except for one, Larry Threadgill, who, supposedly, assaulted Kelley. During Kelley’s report of the incident, the Board immediately voted to expel the student without any hearing.<sup>61</sup>

This desegregation plan continued to fail—or according to the viewpoint of the Board, succeed—because Black students continued to protest. Another protest was held in mid-September when students who were still assigned to Camden Academy withdrew from school. The Board claimed this was an issue because they could not reassign students to their correct school zones if they were not registered in the school system. Furthermore, some students remained enrolled in Camden Academy to gain access to the campus. They did not go to class, but instead “milled around the halls and on the grounds trying to incite other students to like action,” which was their way of encouraging more Black students to join the protests.<sup>62</sup> Seven students originally received suspension for these actions, but once the Board members learned of these protests, they unanimously voted to expel all seven students.<sup>63</sup>

The expulsion of these seven students, much like Larry Threadgill’s earlier in the month, was another way of disciplining Black protestors. Similar to the Board’s meetings earlier within the Movement, this was their way of stigmatizing those who favored racial equality. By changing their punishment from school suspension to county expulsion, the members were essentially making the statement that Black residents in Wilcox were not to advocate for the Movement nor

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Larry Threadgill is the younger brother of Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews. She stated that her brother did not originally transfer to the white school alongside her because he was much more outspoken than her. Their father worried that Larry would be a target for white students’ violence, along with a target for the Board to prove a point. His worries were justified because later, the Board chose to expel Larry without ever reinstating him as a student. He never graduated high school, but he did go on to attend and graduate from college. Threadgill-Matthews Interview.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, September 14, 1971.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

disturb the manner in which they would govern local schools. By taking away the Black students' right to education, the Board was also announcing to other Black students that they were not allowed to practice their First Amendment rights within Wilcox County's public school system.<sup>64</sup>

A few days later, thirty-one Black students arrived at Wilcox County High School again, this time with a court order, demanding enrollment. Once again, Kelley reported that he met with the students and informed them that the Board was under court orders from the federal government to integrate, but the Board was not yet able to comply with those orders. He claimed that "all students who were to be transferred would be transferred on a schedule and in an orderly [fashion] and that they would be informed when the time came."<sup>65</sup> This was Kelley's way of talking students down without forcibly removing them. He had been warned that the students were going to appear with the court order, so he came prepared with an explanation—the students' order was a smaller part within the federal government's order, and therefore, the Board was already in the progress of complying. In doing this, he not only invalidated their legal precedent to enroll in the white school, but he also convinced the student protestors that the Board was in the process of complying with those orders. If they were actively attempting to integrate the schools, however, the Black students would not have had to demand enrollment.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> In 1970, expulsion was not the largest punishment for Blacks who spoke out against racism. Harvard University student, Darrell Prescott, lived in Wilcox County during the summer of 1970 and wrote about the county's continuity of Jim Crow. According to him, between 1968 and 1970, "a black man [had] been castrated, a white woman...shot a black male child, and a white doctor who is a member of the KKK...plotted to have the county's black VISTA director assassinated." Gitin also mentioned the KKK's involvement in drive-by shootings which targeted civil rights workers.

Darrell Prescott, "Benign Neglect in Wilcox County, Alabama," *The Harvard Crimson*. Accessed September 2021. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1970/12/14/benign-neglect-in-wilcox-county-alabama/>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

The Board's district zoning plan started shortly after segregation academies opened, but the protests of Black students reveal how ineffective the plan was in actively integrating the county. Black students understood this plan as a massive failure, otherwise they would not have participated in the protests that led to their expulsion. Whites in Wilcox also saw district zones as a failure, but for different reasons. While Black protestors were attempting to get *into* Wilcox County High School, whites were trying their best to get *out*. Though the Board had plans to prolong segregation, whites in the county saw the writing on the wall; they knew that freedom of choice forms and district zoning would only maintain segregation for a little while longer. Whites in Wilcox quickly mobilized themselves and discovered their most successful form of white resistance: the rapid creation and expansion of segregation academies.

