"Without Hysteria or Unnecessary Disturbance": Desegregation at Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama, 1948-1954

Charles S. Padgett

Spring Hill College is Alabama’s oldest institution of higher learning, one year older than the University of Alabama. Founded in 1830 by Michael Portier, the Catholic bishop of Mobile, it has been run by the Jesuits since 1847.1 When it desegregated in September, 1954, the four-year liberal arts college claimed 1,000 students, including its evening division in downtown Mobile. The desegregation of Spring Hill College (SHC) came just before the increased Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and White Citizens Council activity which led the backlash to the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision. Although volumes have been written about resistance to desegregation in the Deep South, almost no published research exists on the peaceful desegregation of white southern colleges, which anticipated and complied with Supreme Court rulings. This essay will place SHC’s unique story in the context of the desegregation of higher education in the South and of race relations in Mobile, Alabama, in the decade before massive resistance. It will examine models for desegregation of Catholic colleges before the Brown decision and, finally, will detail SHC’s desegregation as a gradual process that occurred between 1948 and 1954.

Desegregation in the South Before Brown

The history of the desegregation of higher education in the South before and during its massive resistance focused on obstacles blocking the entry of African Americans to colleges and universities. Richard Kluger documented how African-American students faced years of delay from university officials and required continuous legal help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to effect their

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admissions. Before and after their court-ordered enrollments, African-American students faced chicanery from university officials and harassment from groups of whites who opposed their right to be on campus. E.C. Clark, Adam Fairclough, and others showed that these African Americans were held to a higher standard of personal conduct than white enrollees, as university officials created or stretched existing policies to keep them out. Frequently, their desegregated education at state universities was restricted to class attendance, and other socialization with white students was restricted, unwelcome, forbidden, or dangerous. Heroic narratives formed the canon of the literature of desegregation of higher education in the South—Heman Sweatt at Texas, George McLaurin and Lois Sipuel Fisher at Oklahoma, Atherine Lucy and Polly Myers at Alabama, Jim Lawson at Vanderbilt, James Meredith at Mississippi, and Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes at Georgia—and many of these students became subjects of book-length treatises. The memoirs of James Meredith and Charlayne Hunter-Gault suggested that to be the first African American admitted to a previously all-white university entailed public exposure to incessant media attention which marked those students in indelible ways.

Thorough documentation of their experiences by press photos, television, and print pricked many white consciences and left images in America's public consciousness of their lonely, valiant struggles to gain an equal opportunity at higher education. For example, legislatures in Texas and

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Oklahoma established law schools overnight in the late 1940s as stopgap measures to preempt the enrollment of African Americans to their state universities. To accommodate George McLaurin’s forced admission in 1950, the University of Oklahoma scheduled all of his graduate courses in education in a classroom with an anteroom, where McLaurin sat isolated physically from white students but still able to hear the professor and see the board. A separate bathroom, too, was designated for McLaurin’s use.

Beginning in 1952 the NAACP began a four-year battle to enroll Autherine Lucy and Polly Myers at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Finally, in early 1956, with both women poised for enrollment and massive resistance at high tide in Alabama, university officials excluded Myers on the premise of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Three NAACP stalwarts accompanied Lucy to registration in February, 1956, and university officials moved her immediately to the front of the registration line, aggravating scores of other enrollees. By the third day of classes, she and her university escorts were showered with eggs, rocks, and epithets from a crowd of 200-300 outside her classroom building. Later that same evening, the Board of Trustees voted to bar Lucy from campus, “lest greater violence should follow.”

The Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board* decision in May, 1954, defined African-Americans’ right to attend previously all-white state universities, but, as Michael Klarman demonstrated, it also became the catalyst for white opposition to desegregation and temporarily destroyed racial moderation. In its “with all deliberate speed” clause, the court waffled on how quickly desegregation should happen. After the Lucy debacle, overt public displays of racial hatred by whites for African-American students became commonplace in the South when school officials implemented court-ordered desegregation, and the photographic images of white faces contorted with rage, as in the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, documented massive resistance and lingered in the collective memory of that era. Robert Pratt showed that, even when white resistance to desegregation was passive, polite, and legally complex—as in Virginia—the resolve of white politicians to separate African-American students from their white peers was unrelenting.

When state police proved reluctant or unwilling to safeguard African-American students, federal authorities intervened to maintain public order, as when the Arkansas National Guard quelled riots in Little Rock in 1957,

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when the Federal Bureau of Investigation intervened to root out white student protesters and other malcontents in 1961, and when Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes desegregated the University of Georgia.\textsuperscript{15} When James Meredith desegregated the University of Mississippi, federal troops enforced his admission, and the campus in 1962 resembled a battleground.\textsuperscript{16} The ultimate showdown of massive resistance was Alabama Governor George C. Wallace's faceoff with United States Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach in "the schoolhouse door" in 1963 at the University of Alabama.\textsuperscript{17} Although the \textit{Brown} decision became law in 1954, its implementation in public schools in the South took additional years of legal maneuvering. Many Southern schools remained segregated until the 1970s.

