

Black Leadership and Outside Allies in Virginia Freedom Schools

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Abstract

In July 1963, students from Queens College (QC) and a group of New York City teachers traveled to Prince Edward County (PEC), Virginia, to teach local black youth in Freedom Schools. The county had eliminated public education four years earlier to avoid a desegregation order. PEC Freedom Schools represented the first major effort to recruit an integrated group of outside teachers and students to educate black students in a civil rights battleground over an entire summer.

In contrast to the racial and class tensions that arose between black leaders and predominantly white volunteers in other civil rights campaigns, PEC volunteers willingly deferred to the expertise of local and outside black leaders. This paper identifies the relatively modest scope and well-defined mission of the program, the real-world experiences of volunteers, and the high quality of black leadership as factors that led to this positive outcome.

In July 1963, sixteen students from Queens College (QC), City University of New York (CUNY), along with a contingent from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), hailing mainly from New York City, traveled to Prince Edward County (PEC), Virginia, to teach local black youth in Freedom Schools.¹ The integrated group of New York volunteers went south to confront a glaring example of racial injustice: Prince Edward, a rural, “Black Belt” county of 14,000 residents,

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¹The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) is the New York City affiliate of the AFT. In the historical record, the Prince Edward Freedom Schools are sometimes depicted as a UFT initiative, and other times as an AFT initiative. For a list of teaching volunteers, see AFT Teacher’s Roster, Prince Edward County, Virginia, United Federation of Teachers Papers, series 2, subseries 2A, box 21, folder 5, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter UFT Papers).

had abandoned public education in the face of a desegregation order, and black children who were unable to continue their education outside the county had gone unschooled since 1959. PEC represented the first major effort to recruit an integrated group of outside teachers and students to educate black students in a civil rights battleground over an entire summer. Moreover, Prince Edward was where creators of Freedom Schools first attempted to balance instruction in basic academic skills with the inculcation of political awareness for students who had been deprived of adequate education (or any at all), reach rural, black youth who had had few positive encounters with whites, face hostile local whites, and discover how best to serve the cause of civil rights while respecting and nurturing local leadership. In addition to providing vital educational and moral support to county students who had missed multiple years of schooling, the Prince Edward Freedom Schools served as an important template for the Mississippi Freedom Schools that were launched as part of Freedom Summer in 1964. While the PEC summer program was not the sole model that the Mississippi architects drew from, it was arguably the most direct ancestor.

This paper assesses the creation and operation of the Prince Edward Freedom Schools, interactions between county residents and teaching volunteers, teaching challenges volunteers faced, protest in the county, and linkages between Freedom Schools in PEC and Mississippi. While highlighting the experiences of the integrated group of Freedom School volunteers, I argue that this is not a story of outside white “saviors” rescuing black victims from the racist cruelties of local whites. In Prince Edward, white and black volunteers alike followed the direction of black leaders in the county—most prominently, Reverend L. Francis Griffin, pastor of Farmville’s First Baptist Church—and black outsiders, including QC’s Rachel Weddington and AFT’s Richard Parrish, while building on the efforts of previous black volunteers from the Virginia Teachers Association (VTA). The volunteers trusted Griffin and worked to gain his trust and the trust of other black Prince Edwardians.

This state of affairs—where outside volunteers accepted their roles as foot soldiers, without self-promotion or attempts to grab the reins of leadership—was an impressive achievement that is explored throughout the paper. Over the course of black freedom struggles in the United States, tension and conflict along race, class, and gender lines between local blacks and outsiders who joined them were not unusual.² Indeed, during black Prince Edward’s long struggle over closed schools, some

²See, for example, Winifred Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

local blacks grew skeptical about the actions and motivations of outside volunteers. Fifteen years after schools had reopened, Griffin—the universally acknowledged leader of black Prince Edward—reflected that he should have kept “the outside help away, and let it be strictly a local fight with no holds barred.” While praising the work of some outsiders, Griffin lamented that “there were too many frustrated, poorly adjusted, uncommitted people mixed in with the good ones. They competed among themselves for recognition and credit.”³ To understand why the 1963 New York volunteers did not fall into this category, one can point to several factors: (1) the relatively modest scope of the program meant that potential volunteers could be screened carefully for suitability; (2) the mission of the summer program—to prepare local youth for their return to full-time schooling—was well-defined and clearly articulated; (3) the volunteers, an integrated group coming largely from modest backgrounds, had real-world experience in teaching or tutoring black students; and (4) the volunteers made their way to PEC under two black leaders, Weddington and Parrish. In Griffin, Weddington, and Parrish, the volunteers found competent, empathetic, and committed black leaders who inspired their confidence.

This paper examines the experiences of both QC students and licensed teachers who taught in Prince Edward during the summer of 1963. Somewhat greater attention is devoted to the QC students, the result of a more extensive archival record and greater interview access; licensed teachers were difficult to locate, and it appears that a greater proportion of them are deceased or have failing memories. (Two New York teachers whom I interviewed, Sandra Adickes and Jo Davis, were able to recall very little about their time in PEC.)

The research described here complements the findings reported in my book *Southern Stalemate: Five Years without Public Education in Prince Edward County, Virginia*, which analyzes the political conflicts at the local, state, and national levels that shaped the county’s unprecedented, five-year closure of public schools, and the black community’s response to the closings.⁴ The book only briefly discusses the Freedom Schools of 1963 and prior summer educational efforts. This paper, which incorporates extensive research conducted after the book’s publication, prompts scholars to think more carefully about the ways in which local

³John Egerton, “A Gentleman’s Fight in Prince Edward County, Virginia,” in *Shades of Gray: Dispatches from the Modern South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 124.

⁴Christopher Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate: Five Years without Public Education in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012). See also Jill Oglie Titus, *Brown’s Battleground: Students, Segregationists and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

leaders and outside allies can collaborate to make the most meaningful contributions to the quest for social change. A key theme here is that local leaders must be clear about expectations of volunteers, and that the volunteers must defer willingly to local leadership. Before describing the current study, I offer some necessary context on the history of black activism and the role of outside volunteers in Prince Edward's conflicts over public education.

Black Activism, White Resistance, and Outside Involvement in PEC

The Prince Edward school closings had their roots in a 1951 strike by black students at R. R. Moton High School who demanded that the county equalize facilities or begin school desegregation. Student strike leader Barbara Johns was the first educational exile from Prince Edward. Fearful for her safety after the strike, her parents sent Barbara to live in Montgomery, Alabama, with her uncle Vernon Johns, a brilliant and searing critic of white supremacy and black passivity who was a regular presence in Prince Edward and an early mentor to Reverend Griffin. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) agreed to take on the case as a desegregation lawsuit, and Prince Edward became one of the five cases decided in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Despite the shock expressed by local white leaders at the strike and subsequent litigation, black Prince Edwardians had a long history of educational activism and support for their children's academic aspirations. From consistent pressure by the black PTA on the school board to address educational inequalities, to regular lessons by dedicated teachers on black history and civic engagement, students in the county's black schools learned to resist the second-class status white society imposed on them.⁵

This hidden history of black activism on behalf of educational justice was not unique to Prince Edward. The 1951 student strike in Farmville was one of seventeen school boycotts launched by African Americans between 1943 and 1953. These boycotts typically lasted from a few days to a few weeks, but in Merriam, Kansas (1948–1949), and West Point, Virginia (1952–1953), they endured for at least one year. In thirteen of the seventeen communities, black protestors were successful, primarily through the combination of direct action and litigation.⁶

⁵Kara Miles Turner, "‘Liberating Lifescrpts’: Prince Edward County, Virginia, and the Roots of *Brown v. Board of Education*," in *From the Grassroots to the Supreme Court: Brown v. Board of Education and American Democracy*, ed. Peter F. Lau (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 88–104.

