

BALTIMORE CITY PAPER ONLINE

September 5 - September 11, 2001

Course Correction

Two Years Before Desegregation Became the Law of the Land, a Baltimore High School Opened Its Doors to 13 Black Students Very Quietly

By Aaron M. Glazer

"Lynch them! Lynch them!" the mob yelled at Albert "Bucky" Hawkins Jr. as he approached the entrance to his Baltimore City high school.

It was early November, 1954. Crowded in front of the entrance of the formerly all-white Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, a group of enraged Baltimoreans shouted insults and violent threats as black students approached. A wide, open sidewalk separated the stairs leading to the entrance from busy North Avenue. The protesters stretched along both sides of the sidewalk, leaving a path through which students had to enter. As Hawkins got closer, the crowd yelled, "Go back to Africa! Niggers go home!"

The mob was the latest incarnation of a minor uprising in Baltimore that grew out of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling six months earlier in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the decision declaring the doctrine of segregated, "separate but equal" public schools unconstitutional. In the wake of the decision Baltimore City's school board had voted to integrate all its public schools.

But the protesters at Poly were fighting a battle that had been decided well before *Brown*. More than two years earlier --49 years ago this week--the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City had quietly voted to allow 13 black students to enroll in Poly's "A" course, an advanced engineering-preparatory course offered to the city's top students. When Hawkins had first walked through those doors 26 months previous, there were no protests. There was no overt antagonism. There was barely a nod of recognition as, for the first time, black students entered an all-white Baltimore school.

On that day in November 1954, though, there was a protest, and some white Poly students left their classes to join. Most were not taking the "A" course. For many, it was just an excuse to cut class, not an attempt to fight blacks entering their long-integrated school. Over loudspeakers hanging above the sidewalk, Principal Wilmer DeHuff made a curt announcement: Any student who was not back inside in 15 minutes would be immediately suspended. Student protesters flew back into their classrooms.

The protest outside Poly was one of only a few that greeted widespread desegregation in Baltimore, and they received little media attention. Within a few days, the crowds had dispersed. But their brief presence had an impact on Poly's small African-American student body.

"It wasn't until '54 that we had any problems. That's when people realized we were there," recalls Milton Cornish, one of the original 13 black students. "We'd been there for two years with no problems at all. We'd actually become part of the school."

Roszel Thomsen, president of the Board of School Commissioners, stood at the head of a long table, flanked by his eight colleagues, and spoke to an audience composed of activists, protesters, friends, and foes--and, in the far reaches of the room, a few black students and families. "I will ask everyone in the room to stand," Thomsen said, opening the Sept. 2, 1952, meeting, "and, in his or her own way, to pray silently that the decisions this board reaches will be wise ones."

The boardroom was not very big; rarely did many members of the general public attend school-board meetings. This day, however, the room filled early, and attendees spilled into hallways. With so many bodies packed into the tight space, during a typical Baltimore summer, the room was unbearably hot.

In six days, public schools would open for the year, and the board had called a special session to debate a unique request. Black students had applied to the city's premier pre-engineering college-prep program at all-male, all-white Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, a program known as the "A" course.

The request left the school board in a precarious position. Two years before *Brown*, Baltimore was still a bastion of Jim Crow. Housing covenants kept African-Americans out of many neighborhoods; shopping and eating establishments posted signs proclaiming negroes not served here. No public-school system below the Mason-Dixon line was known to have had racially mixed schools, and Baltimore's own city code mandated segregation.

The Baltimore Urban League was searching for a way to break down the segregated system. With the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), it probed academic records across the city, looking for the top black students, those

who would qualify for the Poly "A" course but could not apply because of their race. The Urban League approached 16 students, coached them, and finally made a formal application for them to enroll in the "A" course.

The technique was not unique to Baltimore; the NAACP used it regularly under the guidance of Baltimore native Thurgood Marshall, its lead attorney. The goal was simple: to force the issue of integration, using the "A" course to make Baltimore face up to the reality of its inherently unequal school system.