The memory of violent white reaction to the desegregation of higher education in the South is thus accurate. However, to remember only the violent upheavals in college desegregation presents an historically incomplete picture. By 1951, \textit{New South}, a mouthpiece for the progressive Southern Regional Council, touted the trend of cooperation among private white colleges and seminaries to court-ordered desegregation of public universities.\textsuperscript{18} It listed twenty private schools in seven southern states and the District of Columbia, representing Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, and nondenominational institutions that had formerly accepted only white students (See Table 1). After the legal program of the NAACP to desegregate higher education reaped its first successes in 1938, when the Supreme Court forced the University of Maryland to admit Donald Murray, Supreme Court decisions gave the green light to private colleges like Johns Hopkins in Baltimore and St. Louis University in Missouri to desegregate in 1944.\textsuperscript{19} The table further illustrated that four colleges in Louisville simultaneously opened their doors to African Americans in 1949, after a federal judge ordered the University of Kentucky to desegregate its graduate programs, prompting Kentucky's legislature to repeal its earlier prohibition of desegregation in education beyond the secondary level. Similarly, that table shows that in 1951 Wayland Baptist in Plainview, Texas, was the first college south of the Mason-Dixon Line to desegregate its undergraduate program.\textsuperscript{20} Its desegregation reflected the success of the NAACP's legal program against the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma in 1950 in the \textit{Sweatt} and \textit{McLaurin} cases, respectively, opening up each law school to one qualified African American. In October, 1950, a three-judge federal panel

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Hunter-Gault, In My Place}, 194-195.
\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Meredith, Three Years in Mississippi}, 207-214.
\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Clark, Schoolhouse Door}, 213-237; \textit{Carter, Politics of Rage}, 142-151.
\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Kluger, Simple Justice}, 202, 213.
\textsuperscript{20}See the college's website at \url{http://www.wbu.edu} Click links to "History" and "Dates."
opened Louisiana State University’s law school to Roy Wilson, and, by 1953, about one hundred African Americans were enrolled in LSU’s graduate, law, and medical schools.  

Guy B. Johnson, a white sociologist at the University of North Carolina’s Institute for Research in Social Science, collected data on those African-American college students who desegregated previously all-white southern campuses. Although court-ordered desegregation met resistance under a variety of guises in public universities, Guy Johnson counted 450 African-American students enrolled in public universities in 1954 in southern states, excluding Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, and he estimated 1000-2000 had contact with white students in regular sessions in the five years before the Brown decision. His tally did not include African Americans enrolled in thirty private or denominational colleges in the South, which initiated peaceful and successful experiments with desegregation. Johnson reported that the vast majority of white students “are simply indifferent but there is a minority who interact with Negro students in a cordial and friendly way.”

Very little documentation exists of those quiet, successful experiments with desegregation on southern campuses. Some registrars pleaded colorblindness, insisting they kept no admissions records by race, and college officials withheld public identification of their first African-American students. Johnson added, “The careful control of publicity concerning race on the campus has been so important that it deserves special mention as an administrative strategy in public relations.” Thus, for a more complete picture of college desegregation in the South, we must revisit the numerous campuses that desegregated before the Brown decision and massive resistance, with a focus on those private colleges that voluntarily relaxed their prohibition on the admission of African Americans. A useful perspective for such work is that of John Stanfield II, a critic of social science methods which replicated ideologies and cultural biases about race, who called for new approaches for representing the human truth about people regardless of color and beyond stereotype. He said,

As much as U. S. social scientists have made interracial interaction into a human dilemma, we rarely develop the methodological tools to probe the countless cases of people who look different phenotypically and yet still get along and live their lives—marrying, having kids, engaging in work relationships, making friends—with no difficulty whatsoever. Indeed, given the race centeredness of

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21Fairclough, Race and Democracy, 155.  
Table 1
Desegregated Private Colleges in the South in September, 1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>City or Town</th>
<th>Institution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Decatur</td>
<td>Columbia Theological Seminary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Berea</td>
<td>Berea College</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>Nazareth College</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Southern Baptist Theological Seminary</td>
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<td>Ursuline College</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Louisville Theological Seminary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loyola University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>Annapolis</td>
<td>St. John's College</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>St. Louis University</td>
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<td>Washington University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>Austin Theological Seminary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>Southern Methodist University</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fort Worth</td>
<td>Southwestern Baptist Seminary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plainview</td>
<td>Wayland College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>Union Theological Seminary</td>
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<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
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<td>American University</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Catholic University of America</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Dunbarton College of Holy Cross</td>
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(adapted from A. Morisey, *New South*, Aug-Sept., 1951)

this society, with its racially saturated media, political, economic, and educational systems, it is difficult if not impossible for many Americans to realize that race is problematic in human relations because it is made into an issue, not because it is a natural bone of contention and source of tension. That most American social scientists have a hard time understanding this can be seen in the fact that studies of prejudice and racism are more pervasive than studies of interracial harmony in race relations research. We ask more questions and record more observations to document patterns of intergroup dislike and discord than we do to document positive bonding and cooperation.21

Desegregation at Spring Hill College

Stanfield believed that historical journals helped counter the flawed sociology of race prevailing in American social science journals. Nevertheless, the historical record lacked documentation of numerous examples of peaceful desegregation in the South and elsewhere, which surfaced before the Brown decision and persisted through the darkest years of massive resistance. The fundamental query within Stanfield's framework is this: In the absence of institutional resistance and organized white protest, how did African-American students perceive their educational experience? How did these colleges prepare their white faculty and students to weather the sea change in race relations? How did these institutions incorporate desegregation into their teaching mission and to what effect? Finally, in the case of Spring Hill College, what circumstances in Mobile, Alabama, helped or hindered its experiment with desegregation?

