

TRUANT PARENTS ALLEGED DISCRIMINATION IN 1922

By Ellen Knight¹

Back in 1922 there was a church on Cross Street called The New Hope Baptist Church. Its congregation embraced Winchester's African-Americans, most of whom lived in the Harvard and Irving street area.

On the whole, the smaller community lived peaceably within the larger one, which had helped it buy and remodel its church. Then, in 1922, the School Committee blundered, perhaps innocently and perhaps unwittingly, but definitely tactlessly into a situation which raised charges of discrimination.

When the incident occurred, the Committee was alienating parents town-wide with unpopular changes, and it is difficult, in retrospect, to see Committee actions as racially motivated. Committee members themselves denied the charge. But at the time it was difficult for some blacks to see it any other way.

Most African-American children attended the Chapin School on Swanton Street or the Washington School on Cross Street, next to the New Hope Baptist Church. That church had, in fact, been the original Washington School before the newer building replaced it.



The second Washington School building on Cross Street viewed across Leonard Field

By the end of the 1910s, there had been enough parental complaints about the whole school system that a special committee recommended a survey. Town Meeting funded it. The Federal Bureau of Education produced it. The School Committee then set about implementing the recommendations – and upset people throughout town.

The recommendation to increase the education budget and spend more on salaries to get better teachers resulted in the firing of twelve teachers, including the popular high school principal, whom parents did not want to see go. But, despite student strikes and a citizens committee which agitated for answers, the protest went nowhere, especially after the principal found a new job.

The Bureau also urged the town to replace its existing elementary schools with three new ones. One thing Winchester residents throughout town really liked about their school system was having neighborhood elementary schools. There were eight of them. The School Committee proposed four new and larger elementary schools to replace the old buildings. It was an expensive undertaking, but Town Meeting backed it. Not everyone liked it.

REDRAWING LINES

In preparation for reducing the number of districts, the School Committee and superintendent began to reshuffle grades within the buildings and redraw the district lines. This sparked more agitation and more trouble.²

The School Committee did not notify Washington School parents before the changes went into effect.³ Children reassigned to the Chapin School went as usual to the Washington School and were refused admittance to class by the teachers, who told them to go to the Chapin School. They went home.

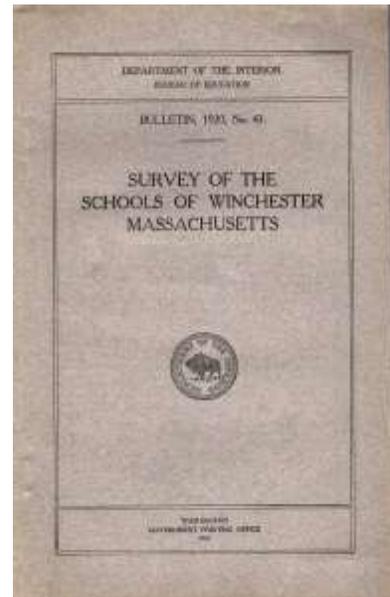
Reportedly, this affected 38 children, both black and white. A parent committee which formed to deal with the matter was led by New Hope's pastor, Rev. William Smith, though it included Italian and Irish parents, as well as African-Americans. But it was the black parents who were particularly incensed and outspoken.

The Chapin School, they contended, was farther away and necessitated their children's using Florence and Chester streets, two of the worst in town. The Committee countered that the distance was negligible and would recommend that the streets be repaired.

The Committee said it redistricted students to the Chapin School who would attend the new Chapin School. It refused to return children back to the Washington School on the argument that the building (with a new sixth grade) was overcrowded. Parents said it was not. George Jackson, one of the more vocal parents concerned, pointed out that attendance had actually dropped over the years.

There were conferences and hearings among the parents, School Committee, and superintendent. At one point the superintendent and Committee chairman suggested a method by which the children could return to their old school, but, though the black families went through the hoops, the Committee refused to change its position. While several families capitulated to the redistricting, five black families refused to send their children to the Chapin School, claiming the Committee was prejudiced.