The school board had no prepared response. Black students simply did not apply for admission to all-white schools. The panel turned for help to the city solicitor, who answered, in effect, that in the doctrine that famously applied before *Brown*, the "equal" outweighed the "separate." He cited the 1936 Maryland Court of Appeals decision in *University of Maryland v. Murray*, which integrated the state university's law school: "Separation of the races must nevertheless furnish equal treatment. The constitutional provision cannot be dispensed with in order to maintain a school or schools for whites exclusively. That requirement comes first." In short, a course equal to Poly's "A" had to be created at a black high school, immediately. If this could not be done, Poly had to admit black students.

"This policy [of segregation] is subject to the overriding demands of the [U.S.] Constitution," Thomsen told reporters. "The only real question before the school board is whether the proposed curriculum in one of the Negro schools will be substantially equal to the Polytechnic 'A' course."

City schools Superintendent William Lemmel was assigned the task of planning the alternate "A" course. The resultant report stated that, with a \$78,000 investment (to hire teachers and build laboratories), the classes taught at Poly could also be taught at all-black Frederick Douglass High School in West Baltimore.

Before an attentive audience in the school-board meeting room, Thomsen outlined two possible outcomes. If the Douglass course was declared substantially equal, the board was legally bound to continue segregation at Poly. If an equivalent course was not possible, Poly had to admit black students to the "A" course, or abolish it.

Debate lasted four hours. Under the guidance of Marshall Levin, the Urban League's attorney, opponents of the Douglass plan argued that even if the level of teaching and the quality of the facilities could be replicated, the prestige of the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute could not. Poly boys (as they were known) who completed the "A" course were admitted as sophomores to top-tier engineering schools such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins. An account in *The Sun* quoted Robert Roy, an assistant dean of Hopkins' engineering school, as telling the crowd that "one does not set up equal facilities by creating something identical in form but not in spirit."

But each argument for admitting the black students to Poly was met by resistance. "There was a lot of negativity," recalls Milton Cornish, who attended the meeting with his family. "Somebody would say one thing positive, and someone else would get up and go, 'No no no,' [using] any kind of an argument you could probably think of that someone would say to prevent you from going someplace."

Among those naysayers was Wilmer DeHuff. Poly's principal contended that any school requiring a high level of achievement and diligent work from its faculty and students could attain both the academic quality and the respect that Poly enjoyed.

The final speaker was Thurgood Marshall. The students, he argued, must be allowed to attend a school where not just the curriculum, faculty, and facilities were equivalent, but where the institution's reputation afforded them the same opportunities as white students. Whether a truly equal course could be created at Douglass, Marshall said, was "at best . . . a gamble. And a gamble is not what I consider equality."

The public arguments completed, the board recessed into an anteroom. In a 1984 reminiscence for *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Thomsen wrote that he suggested a vote on whether the proposed Douglass course would be equal to Poly's. If the board members rejected that notion, then under the law they were bound to admit the black students to Poly.

The six male members of the board voted first, and split down the middle. Dr. J. Ben Robinson, dean of the University of Maryland Dental School, J. Trueman Thompson, a Hopkins engineering professor, and John Curlett, a Poly alumnus and an executive at the McCormick spice company, voted for a separate Douglass program. Local businessperson Walter Sondheim Jr., Bernard Harris, a physician and the board's only black member, and John R. Sherwood, a local oil-company executive, voted to admit the boys to Poly. The issue would be decided by the two female board members, Victoria Rysanek, the wife of a South Baltimore physician, and Elizabeth Morrissy, a professor at the College of Notre Dame.

There was little doubt inside the anteroom what was about to happen: "We knew from our *in camera* discussion how each member would probably vote," Thomsen recalled. The public, however, did not. For those on all sides of the issue, basic values were at stake. Segregationists feared the shattering of their world--blacks would enter Poly, the school's reputation would plunge, and the status quo would be lost forever. Civil-rights advocates faced crushed hopes and the prospect of yet more protracted court battles. For the families of 13 young black men (three of the 16 applicants chose not to attend Poly), two votes stood between them and answered prayers--that their sons would get the same quality education and the same opportunities as white students of similar ability.