Race Relations in Mobile in the Decade before Brown

Mobile's record on race relations, chameleon-like, changed radically over different periods of its history. The onset of World War II, however, brought boom times to many Southern cities, and Mobile typified the trend. The Army constructed Brookley Air Field in Mobile in 1939, and then the Navy contracted to build ships in Mobile and nearby Pascagoula, Mississippi. Michael Thomason and Melton McLaurin noted, "Overnight Mobile became a major shipbuilding center. Its shipyards built nearly 200 vessels during the war and repaired hundreds of others. The Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company (ADDSCO) and Gulf Shipyards, the city's two largest firms, employed a combined work force of nearly 40,000 men." Before the war Mobile's entire work force numbered only 17,000. Workers of both races from rural areas poured into Mobile, swelling its population from 115,000 in 1940 to 200,000 in 1944. Mobile's African-American population jumped from 30,000 to 46,000.

Cultures clashed, and Mobile's established white families—many of whose sons attended Spring Hill College—found themselves outnumbered suddenly by raw, undereducated country folk. The Federal Housing Authority threw up sixteen housing projects in outlying areas of Mobile County; only one development lay within Mobile's city limits, and only two developments housed African Americans. The massive influx of poor whites

29McLaurin and Thomason, Mobile, 128.
30Ibid., 124, 126-127.
realigned religious and racial demographics in Mobile County and balkanized the city, too. Southern Baptists became Mobile's majority religion and diluted its Catholic population to 20 percent. Poor whites now outnumbered African Americans in Mobile, and Jim Crow assisted whites in monopolizing jobs. So critical were the skilled jobs at Brookley and ADDSCO that the federal government provided job training to fill them; however, the training was overseen by the Alabama Department of Education. For this reason, historian Dorothy Autrey noted, "Mobile blacks profited little from the economic boom. Neither Brookley Air Field nor the converted war factories hired them as skilled workers, and the State Department of Education refused to open vocational courses to them." When ADDSCO refused to hire African Americans, the local NAACP, led by John LeFlore, lobbied the Federal Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) and succeeded in promoting twelve African Americans, from a total employment base of 30,000, in 1943 from unskilled positions to welders at the Mobile shipyard. In David Goldfield's account, "ADDSCO officials placed these blacks on the night shift. White workers, surprised by the sudden presence of black welders, attacked them, and a riot erupted that injured fifty blacks." When state and local police failed to restore order, a military contingent from Brookley settled the rampaging white workers, and the FEPC and ADDSCO quickly modified the experiment by segregating the African-American welders. Labor organizations, like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), heretofore unsuccessful in most southern locations, scored membership gains from both races among Mobile's wartime civilian population. Nevertheless, the workplace and the union hall remained segregated.  

Many soldiers of both races from all over the United States completed their training for combat on military bases in the South. Life in the Jim Crow army for African-American soldiers was a two-edged sword that cut them both ways. Robert Carter, who later assisted Thurgood Marshall in the NAACP's legal battles against segregation, vividly remembered his army years as a northern soldier on a southern base: "I thought I was pretty well balanced on the race problem, but once I got in the army, the thing was ground in my face everywhere I turned: blacks acting as lackeys to whites, and whites acting oppressively toward blacks." German prisoners of war
often received better treatment, with less risk of physical harm, than African-American soldiers stationed at southern bases.\(^6\) For example, in 1943, an armed white bus driver in Mobile shot one of his African-American passengers, Private Henry Williams from Brookley Air Base.\(^7\) Similar atrocities occurred near military bases throughout the South.\(^8\) The following year more racial trouble erupted at Brookley Field when African-American soldiers and white military police faced off in a two-hour gun battle.\(^9\)

Although the *status quo* in race relations most affected the African-American soldier, it created cognitive dissonance for one white officer: Joseph N. Langan, a Catholic and a self-taught lawyer, represented Mobile in the Alabama legislature. As an Army major, Langan was assigned an African-American soldier to drive him throughout western Texas and New Mexico to search out favorable sites for soldiers to practice river crossings. When restaurant owners refused to allow the driver inside, Langan purchased two meals and the men would eat in their jeep. But Langan found one restaurant owner in California who believed differently: “I asked the lady if it was all right for my driver to come in and eat dinner with me and she said, ‘If he’s good enough to fight for my country and wear the uniform, then he’s certainly good enough to come into my restaurant and eat.’”\(^10\) Later, in the South Pacific, Langan saw soldiers of both races fight and die side by side, and these experiences transformed his mindset about the meaning of *separate but equal*, the flawed conceptual basis of Jim Crow.

After the war, it infuriated Langan that Mobile buses picked up white passengers while sometimes bypassing African Americans. In November, 1945, he wrote a letter to the head of the Mobile transit system, which was also published in the Mobile newspaper: “I thought I’d gotten on the wrong boat coming home from overseas and had ended up in Germany rather than the United States. After World War II,’ he said, concerning race relations, ‘we all had to take sides.’”\(^11\) As an Alabama state senator from 1947 to 1950, Joe Langan sided with local NAACP activist John LeFlore to eliminate the white primary election and the poll tax and brought African-American teachers pay equity with white teachers. Langan’s activism was similar to other

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\(^{\text{7}}\) Autrey, “National Association,” 231.
\(^{\text{9}}\) McLaurin and Thomason, Mobile, 137.
moderate segregationists in the South and served to create salutary relations between the races in Mobile. However, for more than a decade, the NAACP prodded community leaders and the courts to rectify glaring inequities in higher education. Nevertheless, Spring Hill College’s desegregation had less to do with the secular activism of LeFlore and Langan in Mobile than with the dedicated efforts of individuals within the Catholic Church.