⁶August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, "The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities," in *Along the Color Line*:

Struggles for educational justice did not cease with the beginning of desegregation, as African Americans in many communities continued to fight against undue burdens on blacks in the desegregation process (i.e., enrolling blacks in formerly all-white schools, but not vice versa), unequal resources, unfair treatment within schools (i.e., harsher disciplining of black students, racism by students and teachers, tracking to maintain segregation within classrooms), and disrespect for the legacy of black schools, among other issues.⁷

In PEC, black students returned to school after two weeks, with the NAACP's promise to initiate legal action firmly in hand. After the construction of a new Moton High School in 1953 failed to convince the black community to drop the lawsuit, the anger of the county's white leaders intensified. Prince Edward faced a final desegregation order in September 1959, at which point the county abandoned public education. Other school districts had sidestepped desegregation through a variety of tactics, and some even delayed opening desegregated schools by a month or two, but the extremity of PEC's response in denying education to black students was unrivaled. Immediately after schools closed, white county leaders launched the private Prince Edward Academy for white students. Several months later, these same segregationist leaders publicly offered to help create black private schools, but the black community distrusted the motives of the segregationists and wished not to obscure the moral and legal crisis at hand. An estimated 2,694 black students were locked out of public schools from 1959 to 1964, with 492 receiving some years of education elsewhere. Most whites attended the segregated academy, but approximately 258 of the 2,118 white students received little or no formal education during this time.⁸

Though direct-action protest was virtually absent in PEC from the 1951 strike until the summer of 1963, educational improvisation in the black community—such as embracing volunteer teaching efforts from inside and outside the county, while being clear that these efforts were *not* in fact schools—was itself a sort of activism. Black Prince Edwardians essentially boycotted any potential educational arrangement that could be construed as viable stand-ins for public schools, such as black private

Explorations in the Black Experience, ed. August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 309–494.

⁷See, for example, R. Scott Baker, *Paradoxes of Desegregation: African American Struggles for Educational Equity in Charleston, South Carolina, 1926–1972* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006); and David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁸Christopher Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*. Edward Peeples, a sociologist and activist who published the first scholarly account of the closings, graciously shared his estimates of lockout victims following the January 8, 2007 interview with author.

schools or the use of public school buildings for “training centers,” which were run by local volunteers during the school year to provide activities and some rudimentary academic skills to out-of-school youth.⁹

Both sides in the conflict sought reinforcement from outside sympathizers, emphasizing that the outcome of the battle in this small county would reverberate nationwide. Segregationists contended that this was a case about local autonomy and (white) taxpayers’ rights to allocate revenue as they saw fit. The federal government, they argued, could not force the county to operate desegregated public schools if it did not wish to do so. They enlisted respected attorneys, powerful state and federal officials, and sympathetic journalists to advocate for their cause, and sought financial backing from fellow segregationists, state government (via tuition grants), corporations, and foundations.¹⁰

Black Prince Edwardians gained the legal backing of the NAACP, sought favorable press attention, and sought to “outsource” education for as many black youth as possible. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the NAACP, among other groups, lobbied the Kennedy administration to involve itself more directly in resolving the crisis. Led by Reverend Griffin, black Prince Edwardians remained determined to withstand the school closings rather than back down from their central contention: *Brown v. Board of Education* guaranteed the right to public education in a unitary school system, even if many local residents objected to school desegregation.

Blacks and whites alike looked to Griffin to articulate the desires of the black community. Throughout the closing years, he was happy to consider offers from outsiders to teach during summer “crash” programs, or to place students in schools outside the county, but on terms that were acceptable to the local black community. The Freedom Schools launched by the integrated group of New Yorkers built upon the tireless efforts of black people inside and outside the county. In addition to the training centers run by local women for youth who remained in the county, the black VTA placed, and sometimes funded, PEC students in other schools in the state, as well as launched summer learning programs in 1961 and 1962. The predominantly white AFSC, which maintained a vibrant presence in the county from 1960 to

⁹Three black women in the Prospect District of the county ran what were essentially underground schools during the closings. See Amy Tillerson-Brown, “Grassroots Schools’ and Training Centers in the Prospect District of Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1959–1964,” in *The Educational Lockout of African Americans in Prince Edward County (1959–1964): Personal Accounts and Reflections*, ed. Terence Hicks and Abul Pitre (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010).

¹⁰Christopher Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*. See also Christopher Bonastia, “White Justifications for School Closings in Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1959–1964,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 309–33.

1965, and placed sixty-seven students in schools and homes outside the state, featured two black women who played critical roles in the Prince Edward effort: Jean Fairfax and Helen Baker.¹¹

The Freedom Schools, then, were by no means the first or only attempt to aid out-of-school children in PEC, but served as an important bridge to a full-time return to schooling in fall 1963, when the Kennedy administration opened the Free Schools, which were privately funded but available at no charge to all interested students. Unlike the summer Freedom Schools, the Free Schools were full-time, proper schools, rather than educational triage. The county reopened public schools in September 1964 in the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Griffin v. County School Board* (377 U.S. 218), which remanded the case to the district court, specifying that the lower court could require the county Board of Supervisors "to levy taxes to reopen, operate, and maintain without racial discrimination a public school system in Prince Edward County like that operated in other counties in Virginia."¹² Ignoring the educational devastation they had visited upon black students, the supervisors allocated minimal funding to public education, and few whites enrolled in the reopened public schools. This revised method of maintaining segregation—poorly funded public schools for blacks, private schools (sometimes with public funding) for whites—would become popular in numerous Deep South locales, particularly in Mississippi.¹³ In Prince Edward, black students and families continued to press white leaders to improve facilities, fire racist teachers and administrators, and expand course offerings in the public schools. Support for public education began to grow in the late 1970s, when the county began to fund public education more generously and substantial numbers of whites returned to the public schools.¹⁴

Roots of Freedom Schools

Lacking a public school system, Prince Edward was a logical locale for experiments in alternative education. The seeds of this idea had been planted in a variety of settings. In 1961, black students in McComb, Mississippi, boycotted Burgland High, the town's senior and

¹¹Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*; Titus, *Brown's Battleground*.

¹²"Text of Supreme Court's Decision Ordering Virginia County to Reopen Its Schools," *New York Times*, May 26, 1964, 26.

¹³Michael W. Fuquay, "Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964–1971," *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (June 2002), 159–80; and Kenneth T. Andrews, "Movement-Countermovement Dynamics and the Emergence of New Institutions: The Case of 'White Flight' Schools in Mississippi," *Social Forces* 80, no. 3 (March 2002), 911–36.

¹⁴Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*.

junior high school for blacks, after the principal refused to readmit two students who had been jailed for thirty-four days for their participation in a local sit-in. Students who walked out in protest were expelled. Most refused to abide by the terms of their readmittance: promising not to participate in future demonstrations. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers, including Bob Moses and Chuck McDew (both black), spent three weeks in October teaching these students at the makeshift “Nonviolent High.” The school closed when its faculty members, along with older McComb students, were tried and convicted of disturbing the peace, resulting in prison terms of four to six months. (They were released on bail five weeks later.) In McComb, according to historian John Dittmer, “SNCC intuitively grasped a vital part of its future mission in Mississippi: developing a sense of worth and leadership among people who had never been held in high regard in their communities.”¹⁵

Another influence was the Freedom Schools that operated in cities such as New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and Boston during student boycotts over segregation, inferior school conditions, and substandard educational quality. These Freedom Schools typically lasted only a day or two.¹⁶ Noel Day, a black former New York City teacher, was a central figure in the launch of Boston Freedom Schools on two days, June 19, 1963, and February 26, 1964. The idea was to keep students participating in the “Stay-Out” (as it was dubbed) “off the streets,” and “to provide an opportunity for them to feel a part of a mass action.” Boston Freedom Schools sought to provide a template for the sort of education that *should* be occurring in local schools, “education that was relevant to the needs of the children, treated them with dignity, involved their interests, and challenged their capabilities.”¹⁷

¹⁵John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 113. See also Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). SNCC activists also had strong ties to the Highlander Center in Tennessee, which emphasized that oppressed people needed to analyze their problems collectively and experientially to devise responses to their oppression. See Daniel Perlstein, “Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools,” *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (October 1990), 297–324.