#### The Most Successful Method of Resistance: Segregation Academies

The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) refused to accept the Board's plans as the Board continued segregating students. Though Wilcox's whites appreciated the Board members for their dedication to segregation, they knew it was only a matter of time before the federal government either pulled funds from the public school system due to lack of cooperation or forced the system to fully integrate. In 1969, whites in Catherine, a town within Wilcox, decided to take matters into their own hands and establish the first segregation academy in Wilcox County. In doing so, they realized they could bypass federal laws and enforcement by creating their own space—a space which they could run entirely without intervention from anyone other than local whites.

Catherine Academy was the first segregation academy to open in Wilcox County due to impending integration. It was among the first segregation academies started in Alabama, and it

was originally a member of the Alabama Association of Private Schools (AAPS). The AAPS community provided whites throughout Alabama's Black Belt with important skills to create strong frameworks for their schools while also placing them in conversation with other founders. Lowndes Academy, located in Lowndes County, started only three years before Catherine Academy, but it was very helpful; it showed whites what to consider in their school curriculum and athletic departments. The members of the AAPS met at what later became Catherine Academy to discuss these important decisions. This meeting became a building block for the new model of education in Alabama and allowed white private school boosters to openly create a common accreditation policy, athletic schedules, and admission standards for their new institutions.<sup>67</sup>

Though whites could envision the success of segregation academies in Wilcox, they knew establishing and running their own schools without federal assistance would be costly. They believed tuition fees and donations from the wealthy white population would cover the basics, but they also organized many fundraisers to gather money for other expenses. In March of 1969, Catherine Academy held a skit night and charged admission for both adults and children.<sup>68</sup> The following month, the school's founders held a barbeque and a Gospel Sing including talents from Atmore in neighboring Escambia County. The month of May featured more fundraisers: a fish fry, bingo party, pet show, and pancake supper.<sup>69</sup> The events brought in decent amounts of money for Catherine Academy—which they directed towards school supplies, salaries, and athletic equipment—but equally important, it created a new community for its founders, sponsors, and families. These new spaces would not last without support from whites

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<sup>67</sup> "Catherine Academy Hosts A.A.P.S." *Wilcox Progressive Era* (Camden, AL), January 30, 1969.

<sup>68</sup> "Skit Night at Catherine Academy" *Wilcox Progressive Era*, March 27, 1969.

<sup>69</sup> "1,300 go to Catherine Academy Barbeque" *Wilcox Progressive Era*, April 24, 1969.

who did not have students to enroll in Catherine Academy; they needed outsiders to play roles such as athletic fans. These fundraisers placed importance on bringing the County's whites together to support this new parallel, segregated school system.

While Catherine Academy's members and founders formed a community among themselves, they also formed tight-knit communities with other segregation academies. They continued to attend meetings like the one in early 1969 where they discussed resistance tactics in their own space away from Wilcox's Black population and federal intervention. Catherine Academy was originally established alongside eight other segregation academies including Lowndes Academy, Dixie Academy, Southern Academy, and Morgan Academy, and three others. During the 1969 football season, the school only had seven competitors and played three of those all-white schools multiple times.<sup>70</sup> The creation of these eight schools, however, proved to be just the beginning.

Whites throughout Alabama created a tidal wave of segregation academies in 1970. By the start of the school year, twenty-three more schools had opened throughout the state; Wilcox Academy, located in Camden, was one of them. Whites in Camden began their discussions of a new school almost immediately after witnessing the success of Catherine Academy. In February of that year, the Wilcox Educational Foundation Inc. held a meeting to consider building and operating a school which they originally named Camden Private School. The Wilcox Educational Foundation presented this meeting as a Q&A forum for the public. In reality, however, this was simply a precaution. The decision had already been made to open a new school and they had already purchased and transported four hundred desks from Birmingham. No tuition had been collected, which meant local businesses covered the cost of these desks.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "Catherine Gridders Start Season Friday" *Wilcox Progressive Era*, September 4, 1969.

<sup>71</sup> "Private School Group Will Hold Public Meeting" *Wilcox Progressive Era*, February 26, 1969.



Camden Private School, which the founders later changed to Wilcox Academy, was a community-based effort that gained support from whites both with and without school-aged children. Like Catherine Academy, Wilcox Academy relied heavily on the new white space it provided in Camden. Local whites knew how important this new segregation academy was to upholding their vision of a segregated way of life, and they wanted to generate a strong community so that the school would continue to thrive and provide whites with a segregated space for future generations.