**Desegregation of Catholic Higher Education in the United States**

Cyprian Davis documented that at mid-century the Catholic Church developed a reputation with African Americans for racial fairness based on dramatic interventions by individuals. For example, Mother Grace Dammann at Manhattanville College, the “Catholic Vassar” near Harlem, invested years in raising the awareness of her students about racial injustice, resulting in 1933 in the Manhattanville Resolutions, a prototype for student activism on Catholic campuses. In 1938, Dammann announced her intention to admit an African American the following school term, and the students voted 80 percent in favor of her decision. When alumnae raised objections, she lectured them:

> A Catholic colored girl who meets the requirements of a Catholic college and applies for a Catholic education has a right to it and in consequence the college has a duty to give it to her. The day has gone by when we can blithely live as compartmental Catholics, with our political, business, intellectual, social activities in air-tight compartments functioning separately like parts of a well-behaved machine. Catholicism is nothing if it is not a *life*, unified, coordinated to its end.

Theologically, Dammann embraced precepts that placed her decades ahead of the American Catholic bishops, who never spoke in a unified voice against racism until 1979. Dammann acted on her convictions, supported by Pope Pius XI, who dispatched letters to the heads of Catholic colleges and universities shortly before his death in 1938, urging those leaders to join actively in a campaign to combat racism. Albert Foley, S. J., documented how Dammann’s leadership wrought significant desegregation in Catholic girls’ colleges by 1947.

Because Catholic bishops never reached consensus on how to address slavery or Jim Crow, their collective silence on race relations encouraged

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some Catholic colleges, founded in the nineteenth century with nondiscriminatory admissions policies, to regress. For example, the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., opened its doors in 1889 to students of all races but was excluding African Americans by the 1920s. Not until 1936 did its new rector, Monsignor Joseph Corrigan, revert to the original policy of nonexclusion.  

The desegregation in 1944 of St. Louis University (SLU), another Jesuit college in the border state of Missouri, was well documented and provided a context and comparison for Spring Hill's desegregation. Once again, an individual—the indefatigable white priest William Markoe, S.J.—played a key role. As pastor of an African-American parish, St. Elizabeth's, he hosted the 1931 Federation of Colored Catholics (FCC) convention and orchestrated a procession of 500 Catholic laity and clergy from St. Elizabeth's to the nearby SLU chapel. In the presence of Archbishop John Glennon of St. Louis, Stephen Theobald, one of only three African-American priests, celebrated a solemn high Mass. Later, in SLU's auditorium, in the presence of its president, Theobald castigated the university for excluding African Americans.

World War II was a watershed period for American Jesuits' identity and mission, which rested then on their superiority as educators. In 1943, more than 200 Jesuits convened in West Baden, Indiana, where trailblazers like Daniel Lord, S.J., and John LaFarge, S.J., urged a higher profile by Jesuits in social issues, including civil rights for African Americans. The Jesuits moved their Institute for Social Order, a Catholic think tank for social justice issues, to SLU and started publishing the socially progressive journal *Social Order*. Even so, SLU's desegregation caused seismic rifts in the Jesuit community there. The province's leader Peter Brooks, S.J., mandated desegregation to the youthful president of SLU, Patrick Holloran, S.J. When Holloran backpedaled, Claude Heithaus, S.J., a professor of classical archaeology, defied Holloran's gag order and preached a sermon on the sin of segregation, which was later published in the student newspaper: "Defending Catholicism and segregation in the same breath was a hideous contradiction, he declared, tantamount to justifying 'Christian cannibalism.'" Holloran exiled Heithaus from the province to a chaplaincy in Fort Riley, Kansas, and also sent visiting professor, George Dunne,
S. J., back to his home province in California. The American Assistant, Zachaurus Maher, S. J., then reprimanded President Holloran for failing to address the ethical issues raised by Heithaus and Dunne, but their expulsions were allowed to stand. The lessons from SLU’s desegregation were clear, according to historian Peter McDonough: “Racial integration was achieved, but dissidents who advocated reform at the cost of hierarchical solidarity were punished. Idealism was not suppressed, but individual courage was not rewarded. Conscience had personal costs.” Nevertheless, by 1952 SLU had more than 250 African Americans enrolled in a student population of 10,500, as well as four African-American faculty members. John McCarthy, S. J., trumpeted desegregation at SLU in the Jesuit Educational Quarterly as a success that other St. Louis colleges envied.

Following SLU’s desegregation, only two Jesuit colleges—both in the New Orleans province—remained segregated. A generation gap developed between younger Jesuits, like the newly ordained Albert Foley, a New Orleans native, who embraced the new emphasis on social justice, and the older priests, inured to a narrow vision of nurturing the Catholic faith and insulating Catholic youth from secular and Protestant influences in society. Foley remembered a meeting at SHC in 1946—an offshoot of the West Baden Conference—with twenty-two Jesuits from the New Orleans Province: “At the convocation we moved into some rather vigorous and vociferous discussions on the race question and segregation. The older and more conservative fathers maintained that segregation was the backbone of the social order in the South. The younger group of about seven of us violently disagreed with this fixed position.” From his briefcase, Foley removed a copy of Pope Pius XII’s Allocution for Christmas, 1942, and read to the group a quotation: “There can be no room for the open or secret oppression of minorities or for restriction of their economic and political rights. Governments can expect minorities to obey the law in proportion as they respect the rights of minorities.” When William Crandell, S. J., dean of Loyola University in New Orleans, remarked that segregation was not oppression, Foley countered Crandell’s position so cogently yet passionately that the group selected Foley to head the Interracial Committee for the province. Cast in a leadership role by his peers, Foley sought opportunities to study race relations.

