

An Interview with
Virginia Holder
January 6, 1979 and April 2, 1979

Interviewed by

Karl Prince

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
Post Office Box 571
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

AU 041
OH 1979.07.09
MHSOHP2-12

Interviewee: Holder, Virginia
Interviewer: Prince, Karl

Title: An interview with Virginia Holder, January 6, 1979 and April 2, 1979 / interviewed by Karl Prince

Collection Title: Murrah High School Advanced History Class Oral History Project, Politics and Integration

Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens about local politics and the Jackson Public Schools integration. The interviews were conducted during the 1978-1979 school year.

This collection was selected to be digitally remastered through the National Endowment for the Humanities Civil Rights Era Recordings Grant in 2004.

Part 1

- PRINCE: I'm interviewing Mrs. Holder, currently a teacher in the Jackson Public Schools. Mrs. Holder, would you tell me something of your educational background?
- HOLDER: I was educated in the public schools of Virginia. I attended Randolph-Macon Woman's College, received an A. B. degree, and did graduate work at Duke University, getting a master's degree, and finishing the residence for a PhD.
- PRINCE: Would you state some of the places you have lived in America?
- HOLDER: I was born in Virginia, went to school in North Carolina, I have lived in California, Kentucky, Illinois, and now in Mississippi. I've been privileged to travel all over the United States.
- PRINCE: How long have you taught in the Jackson Public Schools?
- HOLDER: I have been teaching in the Jackson Public Schools since 1968.
- PRINCE: Does this mean that you were here during the period of court integration in Mississippi?
- HOLDER: Yes, I was teaching at Murrah High School in January of 1970 when the court-ordered integration was put in. At half year, there was a period of one week when all of the zones were established and pupils were to go to the school from their particular zone, and there was a court-ordered mix of teachers as well.
- PRINCE: What were some of the changes that you noted after integration?
- HOLDER: Under the Freedom of Choice, which Jackson Public Schools had been operating, there had been some small number of black students at Murrah. After a school zone was established, many of these previously-registered black children could not attend Murrah. For the students, you could go only to the school in the zone in which you lived.
- PRINCE: Was there any change among teachers at that time?
- HOLDER: Yes, there was a drawing and – by officials at the central office, so that the ratio of black and white teachers was set by the court at a 60 percent white and a 40 percent black ratio. The – this entailed the transfer of many teachers.
- PRINCE: Was there any change for the students?

- HOLDER: Yes, students were removed from schools where they had previously been going and were placed suddenly in new classrooms and new teachers and new schools.
- PRINCE: How did the students react to this?
- HOLDER: Some of the students thought it meant a good, old-fashioned holiday. Others were very serious and were ready and willing to work. There was a great deal of bewilderment among the students for the first few days.
- PRINCE: Do you feel there has been any improvement in race relations since 1970?
- HOLDER: Yes, I feel there has been a tremendous improvement. After one goes to school with fellow students of any race, you begin to know them and the strangeness and the differences in skin color disappear. Children begin to realize that they're all the same. They're all the same age, have many of the same problems, and this has been good, I think, on the part of both black and white children.
- PRINCE: Has there been an increase in disciplinary problems in the school since integration has . . .?
- HOLDER: Actually, there has always been a disciplinary problem for a teenager in public schools. I do not feel that this has increased tremendously. There have been some different types of problems, of course, but as far as anything like race riots, intense reactions that just happened in Little Rock or in Boston, this has been of a minimal nature in Jackson and Jackson Public Schools have been very fortunate not to have had this type of a problem.
- PRINCE: Were you transferred or did you remain in the school you were teaching?
- HOLDER: I was kept at Murrah High School for a number of reasons, but I did eventually move myself and transfer.
- PRINCE: You said you were at Murrah. When did you transfer to Callaway and why?
- HOLDER: I transferred to Callaway in the Summer of 1970. I had been teaching World History at Murrah, but I happened to be a foreign language teacher. There were no job openings in my particular field of Latin until 1970. At that point, I was transferred to Callaway to help develop a program in Latin there.
- PRINCE: What were you teaching in 1970?

HOLDER: I was teaching four classes in World History and one Latin class. After the integration, there were not enough pupils to give two Latin teachers classes, so that I had five classes in World History, two of them totally brand new.

PRINCE: What are you teaching now?

HOLDER: I teach five classes of Latin at Callaway High School.

PRINCE: How did the change in zones affect Murrah?

HOLDER: Murrah was greatly affected by the change in zones. For example, the area south of Riverside, which is usually called the Belhaven area, had strongly supported Murrah for many years. This area, within walking distance of Murrah, was made a part of the Central High School zone and many students who lived very close to Murrah could no longer attend there.

PRINCE: Was there any white flight from Murrah in February, 1970?

HOLDER: Yes, there were many withdrawals – withdrawals of students and they went to some of the local private schools. Some of the seniors even managed to get into the state universities and colleges without ever receiving a high school diploma.

PRINCE: Did the quality suffer from integration?

HOLDER: I don't think that educational quality suffered from integration. For example, I'm the same teacher teaching now as I was before integration. Yes, I have made a few changes in the way I have taught. I have found that many of my students were not too well prepared. Many of the basic things had to be worked on to get them up to the level of some of the other students.