A month after the large purchase of desks, everything fell into place for Wilcox Academy. One-hundred and nineteen families joined the Wilcox Educational Foundation and the organization secured sixteen acres to build the campus which planned to include a classroom building, playground, and multiple athletic fields. Members submitted floorplans and continued to secure sponsors to pay for the football program, but they had yet to find enough funds to begin construction of the building.<sup>72</sup> Similarly to Catherine Academy, Wilcox Academy gained funding through fundraising. In early April 1970, members organized two of their first large events: the first was the Building Fund Drive which allowed prospective parents to donate money in exchange for expressing their opinions on plans such as floorplans and curriculum; the second event took place during the Antique and Gun Show where they organized selling booths with items such as antiques, clothes, and handmade goods. The fundraisers generated sufficient amounts of money, all of which they directed towards construction of the building.<sup>73</sup>

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Note: the date of the paper is 1969, however, the paper was in the 1970 archived collection. The articles also correspond with events during the same year. It is assumed that the date was incorrectly placed on the paper and should instead be labeled “February 26, 1970.”

<sup>72</sup> “Private School Plan Shaping Up” *Wilcox Progressive Era*, March 26, 1970.

<sup>73</sup> “Fund Raising for Private School” *Wilcox Progressive Era*, April 2, 1970.

Members organized their largest money maker in May which they named the “Spring Festival.”<sup>74</sup> The festival included a tour of Camden’s Antebellum homes, still in perfect condition to remind people of the Old South; this tour drew in people from outside of the Camden area. A tour ticket cost three dollars and consisted of access to multiple Antebellum houses, several old churches, a Confederate graveyard (which also had monuments dedicated to the Confederate soldiers who were buried there), and the Wilcox Female Institute, which by 1970 had closed and was a commodity of the public high school and a historical landmark. Following the tour, viewers attended a barbeque where food plates were sold for \$1.50.<sup>75</sup> The Spring Festival created another white space for Wilcox and whites in the surrounding counties. Blacks were not explicitly barred from these fundraisers, but the nature of their tours, which highlighted the county’s past monuments and architecture dedicated to white supremacy, certainly did not provide a welcoming environment to them. The fundraisers and dedication of whites proved successful when Wilcox Academy was built and operating on September 14, 1970.

Fundraising and donations were not the only way these new segregation academies obtained supplies, however. Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews remembers that desks went missing from the public school. It was speculated that they were taken for use in one of the new academies<sup>76</sup>—probably Catherine Academy or Stokes Academy; as already noted, Wilcox Academy secured desks early in their development through local businesses. Likewise, Dr. Andre Saulsberry, the current Superintendent of Wilcox County public schools grew up hearing

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<sup>74</sup> “Private School to Build Soon” *Wilcox Progressive Era*, April 16, 1970.

<sup>75</sup> “Spring Festival to Feature Tour of Ante Bellum Homes, Antique Auction” *Wilcox Progressive Era*, May 14, 1970.

<sup>76</sup> Threadgill-Matthews interview.

rumors that whites stole athletic equipment from WCHS to use at the private schools.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, during a meeting early in the 1970-1971 school year, Kelley told the members of the “disappearance of a considerable amount of equipment and supplies from the Wilcox County High School.”<sup>78</sup> He assured the members that the guilty parties had agreed to return them and persuaded them to dismiss the incident without pressing charges or pressing the issue further.<sup>79</sup> Based on the negative rhetoric surrounding activists and the Board’s urgency to punish student protestors, it can be assumed that whites were responsible for this. Perhaps whites directed this stolen equipment towards the new segregation academies because they did not have the funds to buy it themselves. While there is not irrefutable evidence proving that whites stole supplies for their new schools, the fact that rumors of such misappropriation of public school resources for the new segregation academies continued to circulate among many people in Wilcox for half a century is telling in and of itself.

The new all-white schools did generate new questions, especially questions surrounding the private school versus the public school. Guy S. Kelley, the superintendent of the Wilcox County public schools, continued to make promises of segregation. A month before the 1970 school year began, he made an announcement claiming he was “confident that county schools will open as usual on the basis of freedom of choice.”<sup>80</sup> Because of this plan he was able to keep most Black students from entering the public high school while allowing only “token” Black students to enroll, delaying integration once again.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Andre Saulsberry, interview by author, October 2, 2021, Camden, AL.