¹⁶Daniel Perlstein, “Teaching Freedom”; Jon Hale, “The Student As a Force for Social Change: The Mississippi Freedom Schools and Student Engagement,” *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 3 (Summer 2011), 325–47; Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Leonard Buder, “Boycott Cripples City Schools,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1964, 1; “225,000 Pupils Out in Chicago Rally,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1963, 1.

¹⁷Noel Day, “The Freedom Movement in Boston,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 2, no. 6 (December 1964), 11–23.

New York Freedom Schools, which operated during the city's own school boycotts, sought to redefine teaching and learning. The organizers contended that it was not only licensed teachers, but community members, who had something to offer to a child's education. Freedom School instructors advanced the notion that schools were not merely conduits for individual success, but "an avenue for making children aware of the struggle for social justice and American democracy being waged by many people."¹⁸ During the massive boycott against segregated schools on February 3, 1964, the Citywide Committee for Integrated Schools estimated that as many as a hundred thousand youths attended more than 400 Freedom Schools that day. Students learned about Negro history, the philosophy behind boycotts, and the struggle for civil rights; a number of schools included some "standard educational instruction" as well.¹⁹

The inspiration from prior Freedom Schools to rethink conventional approaches to education was mainly philosophical; logistically, the Freedom School predecessors to the Virginia project offered less guidance than prior volunteer teaching efforts in the county. While preparing for one-day Freedom Schools was no simple task, planning a six-week Freedom School staffed by out-of-town volunteers represented another order of magnitude. Obtaining commitments from volunteers, arranging housing for them, preparing for local hostility, and creating a curriculum for students who had gone unschooled for as long as four years would all present new and vexing problems.

Laying the Groundwork for the New York Volunteer Effort

With many students living at home and holding down jobs while pursuing their college degrees, QC may have seemed an unlikely headquarters from which to create Freedom Schools for black students in the South. According to QC student Mark Levy (1960–64), a 1964 Freedom Summer volunteer, "Most QC students were very uninvolved commuter students" in the early 1960s. However, some students had started to become more active in political issues on campus by, for example, striking for a day to protest bans by the college administration on controversial speakers invited by student groups, one of the first such actions during that time on U.S. campuses. (Mario Savio, who would later play a pivotal role in the Free Speech Movement at the University of

¹⁸Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door*, 135. These same issues would arise in the heated battle over community control in the late 1960s.

¹⁹Robert Trumbull, "Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern," *New York Times*, February 4, 1964, 21.

California, Berkeley, was a picket captain for the “Ban the Ban” campaign at QC.) QC students were major participants in the attempt to block the imposition of fees and tuition at CUNY; anti-HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) and antinuclear bomb groups were also active. On the civil rights front, QC students joined boycotts of Woolworth’s stores to protest the chain’s discriminatory policies in the South and hosted speeches by Freedom Riders.²⁰

Michael Wenger, who would become one of the leaders of the Virginia project, recalls that students in the QC chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) “were doing things like raising money to send to the South and writing articles about the civil rights movement,” but were encouraged by their faculty advisors to begin “right here in your own backyard.” The students decided to create a tutoring program in nearby South Jamaica, Queens, which was predominantly black and low-income.²¹ Planning began in fall 1962. The program launched in April 1963, with nearly seventy QC students spending two hours per week tutoring elementary and junior high school students.²² These volunteers learned that educational inequalities were not merely a topic for classroom discussion, but an issue they could address personally, at least on a small scale.

Also in fall 1962, QC students Fred McCarty and Paul Friedman began to envision a Prince Edward tutoring program modeled after projects by the Northern Student Movement (NSM) in several northern cities, and a small tutoring program by eastern college students in PEC the previous summer. (The NSM was an offshoot of the Southern Christian Movement, which ran the above-mentioned tutoring program in PEC and was NSM’s fiscal sponsor.²³) The college

²⁰Draft memo, Mark Levy to Queens College Public Relations, May 15, 1989, box 1, folder 2, Mark Levy Collection, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Queens College, City University of New York (hereafter Levy Collection).

²¹Michael Wenger, telephone interview with author. All author interviews were conducted in 2012 and 2013, unless otherwise noted. The QC chapter was originally affiliated with the NAACP, but later changed to a CORE chapter. With its national headquarters located in New York City, CORE had a particularly active presence there during the early 1960s, with the number of affiliated chapters increasing from three in early summer to fifteen by fall. CORE chapters demonstrated against businesses that employed few or no blacks, poor conditions in slum housing, and school segregation, among other issues. See August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

²²Student Help Project, “A Summer in Prince Edward County,” n.d., box 1, folder 10, Michael Wenger Collection, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Queens College, City University of New York (hereafter Wenger Collection). The South Jamaica project grew quickly, eventually involving roughly 500 QC volunteer teachers and 1,200 students.

²³Northern Student Movement Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, <http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/scmmg679.pdf>.

newspaper deemed the project “an exciting challenge” for QC students, “particularly those liberals who claim to be in search of a cause.”²⁴ The Prince Edward proposal was met with considerable student interest in February 1963. The South Jamaica project, headed by future PEC volunteer Stan Shaw, was a logical basis for the Virginia program since the students were already working with members of the QC Education Department, and the organization had some grant funding and office space.²⁵

The South Jamaica and Virginia groups merged to become the Virginia-Jamaica Student Help Project. Sidney Simon, one of the project’s two main faculty advisors in the QC Education Department, tapped Leonard Hausman to be the student leader of the Prince Edward project. Hausman arranged an April trip to see Reverend Griffin, whom he described as “a very determined man but very gentle, very soft spoken, clearly very genuine, [and] was paying a great price in terms of family and his security and health.”²⁶ Police surveillance of local black leaders and economic reprisals from Farmville merchants had worn on the Griffin family. Griffin landed in the hospital for an extended time in 1962 “to remove half of his ulcerated stomach,” and his wife Adelaide had experienced several nervous breakdowns.²⁷ Despite these serious personal costs, his commitment to justice for black Prince Edwardians never wavered.

The other primary faculty advisor at Queens, Rachel Weddington—one of the few black professors on campus—would join the students during their six-week stay in PEC. Revealing her respect for Griffin’s leadership, Weddington assured him that the QC volunteers “have neither the desire nor intention of aggravating what we appreciate is a grave situation, nor of pursuing an untenable course so far as community welfare is concerned. We consider you our bellwether in this respect and stand ready to be advised as to the best procedures in carrying out what is solely an expression of good will and well-being.”²⁸ Carolyn Hubbard (Kamunanwire), the sole black student volunteer, recalled that QC enrolled “about thirty [black students] altogether, if that many” in the daytime, out of a total of 20,000–25,000 students.

²⁴“College Students to Teach Virginia Segregation Victims,” *Queens College Phoenix*, February 19, 1963, 3; *Phoenix*, “To Old Virginnny” (editorial), February 19, 1963, 8.

²⁵Stan Shaw, telephone interview with author. McCarty and Friedman subsequently withdrew from the Virginia Project for reasons that are unclear.

²⁶Leonard Hausman, telephone interview with author.

²⁷Brian E. Lee and Brian J. Daugherty, “Program of Action: The Rev. L. Francis Griffin and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Farmville, 1963,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 121, no. 3 (July 2013), 250–87.

²⁸Rachel Weddington to Reverend L. Francis Griffin, June 19, 1963, box 1, folder 19, Wenger Collection.