Rysanek and Morrissy opposed the Douglass plan. By a 5-3 vote, the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City decided to

permit qualified black students to attend the Poly "A" course, determining that judicial rulings on separate-but-equal outweighed the city statute requiring segregation. While taking every pain to ignore the larger issue of segregation itself, the board had made Baltimore perhaps the first jurisdiction south of the Mason-Dixon line to integrate a public school. Now Leonard Cephas, Carl Clark, William Clark, Milton Cornish, Clarence Daly, Victor Dates, Alvin Giles, Bucky Hawkins, Linwood Jones, Edward Savage, Everett Sherman, Robert Young, and Silas Young would face the reality of entering an all-white school.

If slavery was "the peculiar institution," then Baltimore might be called the peculiar city--geographically Southern but officially neutral during the Civil War, located in a slave state but housing the nation's largest population of free blacks. Baltimore's precarious position, and the uneasiness with which the occupying Union troops viewed the populace, were reflected in the cannons at Fort McHenry--which pointed not only out into the harbor but into the heart of the city, at the ready to put down rebellious factions within Baltimore itself.

That ambiguity over race carried over into the post-Civil War years and the movement for racial equality to come. Jim Crow thrived in Baltimore, but so did open civil-rights activism--the city's NAACP chapter mounted protests from the 1920s, long before most other branches were active, without violent repercussions and often achieving modest gains. According to several scholars of local political history, city leaders were reluctant to wade into the thorny issue of integration as a whole but swiftly acquiesced when forced to address a particular case, granting small concessions to avoid facing the reality of race relations in the city.

The concession the school board made in 1952 may have only involved a small group of students at a single school, but Walter Sondheim says it reflected a larger integrationist view--one at odds with prevailing local and statewide sentiment.

"We were generally a board that didn't want to operate a segregated school system, although I think the state generally would have been in favor of a segregated school system," says Sondheim, now 93, who has since served multiple stints as school-board president and remains a major force in local education and economic development (the latter as a senior consultant to the Greater Baltimore Committee). "[Board members] were more representative of a somewhat better-educated, perhaps more sophisticated [group] than the average [citizen]."

The board of the 1950s was an outgrowth of reforms two and three decades earlier that had taken school-board membership out of the hands of political machines. By the time of the Poly decision, board members were active, informed citizens, heavily involved in education and the community.

"When I was on the school board, there were kind of assigned seats," Sondheim says. "There was a seat occupied by someone from the University of Maryland faculty; somebody from Johns Hopkins faculty; a Catholic on the board; there was a Jew on the board; there was an African-American on the board; there was always one person from south of North Avenue--someone from the neighborhoods. You see, I'm beginning to fill up the board--there was very little room for a white Protestant male."

That diversity created a more liberal, forward-thinking body, willing to consider the unthinkable. However, the board was only in a position to interpret law, not make it. Roszel Thomsen, who later became senior judge of the U.S. District Court of Maryland, found segregation appalling, according to his own and other accounts, but believed the board had an obligation to uphold the laws of the state and the court rulings of the time. That meant he would not allow the board to integrate the school system while legal barriers to doing so remained in force.

Even those who opposed sending black students to Poly were not necessarily motivated by opposition to integration. Thompson, the Hopkins professor, "hated segregated schools with every bone in his body," Sondheim recalls, "but he was unwilling to admit that Douglass couldn't set up a course as good as the one at Poly. He wasn't willing to say that you couldn't set it up that good in an all-black school."

This was the crux of the issue facing the board as the school year approached in 1952. Even a ruling as seemingly definitive as the 1936 *Murray* decision is open to interpretation; a more hidebound board, one that viewed race in a different light, could have easily claimed that a Douglass High "A" course would be equal and left it at that. For decades, schools officials had done just that, maintaining that the black school system was equal despite its hand-me-down books, antiquated equipment, and decaying infrastructure. This was the established view, as reflected by a contemporary *Sun* editorial on the Poly controversy: "The School Board is obviously trying to have a truly equivalent 'A' course in engineering set up for Negroes. And, until there is proof to the contrary, it must be assumed that an equality of advantages can be achieved in this field."

But the board took advantage of an opportunity to upend the established view, and took a significant first step toward elevating Baltimore's second-class citizens to first-class students.