PRINCE: Has there been a change in overall standardized testing programs?

HOLDER: Overall testing as far as the United States is concerned has been in a decline for a number of years. Whether this affects the students in Mississippi as well, I feel sure that it does. As far as standardized testing, I think after eight years, you will find that many of our black students have improved and that many of our white students have improved. Surely in the course of eight years' time as teachers, we have learned to do a better job.

Part 2

PRINCE: I am interviewing Mrs. Holder, currently a teacher in the Jackson Public Schools. Mrs. Holder, would you tell me a little something of your

educational background?

HOLDER: I was educated at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg, Virginia, an undergraduate degree. I hold a master's degree from Duke University, and the residence completed for a PhD in Latin with a minor in Greek. I've done many other courses and seminars beyond that.

PRINCE: Would you state some of the places you have lived?

HOLDER: I was born in Virginia. I have lived in Virginia, North Carolina, California, Kentucky, Illinois, and now my residence in Mississippi.

PRINCE: How long have you taught in the Jackson Public Schools?

HOLDER: This is my 11th year in the Jackson schools.

PRINCE: Does that mean you were here during the period of court-ordered integration in Mississippi?

HOLDER: Yes, I was teaching in Jackson in 1970 when the court-ordered integration was put into being.

PRINCE: What were some of the changes that you noted after integration?

HOLDER: Mainly there was, at first, a white flight from our public schools into the private schools, and particularly into the council schools. There was, of course, a large mixture of black children in previously predominantly white schools. There was also, of course, a small change since we had had Freedom of Choice and many of the black children that had previously been in white schools were assigned to their own zones.

PRINCE: Was there any change among teachers at that time?

HOLDER: Yes, there was a drawing and teachers were arbitrarily assigned to various schools to get the required 60/40 court-integrated mix for teachers.

PRINCE: Was there any change for students?

HOLDER: Yes, the students, of course, were rearranged totally according to zone lines and these zone lines were drawn arbitrarily, and in some cases, gerrymandered to make the necessary black and white mixture.

PRINCE: How did the students react?

HOLDER: Some students were fearful of going to a new school. Some of our students who were seniors decided to go on to college and not even get a high school

diploma.

PRINCE: Do you feel there has been any improvement in race relations since 1970?

HOLDER: I feel that, at least, black students and white students understand each other better. They have begun to make friends and certainly there has been a community of feeling in making this our school by both black and white students.

PRINCE: Has there been any increase in disciplinary problems in the school since integration?

HOLDER: There's always been a problem of discipline in schools. I don't feel that there has been any tremendous increase due solely to integration. Many other problems, of course, are involved.

PRINCE: Were you transferred or did you remain at the school where you were teaching?

HOLDER: I remained at Murrah, where I was teaching in 1969, 1970. I was not transferred.

PRINCE: You said you were at Murrah. When did you transfer to Callaway and why?

HOLDER: I transferred in the summer of 1970 to Callaway so that I could teach Latin, which happens to be my major field.

PRINCE: What were you teaching in 1970?

HOLDER: 1970, I was teaching one Latin class and four World History classes at Murrah.

PRINCE: What are you teaching now?

HOLDER: I'm teaching five Latin classes at Callaway now, and also the head of the foreign language department.

PRINCE: How did the change in zones affect Murrah?

HOLDER: The change in zones affected Murrah because, with Freedom of Choice, children were drawn from all over the north end of town. With the use of the zones, people were required to go solely to their zones and there were many children from Murrah who had to go to Callaway, and many from Callaway who had to go to Murrah.

PRINCE: Was there any white flight from Murrah in February, 1970?

HOLDER: Yes, not a tremendous number. The white flight has been, I think, more since then perhaps than it was at that actual point in time.

PRINCE: Did the quality of education suffer from integration?

HOLDER: I don't think so. For example, I'm the same teacher teaching in the public schools now as I was then. I have taken other courses and surely I have improved as a teacher in 11 years.

PRINCE: Has there been any change in overall standardized testing programs?

HOLDER: I feel that the program that we have now is perhaps working fairly well. The black students certainly are improving and the white students are not retrogressing in any possible way. We are attempting at least to educate as well as we can, and I think that overall, you will see it just about the same ratio of tests.

PRINCE: In this final interview, would you like to summarize the overall changes in education since 1970?

HOLDER: I'm going to paraphrase from a book, The Americanization of Dixie, written by John Egerton. In his chapter on education, he says,

In many places, progress is being made and integration is seen as a development which might serve the best interests of the whole community. People reject the idea that school integration is a leveling process that robs the talented and homogenizes the students. They now speak of a growing appreciation of diversity and of the advantages to be gained from an understanding of different races and cultures.

PRINCE: Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX

Belhaven Area, Jackson, Mississippi - 3
Callaway High School – 2, 3, 5
Central High School - 3
Discipline - 5
Duke University – 1, 4
Freedom of Choice – 1, 4, 5
Integration – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Jackson Public Schools – 1, 2, 3, 4
Murrah High School – 1, 2, 3, 5, 6
Randolph-Macon Women’s College – 1, 4
School Zones – 1, 3, 4, 5
Standardized Testing Programs – 3, 6
Teacher Ratio – 1, 6
The Americanization of Dixie - 6
White Flight – 3, 4, 6