Having grandparents in South Carolina, where she and her family returned often, Hubbard was “very familiar with the Southern brand of discrimination” and was aware of the situation in Prince Edward. After the first day of the Freedom Schools, Hubbard told a reporter that she volunteered because she wanted to “do something that was really constructive and meaningful, because I could so easily see myself in the situation had I been born in the county.” Similarly, Ponsie Hillman, a black Philadelphia teacher, had been “very active” in the NAACP, where “you fight for what you think is right. In those times, we were doing a lot of marching, and a lot of picketing . . . This was only really part of . . . fighting for the rights and the privileges that we deemed we were entitled to.”²⁹

The 1963 Prince Edward project represented the beginning of the period in which the civil rights activism of the UFT became national in scope. In the preceding years, only the Freedom Rides in 1961 involved substantial numbers of outside volunteers traveling south to take part in civil rights activism; according to my calculations, three New York City school teachers were among the 400 plus individuals who took part in the Freedom Rides.³⁰ The UFT was still in its infancy during this time, as it was not until December 1961 that the union became the official collective bargaining agent for New York teachers. Prior to the 1960s, New York City teachers typically belonged to one of roughly seventy different groups and organizations without the “union” label, which most teachers associated with “political radicals or factory workers rather than professionals.”³¹ The two primary unions in the city—the social democrat Teachers Guild and the communist-oriented Teachers Union—counted less than a third of city teachers, combined, as members. The Guild, less progressive on civil rights than the Union, was able to draw members of other unions into a new merger organization, the UFT. The Teachers Union voted to disband and join the UFT in 1963.³² The UFT’s participation in the Prince Edward

²⁹Carolyn Hubbard Kamunanwire, telephone interview with author; Henry McLaughlin, “Teachers Call First Farmville Day Fine,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 17, 1963, 6; Ponsie Hillman, “Prince Edward County Freedom Schools Teachers Discuss Segregation Fight in 1963,” YouTube video, 44: 12, group video interview with Ponsie Hillman, Ruth Feldblet, Norma Becker and Janice Goldsmith-Bastuni, 2004, posted by the Albert Shanker Institute, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCAL9yxAnIs> (hereafter UFT 2004 interview). Becker died in 2006 and Hillman died in 2008.

³⁰“Meet the Players,” *Freedom Riders* (Boston, WGBH, 2010), http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/people/full_roster.

³¹Jonna Perrillo, *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

³²The Guild was formed in 1935 as “an anti-Communist breakaway organization” from the Teachers Union. In 1940, the AFT expelled the Teachers Union for its

project and the March on Washington in the summer of 1963, and in Freedom Summer the following year, gave teachers the opportunity to involve themselves personally in the national civil rights movement, and enhanced the union's national profile. However, some conservative members complained that UFT's civil rights activities were a distraction from its main mission: improving working conditions for teachers and increasing their influence within New York City's byzantine educational bureaucracy.³³

For rank-and-file teachers and QC students alike, volunteering in the South required real commitment. However, at the union leadership level, these efforts did not pose the threat to union power that changes closer to home would. Working for better schools in low-income New York City neighborhoods would entail more enduring sacrifices by the membership, possibly including involuntary assignment of proven teachers to "ghetto" schools, which often served as dumping grounds for teachers who had washed out of other schools. The prospect of such transfers, as well as a desire by black parents to exert greater influence in how and what their children were taught, seemed to threaten teachers' desires for greater autonomy and professionalism.³⁴

Participation in the tutoring program provided students with real-world experience in aiding the learning of primarily low-income black students, and provided the organizers of the PEC project with evidence of the suitability and commitment of potential Virginia volunteers. Similarly, the New York teachers had classroom experiences to draw upon and track records that the union organizers could consider in selecting volunteers. Unlike teachers in the Prince Edward Free Schools of the 1963–1964 school year, discussed next, volunteers were not paid; thus, the possibility of a problematic teacher or students merely seeking a paycheck did not exist. And whereas Mississippi Freedom Summer drew huge national media attention and sought to transform the social landscape of that state—attracting some individuals wishing to make a name for themselves—the Prince Edward project was not a prominent national news story, and the goals of the Virginia program were far more modest: an expression of solidarity with black Prince Edward and a "little catch up [educational] inoculation" for students.³⁵

Communist affiliations. The Guild received the AFT's charter the following year. See Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

³³Jonna Perrillo, *Uncivil Rights; United Federation of Teachers, 50 Years*, <http://www.uft.org/files/attachments/uft-50-years-book.pdf>.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Shaw, interview.

Learning from Prior Volunteers

The year 1963 marked the third consecutive summer that outside volunteers taught out-of-school youth. Consequently, the New York contingent was able to benefit from the experiences of their predecessors. In 1961, roughly thirty volunteer teachers from the VTA taught 425 children for sixteen hours per week in churches and other makeshift classrooms. The following year, 401 children attended classes staffed by twenty-two VTA teachers, and 162 students enrolled in classes sponsored by the Student Christian Federation of New England. The latter program, known as the 1962 Summer College Educational Project (SCEP), included twelve students and recent graduates from Yale, Harvard, Wellesley, Wesleyan, Amherst, and Bennett College in North Carolina. Three of the volunteers, including Farmville resident Phyllistine Ward, were black. SCEP volunteers sought to “refresh or reintroduce those learning skills which had been forgotten” during the closings; introduce new concepts, skills and processes; provide a “morale ‘boost’” to encourage a return to schooling; and assure students that some people were concerned about them.³⁶ While the archival record on curriculum planning for the Prince Edward Free Schools is thin, it appears that lessons from past volunteers in Prince Edward, combined with the insights of QC’s Education Department faculty, the experiences of QC student tutors in South Jamaica, Queens, and the classroom knowledge of union teachers, gave the New York volunteers a solid base from which to create a teaching plan for Prince Edward youth.

The QC contingent solicited advice from William Bennett, a first-year Harvard Divinity student who had directed the 1962 SCEP project. He advised that local blacks “do not recognize the risk you are running and will be suspicious—in other words they do not see you as the hero you imagine yourself to be.”³⁷ (It seems unlikely that black residents,

³⁶Robert L. Green et al., *The Educational Status of Children in a District without Public Schools* (East Lansing: Bureau of Educational Research, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1964), 1; “School Bid Rejected,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1961, 79; “Negro School Plan Starts in Virginia,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1961, 13; Claude Sitton, “Negro Pupils Get Help in Virginia,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1961, 21; “Prince Edward County Negroes Demand Reopening of Schools,” *Southern School News*, August 1963, 14; Ruth Turner, “Educational Report: SCM SCEP 1962,” Special Collection on AFSC Work in Prince Edward County, Virginia, box 1962, folder 38333, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Archives (hereafter AFSC Papers); Ross Weeks Jr., “N.Y. Group Begins Registering Students,” *Richmond News Leader*, July 15, 1963, 4; Bill Wall, “Emphasis on Basic Fundamentals in Summer Classes for Negro Students,” *Farmville Herald*, July 13, 1962, 1. During the three years, according to Green, 38 percent of eligible Prince Edward children surveyed attended for at least one summer, while only 6 percent attended all three summers.

³⁷William Bennett to “Marjorie,” July 4, 1963, box 1, folder 21, Wenger Collection.

especially those housing volunteers, were unaware of risks to volunteers . . . or themselves, for that matter.) David Rudenstine, an undergraduate history student at Yale, strongly recommended that all project participants reside in the black community. During the summer of 1962, he and two other white students lived with C. G. Gordon Moss, the dean of Farmville's Longwood College and the most outspoken white dissenter in Prince Edward. Those living with white families "will always remain in a transitory position, bringing an uneasiness of mind for all white people on your project The native Negroes rightfully will be skeptical of whites who live with whites and teach Negroes in the county whose social mores normally prevent such action."³⁸ The New York volunteers would heed this advice to embed themselves in the black community.