<sup>78</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, September 8, 1970, 189.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> “Fate of Schools Still in Question: Source Says No New Order Expected Until Later in the Year,” *Wilcox Progressive Era*, August 20, 1970.

<sup>81</sup> McCarty, 177.

Despite the academies' seemingly overnight establishments, white students in Wilcox did not immediately transfer from the public schools. Many white parents were torn between public and private schools. Some white families held onto the hope that the WCBE could stop full integration. As Threadgill-Matthews recalled, "I guess it was okay as long as there were just a few [Black] students but then when there were a number of [Black] students I guess [they were] like, you know...we don't want to go here. It's just too many Blacks."<sup>82</sup> Likewise, in Lowndes County, Maurice "Sonny" Marlette, a founder of Lowndes Academy stated that if the public school fully integrated, "I could see that there would be five white and thirty black children in the same class, and I could see that they would pull down education; it would not elevate it."<sup>83</sup> Like the Board members, whites in Wilcox seemed fine with the token Black students; desegregation was acceptable, but integration would cause white flight to the newly-established segregation academies. Aside from Wilcox's whites who opted to keep their children in the desegregated public schools with the hope that the WCBE could stop integration, there were also some white families who could not afford to pay tuition at the academies.<sup>84</sup> In 1971, Wilcox Academy's first graduating class consisted of only thirteen students; in that same year the public school's graduating class, all white, had fifteen students. The Camden's white senior class of 1971 was at this point split almost evenly between the private and public schools.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Threadgill-Matthews interview.

This is a common thread throughout segregation academy history. Marlette stated in an interview in 2013 that "while [Lowndes Academy doesn't] want a preponderance of blacks at Lowndes Academy, they will accept a black. I would have no objection to an integrated school if (whites) are not in the minority." This same train of thought existed in 1970 in Camden, only it was about the public schools. Some whites did not mind having the few Black students that actually did transfer to WCHS, but they knew if the school fully integrated, they would transfer their children to the private school, which they eventually did.

"Alabama's Black Belt Public Schools," *US Slave*. Accessed October 2019.

<http://usslave.blogspot.com/2013/03/alabamas-black-belt-public-schools.html>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Over one hundred students from poor white families transferred to Thomasville City Schools in Clarke County, which was just over the border from Pine Hill. McCarty, 289.

<sup>85</sup> "Public School Opens with 378 in Class First Day," *Wilcox County Progressive Era*, September 3, 1970.

Residents of Pine Hill began discussing the county's third segregation academy as early as Camden's residents,<sup>86</sup> however, unlike Camden and Catherine, they failed to organize resources. They did not raise sufficient funds, perhaps, because Camden, Catherine, and Pine Hill share a small population which could not afford to donate to sufficient funds for all three academies. Pine Hill's whites, like those in neighboring towns, began fundraising for their school as early as May 1970. They scheduled baseball games, concerts, and barbeques, but they were unsuccessful.<sup>87</sup> Stokes Academy's completion was delayed until 1972 when it finally opened its doors as a third all-white private school.

All three of Wilcox's segregation academies, regardless of what year they opened, prided themselves on providing better and more Christian-like educations to their all-white students. Twenty-three students from Catherine Academy took the National Educational Development Test, and sixteen of those students ranked in the fifteenth percentile of all students in the nation; five students ranked in the eighteenth percentile. Furthermore, the school prided itself on spending \$1,000 for its new library in 1970 because they "stress[ed] the scholastic development of each child."<sup>88</sup> A parent of Wilcox Academy claimed there was "no comparison" when it came to private education.<sup>89</sup> Another satisfaction of theirs was that they were not exclusive—they allowed anyone to enroll as long as they could pay tuition fees. They did not require prospective students to take entrance exams, nor did they judge students based on their IQ scores. Instead, they claimed their schools were a space for everyone to thrive. Of course, their spaces were meant for white students only, and their definition of "everyone" did not include Black students.

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Camden's white public schools had roughly 322 less students enrolled for the 1970 school year than the previous year.

<sup>86</sup> "Pine Hill Private School Said Practical," *Wilcox Progressive Era*, February 5, 1970.

<sup>87</sup> "Pine Hill Private School will Hold Memorial Day Activities," *Wilcox Progressive Era*, May 28, 1970.

<sup>88</sup> "Catherine Students Rate High in Development Test," *Wilcox Progressive Era*, May 7, 1970.