Milton Cornish Jr. was 14 on Aug. 28, 1952, when he received a formal letter from Furman Templeton, executive director of the Baltimore Urban League, requesting his presence at a school-board meeting five days hence to discuss his admission to Poly.

Now in his early 60s, Cornish sits in his Pikesville home, holding a homemade folder of high school memorabilia. Alongside the standard paraphernalia--yearbook, team pictures, etc.--is Templeton's letter, and newspaper clippings with headlines such as "Baltimore First to Integrate Public Classes" and "Negro School Problem Arises."

Cornish uses one word to describe his first day at Poly: "overwhelming." Like any incoming freshman, he frantically wandered the halls, looking for his classroom, worried about being late and how he was to survive the demanding "A" course. He was also

feeling the pressures of integration, not knowing how people would react to his presence. What he did not feel, he says, was disdain. Walking down the halls, people would turn and stare at him, their eyes following him, but "[i]t was out of curiosity," he says, not fear or hatred.

Not all of the original 13 viewed things the same way. Where Cornish saw curiosity, others saw anger, felt fear.

"Let me paint a picture for you," Albert "Bucky" Hawkins recounted in a 1988 *Sun* interview. "Me: a 150-pound, 5-foot, 6-inch kid who had been sickly. I got to that building, and there were 3,000 hulking white male students who looked like they could walk through a wall standing around outside. It looked like I was a foot shorter than all of those guys."

Poly was a foreign world to the 13 black students who entered in 1952. Products of Baltimore's overcrowded, underfunded "colored" school system, their previous education left them unprepared for the academic rigor of the Poly "A" course.

"Separate was definitely not equal," Cornish says, "even though we were receiving the best education we probably could at the time. What we were learning still wasn't quite on par. It's hand-me-down buildings, hand-me-down books, hand-me-down everything. Yet we were supposed to learn and be knowledgeable and come out and compete on an equal basis. No way in the world could we do it."

Some Poly teachers set about bringing the black students up to an equal level, providing free weekend tutoring and seeking out sources of help. "We used to go out to Morgan College," Cornish recalls. The head of Morgan's English department "took time to come out there on Saturday and try to teach us English composition," he says.

But no tutor could prepare the students for the experience of integrating a school. DeHuff, despite his earlier opposition to the desegregation proposal, recognized that their nervousness and discomfort could affect their academic performance, and publicly damage the school. A few days before classes started, he called together Poly's student leaders--class presidents, athletic-team captains--and assigned each to chaperone one of the incoming black students, to help absorb them comfortably into the student body. DeHuff's stronghold on the Poly community was apparent--*The Poly Press*, the school newspaper, which had covered faculty and enrollment changes over the summer, published not one word about the integration.

The principal's plan seems to have worked, to some extent. In interviews or published reminiscences, most of the black students reported feeling at least accepted, if not always welcome. Carl Clark--who entered Poly as a sophomore and, in 1955, became its first African-American graduate--says that at times it even seemed his skin color was almost forgotten. He was a junior in 1954, when the Supreme Court issued the *Brown* decision. In his history class, the instructor devoted an hour to a discussion of the case. While his classmates talked about how integration was going to change their lives, Clark sat silently.

"Suddenly," he recalls in an interview, "the history teacher realized I was there. He said, 'Wait a minute, Mr. Clark, you're here and you haven't said a thing.' [I said] I didn't see how this was going to change anything at all, except that maybe it would be on a wider scale than what had happened at Poly. I think the guys sort of forgot I was there. They were expressing [questions about] why this should happen and so forth--and actually, it was already happening."

"Living in an integrated neighborhood, I didn't understand what all the hubbub was about," Robert Young recalled in a 1988 *Sun* article about the original black Poly students. There were flashes of anger on the part of white students, Young said, but they were rare.

But when they occurred, the black students "felt it very keenly," Bucky Hawkins told *The Sun*. "You were alone. . . . Most [students] took a stance of noninvolvement, but there were those students who took it upon themselves to personally discriminate against you."