Selecting the QC students who would be invited to participate was not easy. Mike Wenger recalled that some potential volunteers self-selected out of the project, but there were still limitations on how many students could take part, given that Griffin needed to secure housing for the New York volunteers with local black families, who would expose themselves to possible danger for taking in these boarders.³⁹ In a letter to prospective Prince Edward volunteers, faculty advisor Sidney Simon emphasized that participation in the South Jamaica project would serve as a "screening device" for the Virginia project: "If you are unable to rearrange your lives so that you can be free two hours a week in Jamaica, then I question whether you will be able to muster the maturity you will need in Virginia."⁴⁰ As a result, the organizers were able to evaluate applicants not just on an abstract desire "to make a difference," but on their demonstrated level of commitment and effectiveness in the South Jamaica program. After a daylong meeting at Simon's house on Long Island, where twenty to twenty-five potential volunteers gathered, the five students who were designated the coordinating leadership of the group (including Wenger, Hausman, and Shaw) discussed with their faculty advisors which students would be invited to take part. Ten white women, one black woman, and five white men, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-two, were selected.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the New York City teachers were also developing plans for their summer in Prince Edward. Richard Parrish, a black AFT vice president who served as the coordinator of the professional teachers'

³⁸David Rudenstine to "Marty," April 22, 1963, box 1, folder 20, Wenger Collection; David Rudenstine, interview with author.

³⁹Wenger, interview.

⁴⁰Sidney Simon to Friends of Virginia Student Help Project, April 1, 1963, box 1, folder 10, Wenger Collection.

⁴¹Michael R. Wenger and Stan F. Shaw, "Northerners in a Jim Crow World: Queens College Summer Experience," in Hicks and Pitre, *Educational Lockout*.

volunteer effort in Prince Edward, had visited with Reverend Griffin in January 1963 and was briefed on the legal aspects of the case by NAACP attorney Henry Marsh and Virginia State NAACP Executive Secretary Lester Banks. Parrish wrote that the purposes of “Operation Freedom School Lift” (as the union dubbed the project) were to: offer instruction in math, science, English, social studies, health education, and recreation; “to develop such resources and community relations as to make possible a continuing education program in the county centers”; and “to provide an experience in democratic living for the children, parents, teachers, and community of Prince Edward County.”⁴² Ed Carpenter, a forty-year-old black teacher in Harlem, signed up: “I couldn’t face my kids next winter, and tell them there’s hope, if I didn’t put myself on the line . . . I’m always in the role of giving scant hope to the Negro and his role in American society.”⁴³ As with the QC leaders, the New York teaching leaders presumably drew on evidence indicating the potential volunteers’ commitment to and effectiveness in teaching black youth. Moreover, it is likely that self-selection played a prominent role, as teachers had to be willing to forego summer employment (which many depended upon to supplement their teaching income), and many had spouses and children who would remain in the North that summer. In total, forty-six New York City teachers volunteered in PEC, along with three from Connecticut and one each from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Rockland County, New York. Members of the AFT group, of whom roughly one-third were black, tended to stay in Prince Edward for shorter periods of time than the QC volunteers; there likely were no more than thirty AFT teachers in PEC at any one time.⁴⁴

White Hostility and Intimidation

The New Yorkers worked to gain the trust of black Prince Edwardians by consulting with prior summer volunteers and local black leadership before their arrival, refusing to patronize segregated white facilities, living with black families in Prince Edward, and deferring to their judgments about the best courses of action. While most black residents

⁴²Richard Parrish, “Facts about AFT Education Project, Prince Edward County,” Richard Parrish Additions 2, box 1, folder 20, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter Parrish Additions 2).

⁴³“Why Harlem Teacher Is Joining Task Force to Aid Negroes in Virginia,” *New York Post*, July 11, 1963.

⁴⁴AFT Teacher’s Roster, UFT Papers; Richard Parrish, “Prince Edward County Story,” August 1963, folder 15, Parrish Additions 2; “Facts about AFT Education Project,” Parrish Additions 2.

welcomed the volunteers, local white authorities put the New Yorkers on notice. Like virtually all white southerners during the civil rights revolution, they did not take kindly to “outside agitators.” Upon her arrival, teacher Norma Becker and some other volunteers were asked to meet with the local sheriff, who clearly sought to intimidate them: “A group of us were taken in [the sheriff’s office], we could hear the dogs in the backroom, and we were lectured on what we should and should not do” while in the county. Police officers were quick to issue tickets for alleged driving violations to individuals with New York license plates. Battling a toothache, teacher Janice Goldsmith (Bastuni) traveled for hours to visit a dentist near her sister’s home in northern Virginia because she was “just so terrified to go to a local dentist.” Several students recalled little to no interaction with local white residents.⁴⁵ The volunteers depended on the knowledge of local blacks to ensure their safety in the county.

Indeed, most contact with local whites seemed to come in tense or hostile encounters. Lenny Hausman shared an anecdote that in retrospect seems somewhat amusing, but surely was frightening at the time:

One day I somehow lost my car keys, and I had to go to . . . a hardware store in the heart of Farmville. I walked in just before five o’clock, and there was a woman and two men there, and they had a sense of who I was, and they locked the door [*laughs*]. And the woman took a pitchfork out and the three of them surrounded me and she drove the pitchfork into the ground next to my feet. It was really a scary moment . . . She looked up at me and she said, “Are you I-talian or Jewish?” [*laughs*] And I said, “Which is worse?” She didn’t answer me . . . Somehow I talked my way out of it, I forgot whether I told her I was I-talian or Jewish or both [*more laughter*]. There was no way to deny my identity, and I somehow got myself out of the situation. I have no idea why. [*Author: I guess they didn’t make your keys?*] Strangely enough, they made my keys, and they let me out of there and that was it.⁴⁶

Another incident, widely recounted by QC students, took place one night when an interracial group, which included Rachel Weddington, local black minister and protest leader Goodwin Douglas, and New York teacher Ed Carpenter, drove to a local ice cream stand for a late-night treat. A group of approximately twenty-five white youths surrounded and harassed members of the group, who eventually were

⁴⁵Ponsie Hillman, Norma Becker, and Janice Goldsmith-Bastuni, UFT 2004 interview; June Tauber and Deborah Yaffee, interview with author; Jean Stein (Konzal), “Undated Speech Given by Jean Stein upon Return from Prince Edward County,” box 1, Jean Konzal Collection, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Queens College, City University of New York (hereafter Konzal Collection).

⁴⁶Hausman, interview.

able to return to their cars (though Reverend Douglas had been kicked by one of the youths). When the group reconvened at Douglas's house, the white teens and local police officers circled around for about ninety minutes. Eventually, Stan Shaw wrote in his journal, "A couple of cops ambled up the steps to Reverend Douglas's house, asked us a few questions, told us to stay out of trouble, and left, and we never heard anything more about it." "My guess," Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum adds, is that the police "were allowing us to be scared without anything happening."⁴⁷ As was characteristic in the state, white Prince Edwardians mostly viewed violence as a coarse, uncivilized tactic that did not accord with the "Virginia way." Intimidation, social shunning, and economic reprisals were not, however, off the table.

The presence of a Kennedy administration official in the county offered some reassurance to volunteers. William vanden Heuvel, a thirty-three-year-old lawyer, was in Prince Edward on assignment from the Justice Department to launch the Free Schools. Lenny Hausman recalled that vanden Heuvel "spent time with us and made sure that people around Prince Edward understood that the Justice Department knew that we were there and [we were] not to be messed with."⁴⁸ White Prince Edwardians seemed to know just how far they could go before drawing the ire of the federal government—harassing and intimidating the volunteers without crossing the line into outright violence. As with civil rights volunteers elsewhere, the New Yorkers were compelled to negotiate the space between paralysis from fear and reckless exposure to potential violence.