In a public statement, the Committee said, "It is not only untrue, it is unfair to say that these changes have been made because of racial or social distinctions. Distance has been considered, room has been considered, grade of pupils has been considered, race and wealth have not been considered."⁴



The 1922 report which led to a major school building and redistricting program

The Committee, in fact, considered that making an exception for these children would be discrimination and argued it was doing what was best for all students in town. But feelings were not assuaged, not when the Committee made another tactless decision. It instructed the truant officer to swear out warrants for the five fathers whose children were not going to the Chapin School as reassigned.

Because the two sides could not resolve their differences, the charges against the five fathers went to the Woburn Court and dragged on for weeks.⁵ Although the case was about the truancy, the issue of discrimination was entered as part of the testimony. “No evidence of race discrimination could be found,” the *Star* reported. “The School Committee had made changes all over town in its school districts, probably in good faith, but possibly unwisely handled.”⁶

The case boiled down to the original charge, keeping children out of school. Each defendant was fined \$5. The defendants appealed and were released on personal cognizance. The same edition of the newspaper that carried this news also announced that a private school would open in the New Hope Baptist Church. As reported in the *Boston Globe*, Jackson said the school would open with about 15 students to be taught by a woman from West Medford.

The School Committee refused the use of public school textbooks, saying it did not have the right to loan public property to private individuals. Reportedly, a fund was set up to support the school. “A woman from Cambridge, Central Square, said to me, she taught all kids of color in the New Hope Baptist Church.... She taught every year for five years and taught all girls and boys,”⁷ recalled a member of the community.

DISCRIMINATION DENIED

During the quarrel, *The Winchester Star* observed: “There isn’t anyone here at home who thinks that the School Committee has tried race discrimination, and we doubt if such contention would hold in the courts. The town has never drawn a color line to our knowledge.” However, the writer added, “It will take some real diplomats to put that committee into shape again.”⁸

During the whole truancy case, whatever private personal prejudices may have existed, public sympathies lay with the protesting parents. Their insensitive treatment was added to ongoing complaints against the superintendent.

During the dispute, the Boston papers made attempts to sensationalize the story, the *Globe*, for example, running a headline “Winchester School Scene of Small Riot.”⁹

Wrong, wrote the truant officer to the *Star*. It was just a quarrel between two children that was immediately settled. “The colored and white children are as contented and happy as I have seen them in 20 years.”¹⁰

Actually, it may have been a fist fight, but it was over in a flash and there was an end to it. No rioting. The incident stands out – as does the whole story – for its rarity.

After the court verdict, Jackson was still disgruntled. “For seven weeks we tried to appeal to the intelligence of the School Board and impress upon them our sincerity, but we were treated as though we were eight or ten-year-old children,” he wrote to *The Winchester Star*. “Will the committee please tell the people of the town just why they will not admit our children to the Washington School?”¹¹ He repeated that the claims of overcrowding were bogus.

But the redistricting remained. Jackson moved to Cross Street. Others adapted. The issue died down, though contentions over other School Committee plans continued.

In the end, the superintendent resigned. The construction projects went forward. In a few years there was no question of kids going to the old Chapin School for it was superseded by a new Lincoln School built between Oak and Westley streets. Then, since the four-school plan did not work, a new Washington School opened in 1927 on Highland Avenue.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Jan. 19, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Dismay over redistricting has recurred in town, most recently in 2011, without any racial overtones.

³ This was apparently not deliberate but arose over a misunderstanding about where those children were actually attending school. Had the children already been attending the Chapin School, they would not have needed notice to change schools.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 22, 1922

⁵ The case dragged on mostly due to requests for continuances. When finally heard, it was concluded fairly quickly.

⁶ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 27, 1922

⁷ Interview of William H. Robinson by Randy Bairnsfather and Amy Grates, January 20, 2006

⁸ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 6, 1922

⁹ *Boston Globe*, Sept. 26, 1922.

¹⁰ *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 29, 1922

¹¹ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 10, 1922