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4McDonough, Men Astutely Trained, 191; Southern, John LaFarge, 261-265.
8Ibid.
Foley accompanied Patrick Donnelly, S. J., the president of SHC, to a meeting to introduce the new interracial ministry to Archbishop Thomas Toolen of Mobile, but the archbishop grew livid over radicals who agitated among African Americans. After granting Foley permission to proceed, Toolen strictly forbade the promotion of social mixing between the races. Foley faced a no-win situation: he could ignore the mandate of his order for an interracial ministry, or he could ignore the Archbishop’s wishes. Foley soon antagonized Toolen, after he convened joint meetings of Catholic war veterans and sodality groups from three all-white Catholic girls’ high schools. Those meetings placed African-American males in the same meeting space with white females. One girl’s father orchestrated a barrage of complaints to Toolen, who interpreted the meetings as promoting social equality between the races. When he was suddenly removed from SHC for graduate studies, Foley surmised “that the Bishop had succeeded in getting me thrown out of the diocese . . . I was too radical to be tolerated in the south.” Thus Foley spent much of the postwar period outside the deep South.

Donnelly, too, found himself in a no-win situation. The Augusta, Georgia, native answered first to the Jesuit Provincial in Grand Couteau, Louisiana, and second to Toolen, the local bishop. Historically, Jesuit governance derived from its founder/soldier Ignatius of Loyola. Donnelly served not only as college president but also as rector, or superior, of the Jesuit community at Spring Hill, and all Jesuits there owed him obedience by solemn vow. He sacrificed Albert Foley to St. Louis in 1947 but stayed a course toward desegregation despite Toolen’s opposition.

**Chronology of Spring Hill’s Decision, 1948-1954**

Donnelly’s first public indication that he planned to desegregate SHC was his commencement address at graduation in May, 1948. He sounded familiar postwar themes about the threat of communism in the collapse of Eastern Europe and democracy on trial in America from the delay in granting civil rights to African Americans. He criticized southern universities for conspiring with their silence to deprive African Americans of equal educational opportunities. Then he exhorted, “Let Spring Hill break that silence. Let the College that was the first institution of higher learning to raise the torch of education in Alabama also light and lead the way to full democracy in Alabama and the Southland. Civil Rights? Spring Hill College is for them! For ourselves and for every other citizen, regardless of creed or


Donnelly could have unilaterally desegregated Spring Hill College in 1948, but his Board of Consultants—four Jesuits on SHC’s faculty—cautioned that “while we agree in the principle underlying the move, we must be regulated by local customs.”

Donnelly viewed desegregating summer sessions as the best alternative to full desegregation of the undergraduate program. In fact, Robert Zietz (SHC ’49), a new faculty member, recalled teaching Survey of English Literature to several African Americans working for teacher recertification in the summer of 1949. The normally quiet campus was even more deserted in summer, and Donnelly took advantage of this hiatus to allow African-American nuns to enroll in summer sessions. Meanwhile, Donnelly recruited Joseph Langan to Spring Hill’s faculty, even as Langan pursued his own bachelor’s degree at SHC, like many other veterans on the GI Bill who swarmed the campus after World War II. Donnelly recognized in Langan a valuable ally in his campaign to desegregate the college.

Nevertheless, Donnelly’s push to fully desegregate SHC became lost to other pastoral concerns. For Archbishop Toolen, Catholic higher education for white females was a pressing concern. He had considered establishing a junior college for graduates of Mobile’s three Catholic girls’ schools. Instead, Toolen threw his weight behind a scheme to admit white females to Spring Hill College. Because SHC housed the philosophy school for training Jesuit seminarians, Toolen untangled some hierarchical knots to allow females on the same campus as the seminarians. In 1952, during his ad limina visit to the Vatican, Toolen succeeded in getting coeducational status for SHC from the Congregation for Catholic Education. On the Jesuit side, permission was forthcoming from the Father General of the Jesuits in Rome.

In March, 1952, the pending admission of SHC’s first white females preoccupied the Board of Consultants. Their minutes reflected concerns about the expense ($25,000) of remodeling campus buildings to make “recreation and restroom facilities” available for 70 nonresident coeds expected in September. When The Springhillian, the college newspaper, reported the decision, the page one headline announced, “120 YEAR-OLD TRADITION IS BROKEN; COEDS TO REGISTER NEXT SEMESTER.” Another column gave thumbnail reactions from students and teachers.

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2Board of Consultants minutes, 3 May, 1949, SHC Archives.
5Consultors’ minutes, 1 March, 1952.
6Ibid., 1 March and 6 July, 1952.
Mike Salmon’s was typical: “Economically and socially the institution will flourish; scholastically it will drop.”60 Apparently, Salmon and other males relished the enhancement to their college social life but worried that females would lower SHC’s academic standards.