Teaching Challenges in an Educational Vacuum

Of course, the volunteers also had to gain a deeper understanding of the educational devastation that had visited black Prince Edward, and what they could do to aid the students. The New York teachers and students taught from July 15 to August 20 in eight education centers, where more than 600 children took part. About 250 of these children attended the center in Farmville, with the remainder attending in rural parts of the county. Classes met in church facilities and one Masonic Temple from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on weekdays. Registration was heaviest for children ages six to twelve, but, according to Parrish, "we have . . . hardly reached the present seventeen- to twenty-one-year-old group

⁴⁷Stan Shaw, "Prince Edward County Chronicle," July 20, 1963 (Shaw kindly shared a copy of his journal with the author); Wenger, interview; Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum interview with author; UFT 2004 interview. See also Wenger and Shaw, "Northerners in a Jim Crow World."

⁴⁸Hausman, interview.

who were locked out of school in 1959.” Students in the centers were typically divided into four groups: six- to eight-year-olds who had never been to school; eight- to ten-year-olds with zero to one year of school; eleven- to fourteen-year-olds with two years of school; and twelve- to nineteen-year-olds with at least four years of education.⁴⁹

New York teacher Norma Becker captured the necessarily makeshift nature of the operation: “You had a room, luckily, and you got whatever supplies you could get. I came with a trunkful of books from my own school in Brooklyn, and the one nice thing my principal did [was give] me the keys to the stockroom and said ‘take what you want.’” Ruth Feldblet recalled that many teachers met with students “out on the lawns. Some were in basements, some were in churches—anyplace you could find some room.” They taught “reading, writing, history, arithmetic—anything we could.” Initially the teachers relied heavily on newspapers and encyclopedias for reading material, but then donated books from publishers and individuals “started pouring in.”⁵⁰

On the first day of the Freedom Schools, some volunteers led students in a memory game in which students would pretend to be preparing for a picnic, and list the items they planned to bring. The first student would begin with an item beginning with A, the second would add an item beginning with B, and so on. While children who had not been to school struggled to recall more than a few items on the first attempt, “after the second or third time the same children who couldn’t do four or five articles went up to S.” Janice Goldsmith noted that her first-day students, who ranged in age from seven to twelve and had one year of schooling, were “very enthusiastic” but understandably had skills deficits: “There were some children who wrote their names but not very well . . . Perhaps they have forgotten . . . [Some children] were able to write the numbers up to 100 and write their names. They couldn’t read very well.”⁵¹

Still, the volunteers marveled at the dedication their students displayed. “Some walked five miles, part of it over dirt roads, to come,” Queens student Michael Barbera told a reporter shortly after returning from Virginia. “Others got up at 5:30 in the morning to get farm chores or their paying jobs out of the way before class began.”⁵² Ed Carpenter ran a center for 123 students, ages four to nineteen, relying

⁴⁹Parrish, “Facts about AFT Education Project”; Ray Abrams, “Youngsters Demonstrate,” *Richmond Afro American*, August 10, 1963.

⁵⁰Norma Becker and Ruth Feldblet, UFT 2004 interview.

⁵¹Ina Gold (QC student) quoted in Henry McLaughlin, “Teachers Call First Farmville Day Fine,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 17, 1963, 6. UFT teachers in the 2004 interview also recalled playing this game with students.

⁵²“LI ‘Teachers’ Say They Learned Most,” *Long Island Press*, August 1963 (exact date unknown), filed in box 2, folder 1, Wenger Collection.

almost entirely on kindergarten materials. The students “don’t know how to listen because they have not had the usual kindergarten experience,” he noted. “But there is almost an obsession to learn.”⁵³

Volunteers soon realized that closed schools had left psychological as well as educational scars on county youth. Sandra Adickes, a UFT teacher who would spend Freedom Summer in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, recalled that the Prince Edward Freedom Schools “included small-group study of basic mathematics and remedial English skills, [but] the emphasis of the Freedom School curriculum was on analyzing the social conditions under which the students lived and, through discussion and questioning, identifying the obstacles to their progress and envisioning ways to overcome them.”⁵⁴ Adickes recounted that students “who had not yet entered school responded to our basic reading-writing-arithmetic curriculum.”

However, the curriculum overwhelmed the students—two or three boys as I remember—who had been shut out of the school for four years. They looked up in dismay when, among younger and smaller children who were quickly acquiring skills, they were confronted by words they could no longer recognize and arithmetic problems they could no longer solve. Embarrassed, ashamed, and seeing themselves as sinners rather than the sinned against, the shut-out students often gave up the attempt to reacquire the skills they had lost.

She expressed “regret that beyond encouraging them to come to school and providing them just the amount of individual attention that would not cause them further embarrassment, I could not do much in three weeks’ time to remedy their loss.”⁵⁵ Carolyn Hubbard “would sometimes just cry when I was by myself” because the students “had missed out on so much.” The students were “very eager,” even amidst the blazing Virginia heat, but she worried that her efforts were not “really adequate”—they “needed so much more” than was possible to offer in six weeks.⁵⁶

Despite the sobering reality that a summer program could not right all the educational wrongs that had been perpetrated against their students, the New Yorkers believed that their effort benefited Prince Edward students. Carpenter had the impression that “this is a happy experience for these youngsters. They never want to leave right away. They stay around. They want to know if anybody wants them to do

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Perlstein, “Teaching Freedom.”

⁵⁵Sandra E. Adickes, *The Legacy of a Freedom School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 30.

⁵⁶Hubbard, interview.

anything. The older kids are starting to talk about the future, that's a good sign."⁵⁷ The *Farmville Herald*, the segregationist local paper, was less sanguine about the purported benefits to students. As the volunteers returned to New York, the newspaper could not resist observing that they would be returning to a crime-ridden city where both teachers and students were threatening to strike. With blatant sarcasm, the editorial staff was "inclined to wonder whether the teachers came to teach basic instruction, or were they more interested in enlightening the backward southland with the subtle wiles of the city?"⁵⁸ In reality, the New York volunteers may have had some role in galvanizing student desires to protest, but the impetus came from the black leaders and black youth of PEC.

Sitting Out Local Demonstrations

The New York volunteers were joined by numerous other visitors that summer, including a study team from Michigan State University (led by black researcher Robert L. Green), three SNCC organizers to train local youth in demonstration tactics, and a number of black Prince Edward students returning home after receiving education outside the county. Prominent civil rights campaigns in Danville, Virginia, and Birmingham, the March on Washington, and a Kennedy administration-sponsored school system in the works, fueled the belief that the time was right for direct action. In prior years, the sense that the courts would demand the reopening of schools had made some black Prince Edwardians skeptical about the need for public protest.

The demonstrations, which began on Thursday, July 25, included picketing of downtown stores and the local movie theater, a "try-in" at clothing stores, and a sit-in at J. J. Newberry's lunch counter, which resulted in the removal of all stools there.⁵⁹ Tensions peaked that weekend, when police arrested thirty-two demonstrators in two separate incidents: a protest in front of a segregated luncheonette downtown on Saturday and a church "kneel-in" on Sunday. The most tangible results of the protest campaign came from a boycott by the NAACP Youth Council of businesses that discriminated against blacks, a move that resulted in three businesses agreeing to hire black employees.⁶⁰ Griffin expressed skepticism about the capability of demonstrations to

⁵⁷Abrams, "Youngsters Demonstrate."

⁵⁸"And They Were Here . . ." (editorial), *Farmville Herald*, August 30, 1963, 1C.