John Hudgins, a white student who graduated in 1953, remembers one such incident. As a member of the varsity football team, he scrimmaged against the junior-varsity team, quarterbacked by one of the black students, Alvin Giles. "When he first participated in a scrimmage . . . several members of the varsity defense team suggested that we 'get' him--implying that we should unnecessarily rough him up," Hudgins recalls. "He may have been hit rather roughly the first few times where it was possible to do so. My overwhelming impression, however, is that after the newness of having a black student on the junior-varsity football team had worn off, things pretty much returned to normal."

But if a few significant events are burned into the memory of those directly involved, the integration of Poly overall seems to have had little impact on the white students. One, interviewed nearly 50 years later, recalls only five black students entering Poly; two more remember integration as occurring in 1953, not 1952.

Charles Dressler graduated in 1955, with Carl Clark. "There was a lot of controversy before they came," Dressler says. "It was, 'Hey, niggers are coming, and I don't want them here.' That's the way it was in those days. I don't think there was a great amount of it, but there was enough of it going around that the principal wanted to quell it before it came to a head."

But once the black students arrived, "it wasn't very eventful," Dressler continues. "Most of the kids who are in those accelerated classes were there to learn something. They weren't the social animals."

"With all the testosterone present in an all-boy high school, one might anticipate some small measure of violent reaction by at least a few white students," Hudgins says. "I do not, however, recall any fights taking place between black and white students."

When tempers did flare, they were often diverted out of the schoolyard and into the ring, says Vernon Savage, brother of the late Edward Savage, one of the original 13. "At that point at Poly, if students had a dispute or argument, after school they put on the boxing gloves and fought it out in the ring," Vernon Savage recalls. "Although some of his most enduring friends were white students at Poly, [Edward] visited the ring on a number of occasions."

During the school day, the black Poly students rarely encountered each other. "About the only time we saw each other was in the cafeteria," Cornish says. "It was almost like old home week--'Someone I can relate to. Let me get away from some of this hostility.' Whenever we had lunch [at the same time], we sat together. As [new black] students came in, they had a tendency to gravitate to us, because they were going through the same stuff we understood. . . ."

"I had a chance to talk to a young fellow who went to Poly a number of years after I did," Cornish continues. "For some reason, they knew that this was the table that we sat at, and it's almost like a memorial table now."

What the table memorializes is the struggle of a small group of young men--boys, barely into their teens--swimming in a very large pond, through uncharted waters. "It was a traumatic experience for all of us," Cornish says. "We were 14-year-old boys with the weight of so many things--discrimination, bias, bigotry, hatred, plus trying to pass the 'A' course--on our shoulders. . . ."

"Bucky [Hawkins] said something that really stuck with me. Bucky wasn't very athletic. Fortunately, I was. I had a way of dealing with some things just by dealing in athletics, getting to be known and getting more accepted. Bucky didn't. . . . Sometimes he would be so frustrated, so angry, so pent-up, that he would cry. Well, I've had moments like that myself."

Passing the "A" course required fantastic amounts of work. It was designed to cover five years of schooling in four years, the last of which was spent almost entirely on college-level engineering studies, with courses in calculus, analytical chemistry, and the like. Of the original 13, only four completed the full "A" course. The number might seem to tell a tale of the enormous pressure taking its toll on the black students, but their completion rate was only slightly lower than the rate for the class as a whole, 37 percent. They had shown that they could measure up.

"With freedom comes responsibility." Principal DeHuff intoned these words annually to an assembly of incoming Poly boys. In school, at least, these were words they were expected to live by.

White students who attended Baltimore Polytechnic during its first years of integration credit DeHuff with keeping the relative peace. White acceptance of the school's desegregation, they contend, arose from "the Poly culture." Under DeHuff--principal from 1921 to 1958 and a graduate of the class of 1907--the school prided itself on its strict, difficult academic orientation. Poly boys always wore ties to school. And DeHuff had no qualms about expelling students who did not follow the rules.

"On the day that [black] students first entered the doors of Poly, they then encountered an atmosphere which encouraged them to live up to high standards of conduct," Hudgins says.