Walter Furman, S. J., recalled vividly Donnelly’s announcement to the Jesuit community, following dinner on March 17, St. Patrick’s Day, “He told us he was going to make a statement to us, so we would know [about the admission of females] before we read it in tomorrow morning’s newspaper. After that I went to the dormitory where I was prefect and announced to the students, and there was quite a bit of opposing opinion to that decision.”61 Bill Livingston (SHC ’55), a Navy veteran housed in Mobile Hall, recalled, “That was a BIG, big to-do. So many students fussed about [the admission of females] and said, ‘It’s going to lower our scholastic standard.’ I think some of the faculty, too, objected to it.”62

The only females living on campus at that time were Miss Joubert, the librarian, and Mrs. Levet, the nurse. When Joubert first worked for SHC in the 1930s, she made an arrangement with the Jesuits to live in the infirmary, because there were no living quarters for resident females, and in the 1950s she shared those quarters with the widowed Mrs. Levet, whose son was a Jesuit. Joubert’s bathroom in the library was the only one specifically designated for women. Tradition restricted the female students from Mirror Lake on campus, a longtime males-only preserve, where skinny-dipping in the ice cold waters was a favorite pastime. The boys from nearby Wilmer Hall Orphanage, the African-American caddies off-duty from the campus golf course, and, of course, the Jesuits and male students—all frequented Mirror Lake—but not the women.63

In a striking coincidence, Donnelly was named president of Loyola University in New Orleans the same month that he announced the admission of females. Because he replaced Tom Shields, S. J., who some claimed was footdragging on desegregation, his transfer was a bolster to desegregation at Loyola.64 Indeed, one of Donnelly’s first acts as president of Loyola was to admit two African Americans to the law school in the summer of 1952.65 The midyear transition raised Andrew Smith from academic dean

60The Springhillian (college newspaper), 28 March, 1952, SHC archives.
63Livingston interview.
64Fairclough, Race and Democracy, 174.
65Norman Francis, currently president of Xavier University, New Orleans, was one of the pair. See also Louis J. Twomey, S. J., New Orleans, to W. P. Donnelly, S. J., New Orleans, 1 June, 1952, Louis J. Twomey Papers, box 19, folder 10, Loyola University Library, New Orleans. Twomey wrote, “When our own students and others ask me ‘Why doesn’t Loyola...
to president of SHC and moved George Bergen, S. J., from Loyola to SHC as academic dean. The Board of Consultants now consisted of Smith and Bergen, as well as Sidney Tonsmeire, S. J., Patrick Yancey, S. J., and Everett Larguier, S. J. These men were to decide if desegregation at SHC would last or languish, and Smith pushed them in the direction of desegregation.

Meanwhile, William Crandell, S. J., elevated to Jesuit provincial, appointed Smith chair of the planning committee for a general meeting in August on interracial relations in the Southern Province. Smith convened the planners on January 19, 1952, at SHC and held a second meeting with the group later in New Orleans. Consultants' minutes from September 10, 1952, reported Smith's attendance at the general meeting in Grand Couteau where "it was approved that SHC & Loyola could both receive Negroes at the propitious time. This year, because of the inception of the program permitting coeds to register at SHC, does not seem to be the right time." The following day, perhaps as a placebo, the Board debated the pros and cons of desegregating its Evening Division. The resulting entry was the longest discussion of race relations in the Consultants' minutes. In part, it said,

Several applications have been received from (by) Negroes [sic] for our Evening Division classes. Fr. Rector [Smith] pointed out that there are several reasons against their acceptance and several in favor. For example, in favor of such a move there is the growing tendency [sic] in all sections to allow Negroes to participate in higher education. The two applications now at hand seem to be worthy cases in as much as they are adults seeking additional education. After some discussion it was thought advisable to accept these two applications to the Evening Division as a test case or experiment. At the same time, the Consultants agreed to invite African-American colleges to participate in the annual Azalea Debate Tournament on campus, with the proviso that all invited schools be apprised that the African Americans had been invited.

At last the Consultors moved desegregation to the forefront at SHC, but they must have wondered what the cost would be. Just before Christmas, the landlord for the evening division slapped them with a sixfold rent increase: "Fr. Rector [Smith] reported that the rent at McGill for our evening school had been raised from $50 to $300 in the new Bldg. It was decided to admit Negroes? I fumble around and try to 'save face' for Loyola as best I can." In the same folder, see also Twomey's correspondence with Richard Gumble, Jr., who declined to enroll at Loyola.


Consultors' minutes, 10 September, 1952.

Ibid., 11 September, 1952.
to approach Bishop Toolen on the possibility of a lower rate, and to consider moving the night classes to the college." McGill Institute, a Catholic boys’ high school run for the Mobile diocese by the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, had moved from downtown to a more suburban location. Was the steep rise in rent a result of the new building, or did it result from disapproval of SHC’s desegregation of its Evening Division? A subsequent entry reported, “Bishop Toolen stated that the rent at McGill will be adjusted downward by Msgr. [Monsignor] Leo Byrnes,” but it did not reveal the new amount. Bill Livingston recalled taking an evening course at McGill, where many of the students, including some African Americans, were civilian employees during the day at Brookley Field.

As a federal military installation, Brookley was already desegregated, so most evening students found it unremarkable to be in class with someone of another race. The same entry indicated that the City Hospital would begin training African-American nurses, with Spring Hill’s instructors providing the courses in the hospital’s facilities.

In March, 1953, the Consultors postponed the desegregation of the college yet again. The minutes read, “Fr. Rector said that a colored girl had applied for entrance to the College. Much discussion followed. The opinion of the consultors seemed to indicate that the time is not ready for such a student at Spring Hill. Fr. Yancey was of the opinion that the case should be decided on scholastic qualifications. It was suggested that it would be best to admit a colored boy first when the time seemed propitious.”