⁵⁹Ruth Turner to Jean Fairfax, August 2, 1963, box 1963, folder 38544, AFSC Papers.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*; Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*. Turner had also been a member of the SCEP group that taught in the county in 1962.

force reopening of county schools, opining that “the local merchants here would stand by and see a massacre and still not open the schools.” Nevertheless, he added, “Our young people want to tell the world that they’re not contented folks who wouldn’t do anything without being stirred up by outsiders. They are going to demonstrate, but they want to keep it strictly local.”⁶¹

Like the QC group, the teachers decided “by common consent” to forego demonstrations “because our invitation was to teach in the county.”⁶² Ponsie Hillman recalled that the teaching volunteers would regularly congregate at day’s end: “We marched around the church. Everybody from the community came and we used to march around and clap our hands and sing. This was to keep the spirit high.”⁶³ While the New York volunteers stayed out of public demonstrations, they did spur some local black residents to muster the courage and resolve to demonstrate. For example, Stan Shaw noted in his journal that one student of his “has spent the last three days in jail because I made him think about the situation just a little bit. Eight of my kids have participated in the demonstrations. Just getting a foothold into their existence and giving it a gentle push in (what I think is) the right direction.”⁶⁴

More recently, Shaw explained the volunteers’ agreement with Griffin to stay out of demonstrations: “Given that we were living in the homes of community members who risked a lot by even housing us . . . we were not going to jeopardize that, or jeopardize what we were doing by getting involved in the demonstrations.”⁶⁵ While a number of the QC students were “frustrated” at being held out of the other demonstrations, Wenger believes that the decision to refrain from protest yielded an important insight:

For all of us I think—at least all of the white students—this was our first experience in a situation where white people were not in charge, [realizing that] we were not the white knights in shining armor coming to save these poor black people They were the leaders, they were the courageous ones, they were the ones who were risking their lives and their economic future by challenging the power structure in the South, and we were there

⁶¹Erwin Knoll, “A Quiet Summer Night in Farmville,” July 19, 1963, 1, filed in box 1, Konzal Collection. Although the publisher of the article is not entirely clear, it appears to be the *Long Island Press*.

⁶²Parrish, “Facts about AFT Education Project.”

⁶³Hillman, UFT 2004 interview. The teachers recalled singing “We Shall Overcome” and “We Are Soldiers,” among other songs.

⁶⁴Stan Shaw Journal, August 5, 1963, in author’s possession. Mike Wenger recalls that the volunteers, at Griffin’s invitation, did take part in one march to the local jail, where some local teenagers were being detained after taking part in demonstrations.

⁶⁵Shaw, interview.

as foot soldiers I think it challenged many stereotypes that even a lot of white liberals have, or had at that time at least, so it was an eye-opening experience in that sense.⁶⁶

Phyllis Padow-Sederbaum echoed a similar theme: “One of the things that had been drummed into our heads,” particularly by Weddington, “is that we had just as much to learn from our students as they had from us We were very keen on not seeing ourselves as people who were saviors.”⁶⁷ This was an important insight about the need for whites to be allies in the civil rights struggle, not self-appointed saviors or leaders. Black Prince Edward already had its leader. Throughout the summer, Griffin was in control of the situation, having obtained support for the demonstrations from the NAACP’s State Conference (which he had served as president since fall 1962) and ensuring that demonstrations remained nonviolent and led by local black residents, rather than outsiders.⁶⁸

The Kennedy Administration’s Free Schools: Heroism or Opportunism?

The protest campaign wound down as volunteers returned home, and some black youth who had returned for the summer went back to their schools outside the county. In the fall, despite the county’s persistence in keeping public schools closed, the full-time education of Prince Edward youth resumed with the launch of the Free Schools, a Kennedy administration initiative to offer free, full-time education to all interested PEC students. Planning for the Free Schools predated the summer demonstrations, so it does not appear that the protest campaign prompted the Kennedy initiative. Rather, the long delays in reaching a final resolution to the litigation convinced the White House that it must act to restore education in the county. As with the Freedom Schools, Free School administrators hired an integrated staff, arranged to house volunteers in the black community, confronted local white hostility, and grappled with how to teach a group of students with a wide range of academic abilities. Justice Department aide vanden Heuvel coordinated the massive effort, securing over \$1 million in private donations to launch the one-year school system, as well as the support of key officials in county and state government and Reverend Griffin. In addition, vanden Heuvel arranged to lease county school buildings for the

⁶⁶Wenger, interview.

⁶⁷Padow-Sederbaum, interview.

⁶⁸For an impressively detailed account of the 1963 demonstrations, and Griffin’s pivotal role in them, see Lee and Daugherty, “Program of Action.” Local ministers Goodwin Douglas and Samuel Williams coordinated the protests.

one-year system. Superintendent Neil Sullivan, who had come from Long Island, used team teaching and nongraded classrooms in an effort to make the greatest possible gains in student learning. At the beginning of the school year, students from the black Virginia State College stepped in to teach Prince Edward youth while the remainder of the teaching staff could be secured. Nearly 1,600 students, including eight whites, enrolled.⁶⁹

In later years, Reverend Griffin praised the Free Schools as a “good,” one-year school system, but bluntly described Sullivan as “a self-serving opportunist. He presented himself to the nation as a man who had risked physical danger to rescue these black children from ignorance, when in fact he was not in danger and he didn’t perform any miracles . . . Sullivan, and many of the others, were more interested in promoting themselves than in helping the oppressed people of the county.”⁷⁰ To their credit, the New York volunteers did not view themselves as saviors, but individuals who followed in the footsteps of prior volunteers, many of them black, and who deferred to the wisdom of Griffin and other local black leaders.

While the Michigan State research team found that most students still lagged far behind same-age peers in other locales who had not suffered interruptions in their education, the efforts of vanden Heuvel to create the Free Schools and the dedication of the faculty and staff to PEC youth were remarkable, despite possibly self-aggrandizing motivations on the part of some.⁷¹ The students themselves, some of whom were stepping inside a school for the first time, showed uncommon courage and determination through their faithful attendance. Realizing that the federal government was moved to take action in Prince Edward—albeit after four years in the educational wilderness—surely lifted the spirits of many Free School students. And just as the Free Schools paved the way for the reopening of public schools, the Freedom Schools that preceded them had begun to reacclimate students to the school setting. In 2013 correspondence with the author, vanden Heuvel highlighted the importance of the New York teaching volunteers:

The Queens College and UFT volunteers brought momentum to our efforts as we were trying to organize the Free Schools. They showed the effectiveness of [outside] teachers in a difficult environment. I was concerned about

⁶⁹Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate*, and Titus, *Brown’s Battleground*, devote considerable attention to the Free Schools.

⁷⁰Egerton, “A Gentleman’s Fight,” 124.

⁷¹Robert L. Green and Louis J. Hofmann, “A Case Study of the Effects of Educational Deprivation on Southern Rural Negro Children,” *Journal of Negro Education* 34, no. 3 (July 1965), 340.

their safety because New Yorkers were special targets of venom so I tried to stay in contact as they became supporters of discussion and communication rather than confrontation. They were pioneers of the Free Schools and I respected them as such.⁷²

New York, Virginia, and Mississippi

The PEC Freedom Schools served as one model for the nearly fifty Freedom Schools that served about 2,500 Mississippi students, from preschoolers to adults, during the summer of 1964. SNCC staffers in PEC during the summer of 1963 recruited volunteers for Mississippi. UFT teachers Sandra Adickes and Norma Becker taught in both Freedom School projects, helped to recruit other New York City teachers for the Mississippi Project, and participated in the initial planning meeting for the Mississippi Freedom Schools in March 1964, as did Robert Green and Rachel Weddington.⁷³

Lois Chaffee, who helped to coordinate the March 1964 conference and served as cochair of the Mississippi Freedom Schools Curriculum Planning Committee, wrote to Becker in anticipation of the March conference to gain “more detailed information about the Prince Edward project, because of the many similarities to our problems Also, we’re constantly on the prowl for people with experience and ability to work on our curriculum.”⁷⁴ Chaffee asked for insights on housing, facilities, and materials for the Mississippi Freedom Schools, given Becker’s experience in Prince Edward.

To increase the participation and support of UFT members in the union’s ongoing civil rights efforts, articles in the union newspaper tied the PEC and Mississippi struggles together. A June 1964 article in *The United Teacher* asserted that the Supreme Court’s decision to require Prince Edward to resume public education “has given new impetus to UFT’s Freedom School Project” in Mississippi. An October article urging the continuation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools bore the headline “Want Teachers & Supplies; Avoid Educational Disaster of

⁷²William vanden Heuvel, e-mail correspondence with author, February 4, 2013.