<sup>89</sup> McCarty, 289.

All three academies in Wilcox County, along with many other segregation academies throughout Alabama, were eventually accredited by the Alabama Independent School Association (AISA). The AISA was founded in 1971 and has accredited over ninety schools since then. The AISA continues these segregation academies' traditions of creating tight-knit communities among their white students and parents. Wilcox Academy's student body regularly communicates with other AISA schools, including Clarke Preparatory School in Clarke County and Monroe Academy in Monroe County. The AISA also holds special events outside of the public-school sphere. One example of this is sports. Very few AISA schools play public schools in sporting events, and those that do usually have large student bodies that force them to play public schools; however, most AISA schools are small enough to only play each other. Some of these schools have closed to merge with other AISA schools, such as Lee Academy and Scott Preparatory School which later merged into Lee-Scott Academy, located in Auburn and also serving white schoolchildren in neighboring Opelika and surrounding areas of Lee and Macon Counties. Others, however, closed their doors without notice, forcing parents to find new schools for their children at the last minute. Marengo Academy in Marengo County closed in 2019 after fifty years; likewise, Taylor Road Academy in Montgomery closed promptly in 2009 without informing the parents of its 300 students.<sup>90</sup>

Catherine Academy and Stokes Academy are two AISA schools that closed. Wilcox Academy is the only remaining school in the county, and its student body has grown over the years due to surrounding academies closing. When Marengo Academy closed in the summer of 2019, it gave its students little notice prior to the new school year beginning. Many parents quickly enrolled their children in Wilcox Academy only days before classes started. Even though

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<sup>90</sup> "Taylor Road Academy Closes, Parents and Teachers Baffled," WSFA 12 News, June 2, 2009. Accessed March 2022. <https://www.wsfa.com/story/10460644/taylor-road-academy-closes-parents-and-teachers-baffled/>.

Wilcox Academy is the only surviving segregation academy in Wilcox County, it still has a lasting impact on the population and the segregation practices they continue to implement.

Opening Catherine Academy, Wilcox Academy, and Stokes Academy as new spaces for whites sparked a new era in white resistance. White Wilcox residents concluded that integration was inevitable; the Board members tried their best to keep schools separated, but the federal government did not back down. The Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare – and later the Department of Education – continuously checked in on the WCBE and its plans to diversify public education, always finding them inadequate. These academies allowed whites to gain complete control over their children’s education—they no longer had to answer to any form of government but their own. Segregation academies created a new white space controlled by a micro-government inside Wilcox County in which only white citizens had a vote.

But white control over Black education did not stop when whites withdrew from the public schools. Whites in Wilcox County continue today to take money from public education. Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews returned to Wilcox County and currently resides there with her husband; she volunteers in the community and serves on the Chamber of Commerce. She says that whites represent the majority of attendees at Camden City Hall meetings, and they almost always object to proposed public school funding. The present Superintendent, Dr. Saulsberry, presented a tax referendum proposal suggesting the funds go towards transporting his students the fifty miles it takes to get them to Wilcox Central High School. Whites showed “just a lot of animosity around that proposed tax increase...because, of course, most of the wealth and most of the land wealth is owned...by the white community whose children don’t go to the public school.”<sup>91</sup> This is only one example of how these segregation academies continue to have a

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<sup>91</sup> Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews interview.

lasting and profound effect on Wilcox County today and the limited education resources available to the County's Black residents..

This legacy of segregation academies is not unique to Wilcox County. Whites established these schools throughout Alabama during the early 1970s, but they had the largest impact on rural communities. This new model of segregation proved successful to many whites, so much so that the county has a segregated school system to this day. Whites attend the private school, while Black students enroll in the public schools. In 1971, the Wilcox County Board of Education predicted forced integration would create “an all-black [public] school system,” but they did not understand the extent to which this prediction would prove true.<sup>92</sup> White perseverance and their steadfast commitment to the maintenance of segregation allowed them to create new white spaces through new schools to keep their children separate from Black children. Their ability to adapt their white resistance tactics to changing political climates and court orders allowed them to create a new model for education through the establishment of segregation academies while also preventing integration in Wilcox County for the next fifty years.

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<sup>92</sup> Wilcox County Board of Education Meeting Minutes, September 21, 1971, 221.



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