Clearly, the Consultors were wrestling with the issue of desegregation. Although females were already attending SHC, the Consultors found it easier to hide behind discussions of scholastic qualifications and gender—issues raised by the previous September’s admission of the first females—than the more difficult topic of desegregation.

When William Crandell tapped Michel Majoli, S. J., for his socius, or administrative secretary, it left SHC without a sociology professor. Andrew Smith seized the chance to return Albert Foley, S. J., to SHC as chair of the department of sociology and psychology. When Foley wrote John LaFarge, the Jesuits’ premier interracialist, to congratulate him on his newly published autobiography, he described how Smith had used the book to abet Spring Hill’s desegregation: “We are having it read in the refectory [Jesuit community dining room] down here, and the sane and sober account is having some noticeable impact on the otherwise grim faculty who are still Confederate officers as far as the race question is concerned. I trust

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“Consultors’ minutes, 21 December, 1952.
Ibid., 3 February, 1953.
Livingston interview.
Consultors’ minutes, 16 March, 1953.
that its impact will be felt here with some renewed interest on the part of the younger faculty in the problem [of race relations].”13 Foley noted that the Province’s policy embracing desegregation, under Crandell’s leadership, was already delayed two years and its implementation “left up to’ the local superior and his consultors.”

Within a year of Foley’s return, Smith cajoled his consultors to approve desegregation of day classes for the fall semester. On May 7, 1954, the minutes stated, “An application to the College has been received from Julia Ponquinette, colored, who has been attending Loyola Univ in Chicago— Consultors thought this a good one to begin the great experiment into the new world in the South.” After years of delay, the Consultors finally resolved to desegregate the college. Ten days later, on May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court also released the Brown v. Board decision, which overturned a half century or more of Jim Crow by calling for the desegregation of public education. Although the Consultors’ decision seemed to coincide with the Brown ruling, their chronological proximity was the result of years of deliberation. Academic Dean George Bergen remembered, “It was a rather spontaneous decision to desegregate. I can’t recall any disagreement among the Consultors, and, of course, Fr. Andy Smith was all for it. . . . We weren’t making any big to-do about any of this. It just seemed to be the obvious thing to do.”

Thurgood Marshall, in charge of the NAACP’s legal strategy to desegregate higher education, spoke at an NAACP rally in Mobile the day before the announcement of the Brown decision, and he also described desegregation as inevitable: “Everybody knows segregation is on the way out and it is just a matter of time. . . . If anyone says they know how the Supreme Court will rule, they are lying. Only those nine men know how they will rule.” On Tuesday, May 25, in his commencement address, Andrew Smith was one of the few southern voices to publicly hail the Brown decision, yet he did not reveal SHC’s plan to desegregate. The Mobile Press reported his comments on the front page:

It is equally our duty to work loyally and fearlessly toward such practical arrangements as will implement the Christian philosophy of race relations and be in perfect harmony with the spirit and the letter of American law, without hysteria or unnecessary disturbance of any kind.

14Consultors’ minutes, 7 May, 1954.
It is too early to spell out the implications of this statement for private education, but it is clearly the duty of educators, public and private, to hail the decision of May 17, 1954. It goes without saying that this historic college, always the champion of social justice, stands ready to play its part together with all its sister colleges dedicated alike to teaching God’s truth and promoting justice and charity among all mankind."

Like Mother Grace Dammann’s declaration at Manhattanville twenty years before, Smith’s comments were grounded in Catholic tradition and dedication to social justice. As academic dean at SHC for twenty-five years, Smith forged many links with the Mobile community, and he understood how to circumvent the local practice of segregated education. Without trumpeting the Consultors’ recent decision to desegregate SHC, Smith sketched out a plan for successfully implementing it: no “hysteria or unnecessary disturbance” from newspaper reports of SHC’s action."

Jesuit Provincial William Crandell’s delay in implementing the Province’s new policy on race relations resulted from vocal opposition to desegregation among Jesuits at Loyola University in New Orleans, so the statement’s release barely preceded Spring Hill’s enrollment of African-American students in September, 1954. In his introduction, Crandell was blunt: “Even among Ours the question of interracial relations has produced a cleavage of opinion, not indeed about principles, but about methods and their timing, which bids fair to be a source of disunity, if not of scandal.”

Despite the efforts of ardent integrationists at Loyola, such as Donnelly, Joseph Fichter, S. J., and Louis Twomey, S. J., Loyola’s undergraduate program remained all white until 1963.

Six years earlier, Patrick Donnelly’s commencement address lambasted the conspiracy of silence whereby southern colleges and universities became accomplices in the denial of civil rights and educational opportunities to African Americans. In 1954, Andrew Smith’s comments hinted at conspiracy of a different sort—to cloak in invisibility SHC’s experiment in the face of rabid opposition and racebaiting. The Springhillian made no mention of the policy change, nor did it carry comments from students and faculty, as it had done in 1952 with the policy to admit females. It never reported that African-American students would be attending the college. Smith made no announcement about desegregation at a faculty meeting as Donnelly had done about the coeducational reform two years before. Even though no African Americans applied for residence, Smith met with dorm
prefects, all Jesuit or lay faculty, to discuss the new policy and forestall any protest from dorm residents.\textsuperscript{9} The Consultors’ minutes for June 5, 1954, reported a decision that “Negro applicants to the College will be handled on an individual basis.”\textsuperscript{10} Thus the stage was set for eight African-American students to cross the color barrier in September, 1954, at formerly all-white Spring Hill College.