The words with which DeHuff opened the annual assembly rang true for Hudgins, who was raised in a household he describes as racist. "What a great concept that was to me," he says. "Those words have remained with me throughout my life. Who could then deny freedom to others if they cherish it themselves? What student would then want to make himself conspicuous by opposing integration while espousing freedom and responsibility for himself?"

DeHuff is also credited by the black students whose entry into Poly he'd initially opposed. Everett Sherman, in the 1988 *Sun* article, called the principal's actions "the saving grace" in easing them into the school. "[DeHuff] had a very strong influence on me," Carl Clark says. "He was very strict, but I always thought he was fair. He ruled with an iron hand."

Well before Poly's integration, DeHuff was taking action to prepare his students to deal with the changing society that surrounded them. Each year, the school sponsored a "Brotherhood Week," during which it invited representatives from all-black and all-girls schools to broaden Poly boys' understanding of social and cultural horizons. For Brotherhood Week 1952, DeHuff made a fortuitous decision.

Carver High School, one of the black high schools in the city, was known for its fantastic chorus. "[DeHuff] had the very good idea of inviting this chorus to come and sing at Poly. It had never happened before," recalls Albert Silverman, former head of the Poly history department. (Silverman passed away Aug. 11, shortly after being interviewed for this article. He was 94.)

"They came with their faculty conductor, and I remember when they first began to walk out on the auditorium stage. Every white student came--some of them had to stand. And everybody was respectful," Silverman remembers.

DeHuff walked onto the stage, introduced Carver's principal, then introduced the black school's chorus. "And they began to sing. They sang like angels," Silverman says. There was dead silence in the auditorium. At the end of each song, the Poly boys, under threat of punishment by DeHuff, applauded respectfully. But as the performance progressed, Silverman says, the response grew stronger and more spontaneous.

"Their last number really was a smash. They sang 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,' which was a Civil War song, partially religious in theme," he says. "The last word of the song is 'free.' They sang the last verse very quietly: 'And God shall make us,' and they came out with an enormous finale--'God shall make us free!'"

The black choir on stage looked out on an audience overflowing with white students in their ties and blazers. The Poly boys stood up and yelled and clapped, until every last singer was off the stage.

"It was a good introduction that broke the ice, and when the blacks were admitted there were no unhappy incidents. They gave no trouble, and the Poly boys behaved themselves," Silverman says.

Perhaps even before that performance, Poly was uniquely situated among city high schools to serve as the laboratory for integration. By the standards of the day--i.e., with race removed from the equation--it was a remarkably diverse place. Unlike most other Baltimore schools, Poly attracted students from throughout the city and county--poor, middle-class, and rich. It was not suffused with the neighborhood tightness that could cause the school community to close ranks against outsiders and gather in highly public protest. That would come two years later, when school integration became the rule rather than the rare exception.

Now, with at least one of the original 13 passed on and others far-flung around the country (several are no longer in touch with Poly's alumni organization or their fellow pioneers and could not be tracked down for this story), Cornish has some regrets--not about how they handled the situation as boys, but what they left unsaid as men.

"We never really as a group had a chance to sit down and talk about our inner feelings and how it affected us," he says. "Whenever we got together after we graduated, we never really talked about it much. We talked about the good times; we'd talk about the times in the cafeteria. But we never really talked about how we felt inwardly. I'm sorry we didn't. I think it would be sort of a cleansing for all of us. It was quite an experience."

Five of the 13 attended college, three earning degrees. Most have left the Baltimore area to pursue their careers and are now retired. After graduating from Poly, Edward Savage went to work for the city of Baltimore as a draftsman and then became an engineering designer for a local firm. He died of a stroke in 1986. Milton Cornish worked most of his life for the Army Corp of Engineers. Bucky Hawkins went into the computer business and, after a stint in the Peace Corps, ended up as vice president of an Arizona-based computer company. Everett Sherman earned a bachelor of science degree from Morgan State University and worked as a network project manager in Reston, Va. Carl Clark was the most academically successful, receiving a Ph.D. in physics from the University of South Carolina and teaching for 40 years, the last five at Morgan.

While their experience integrating the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute has left a profound mark on these men, Poly itself has long since moved on. In the Baltimore tradition, the school integrated, then quickly tried as best it could to act as if n