When the local newspapers finally discovered SHC’s desegregation, African-American students had been attending orientation activities for a full week. It was not news—or at least Smith portrayed it as fait accompli:

The Very Rev. Andrew C. Smith, S.J., asked if colored students had been admitted to day classes for the term that started this week, said, “I presume that there are some in the classes.” He said he did not know how many were admitted, adding, “We have never asked them if they were white or Negro. We are not making an issue of it.” Father Smith described the step as “a gradual integration.” He added he was unable to say if any had attended day classes before because “we never ask them.”\textsuperscript{11}

Unlike the 1952 decision to admit females, SHC’s desegregation was barely mentioned in Mobile’s newspapers. The article covered about three column-inches in the middle of page one of a Saturday edition—with no continuation of the story to another page. Southern newspapers regularly underreported news about race relations, particularly educational advancement for African Americans, as a ploy by which upper-class whites allayed the economic fears of lower-class whites and maintained the status quo in race relations.\textsuperscript{12} However, in a year when The Mobile Press and The Mobile Register carried daily coverage of reactions in the South to the \textit{Brown} decision, their brevity in reporting Spring Hill’s desegregation was remarkable. More significantly, the local papers made no editorial comment in the days following as they had in 1952 when the first females entered SHC.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Analysis and Conclusion}

The desegregation of SHC, although simultaneous with the Supreme Court’s historic \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} decision, had antecedents at Manhattanville College and St. Louis University in tentative steps toward desegregation at Spring Hill as early as 1947, the centennial of Jesuit pres-


\textsuperscript{10}Consultors’ minutes, 6 June, 1954.

\textsuperscript{11}“Colored Students Admitted by Hill,” \textit{The Mobile Register}, 18 September, 1954, A1.


ence at the school. More similarities in this regard existed between Spring Hill and SLU than, say, a private college of another denomination, like Wayland Baptist in Texas which desegregated in 1951, or a private university, like Vanderbilt in Tennessee which had desegregation thrust upon it in 1952 but never embraced it until the 1960s. SHC’s desegregation is similar to SLU’s desegregation, about which McDonough observed,

The integration of St. Louis University was a breakthrough. It occurred in the absence of support from peer institutions in the area, and it took place a decade before the Supreme Court’s decision. ...and about fifteen years before the integration of Southern universities got underway. The episode reveals the mix of idealism, caution, and strong personalities at work inside the Society of Jesus, within the parameters of St. Louis Catholicism. The impetus for racial integration came from within the order, not as a result of prompting from outside. Once cast in moral terms the issue was difficult to keep down. However, although the movement welled up from inside the order, the outcome depended to a large extent on facilitating conditions in the social environment over which Jesuits had no control. Prudential considerations came into play."

Although the Missouri Province of the Jesuits operated independently from the New Orleans Province, desegregation at SLU had sparked interest in Catholic interracialism in some southern Jesuits, like Patrick Donnelly and Andrew Smith, consecutive presidents of SHC. When SHC unilaterally desegregated its undergraduate program, admitting eight African Americans in September, 1954, it followed a model employed at SLU and benefited from the pratfalls of the earlier experiment.

Remembering how postwar optimism had promised substantive social change in the South, historian John Egerton lamented the region’s “inability to seize the time and do the right thing, not simply because it was right, but because it was also in our own best interest.” In contrast, Spring Hill seized the moment and never backtracked from its difficult choice. As a formerly white college that desegregated both voluntarily and early, SHC was an anomaly in the Deep South. Joining it in distinction were two African-American colleges in Alabama—Talladega and Tuskegee— which admitted whites during the same time period. For many reasons the college never

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*Albert Foley, S. J., related the following apocryphal anecdote: “The registrar had a call from the office of the University of Alabama not long ago, asking whether a certain student who had graduated here in 1947 was white or Negro. The Alabama registrar said that he was now trying to get into the University as a Negro. He wanted to know if he had “posed” as a white while going through here, and if he had, he said that they were going to file charges of fraud against him if he had. Our registrar gave them no comfort. He simply told them that we had not had the designation for “race” on the registration card, and had not raised the question with the youngster at the time.” “Stages in the Desegregation Process at Spring Hill College,” (unpublished report, 1955), SHC Archives.


trumpeted its distinction, but Martin Luther King, Jr., noted the moral significance of Spring Hill’s desegregation in his 1963 *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. In a paragraph where he criticized the churches’ lack of involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, he made an exception: “I want to commend the Catholic leaders of Alabama for desegregating Springhill [sic] College several years ago.”

By 1963, Spring Hill was no longer the only accredited college serving Mobile and the Gulf Coast. With tuition at SHC rising rapidly, the University of South Alabama’s new campus two miles west of SHC lured local students of both races. Also, Baptists in Mobile met to draw up plans for Mobile College, now the University of Mobile. Meanwhile, Andrew Smith, S. J., who championed desegregation at SHC, was appointed president of Loyola of New Orleans to smooth along the desegregation of its undergraduate program. As public institutions in the South learned to serve a new constituency of African-American and white citizens together, Spring Hill College continued to admit African-American students on an individual basis “without hysteria or unnecessary disturbance of any kind.”

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