⁷³Dittmer, *Local People*; Adickes, *Legacy of a Freedom School*; Carson, *In Struggle*. Other attendees at the initial Freedom Summer planning meeting included Charles Cobb (SNCC), Noel Day, Septima Clark (Citizenship Schools), Bayard Rustin (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), Myles Horton (Highlander Center), and Bob Moses.

⁷⁴Lois Chaffee to Norma Becker, March 2, 1964, Becker—Mississippi Freedom Summer Project—General papers, 1964–1965 (Norma Becker Papers, 1961–1975; Historical Society Library Microforms Room, micro 817, reel 1), <http://cdm15932.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15932coll2/id/44367>. In the letter, Chaffee expresses interest in contacting Rupert Picott (misspelled “Peaco”) of the VTA and Rachel Weddington (misspelled “Reading”).

Prince Edward County” and reported the findings of the Michigan State study team that closed schools had resulted in dramatic declines in IQ scores and basic academic skills.⁷⁵ As a result of the efforts of Adickes and Becker, along with UFT president Charles Cogen and Richard Parrish, thirty-six New York City teachers agreed to take part in the Mississippi Project, representing nearly half of all unionized teachers who served in Freedom Schools there.⁷⁶

The links between the PEC and Mississippi efforts were also apparent at QC. Two faculty members and ten students participated in the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project. The Queens contingent included Andy Goodman, one of three civil rights workers infamously murdered in Neshoba County at the beginning of Freedom Summer. The other two were black Mississippian James Chaney and white New Yorker Mickey Schwerner, whose wife, Rita, attended QC.⁷⁷ A number of QC’s Prince Edward volunteers had been friendly with Goodman. June Tauber seriously considered participating in Freedom Summer, but the murders of her friend and his two colleagues changed her mind:

The last conversation I had with [Andy], he asked me what it was like when I was in Prince Edward, because he was thinking of going down [to Mississippi], and I said, you felt more alive and more a part of the world and more open to learning and to giving than at any other time in your life. You really felt there was a gaping wound and maybe you could help close it, and it was just invigorating He said to me, “Boy, you light up when you talk about that—Are you going to Mississippi?” and I said “Yes.” He said, “I think I am too.” And then I remember seeing his face on the TV news. Because I had not gone yet. For some reason I had something else I had to do for a week or so.

Deborah Yaffee recalls that hearing the news was “the second worst day in my life,” after the day her parents died. The news about Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman “comes right after that. I’m still getting chills [thinking about it almost fifty years later]. It was horrendous.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵“Court Va. Ruling Spurs Mississippi Freedom Schools,” *United Teacher*, June 4, 1964, 1; “Want Teachers & Supplies; Avoid Educational Disaster of Prince Edward County,” *United Teacher*, October 27, 1964, 5. Copies of the articles were kindly provided to me by Leo Casey, executive director of the AFT’s Albert Shanker Institute.

⁷⁶Perrillo, *Uncivil Rights*. Evidently two other New York teachers, Bruce Glushakow and Sylvia Woog, also volunteered in both Prince Edward and Mississippi. Both were stationed in Columbus, Mississippi—Glushakow worked in voter registration, and Woog in the Freedom Schools. See “Master List, 1964 Freedom School Volunteers” and untitled list of union teachers in Prince Edward County. Both were kindly provided to me by Leo Casey.

⁷⁷Mark Levy, “COFO (SNCC/CORE), 1964, 1965, Mississippi,” <http://www.crmvet.org/vet/levym.htm>.

⁷⁸Tauber, interview; Yaffee, interview.

The volunteer efforts in the South seemed to fuel activism closer to home. During the 1963–1964 school year, the civil rights activities of the PEC volunteers was featured prominently in the QC school newspaper, the *Phoenix*. On April 22, 1964, Carolyn Hubbard, now the president of the college's CORE chapter, led 200–250 QC students picketing the World's Fair in Queens to protest ongoing racial discrimination in New York City and throughout the nation. A month later, around two hundred QC students participated in a demonstration at City Hall in a "March for Democratic Schools," attended by roughly 8,000, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.⁷⁹

Conclusion

This paper has examined the 1963 volunteer efforts in PEC as a key prototype for Freedom Schools that followed in Mississippi and elsewhere. It was here that the idea of an extended summer educational program, importing an integrated group of volunteers to teach rural black students in a civil rights battleground over an entire summer, first came to life. While the threat of racial terrorism was less grave in Virginia than in many other southern states, Prince Edward volunteers faced white hostility, the challenge of teaching undereducated or uneducated youth, and, for many, the unfamiliar situation of deferring to black leaders. They sought guidance and inspiration from Reverend Griffin, long stretched thin, who juggled an almost absurdly long list of responsibilities: arranging housing for volunteers, keeping tabs on the protest campaign and the Freedom Schools, continuing dialogues with local white leadership and NAACP lawyers, informing residents about the status of litigation, heading the state NAACP, and leading his church, to name just a few.

Those who had hoped, naively, that the summer volunteer effort would transform race relations and eradicate inequality in PEC were inevitably disappointed. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find a Freedom School volunteer who regrets their decision to take part, or who does not remember their participation with some pride. Janice Bastuni reflected: "I think that was really one of the finest hours of the union that they organized Prince Edward County and Mississippi."⁸⁰ The

⁷⁹Larry Simonberg, "Fair's NYC Pavilion Is Target for Collegians' Demonstration," *Phoenix*, April 28, 1964, 1; Charles Delafuente, "Freedom Week Rallies Fight for Civil Rights," *Phoenix*, April 28, 1964, 1; Stuart Zipper, "CORE, NAACP Demand Integrated Schools Now," *Phoenix*, May 20, 1964, 5.

⁸⁰Goldsmith, UFT 2004 interview.

QC volunteers would be justified in making a similar claim about their involvement in the PEC Freedom Schools.

However, it would be misleading to view the Freedom Schools in Prince Edward as primarily a tale of heroic whites fighting to secure civil rights for oppressed blacks. Roughly one-quarter of the volunteer educators in Prince Edward were black.⁸¹ Black leadership and agency were central to PEC Freedom Schools, and to the protest campaign that summer. As has been emphasized throughout this paper, Griffin was the “point person” in black Prince Edward. Two black educators—Richard Parrish and Rachel Weddington—oversaw the Freedom Schools in Prince Edward. The black VTA provided key support to Prince Edward students throughout the closing years. A third black educator, Robert Green, led a study team to investigate the effects of educational deprivation on Prince Edward students. Local black ministers Samuel Williams and Goodwin Douglas coordinated protests. Black SNCC workers trained black students in protest tactics.

In brief, black people steered educational activism in PEC. The centrality of black leadership and black agency stands in revealing contrast to popular images of civil rights history, in which whites take center stage and blacks are bit players. Films such as *Mississippi Burning*, *The Long Walk Home*, and *The Help* are but a few examples. Kristen Green’s recent memoir-cum-history of PEC also falls under this category, focusing on her attempts to understand her family’s role in closing schools and opening the segregationist academy, rather than the historic importance of the black freedom struggle there.⁸² During Freedom Summer, black SNCC staffers clashed with white volunteers who could be condescending and insensitive; some whites, typically more educated and well-connected than black staff members, seemed intent on usurping black leadership.⁸³ This did not appear to occur in Prince Edward. Respect for black leadership in civil rights struggles, and acceptance of their roles as allies and foot soldiers, is perhaps the most admirable legacy of the Prince Edward Freedom School volunteers.

⁸¹In *Freedom Summer*, McAdam notes that Mississippi Project recruitment focused on students at elite colleges and universities who could self-fund their volunteer work. Since blacks made up fewer than 3 percent of all undergraduates at the time, the proportion of black volunteers in Mississippi was consequently low. Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁸²Kristen Green, *Something Must Be Done about Prince Edward County: A Family, a Virginia Town, a Civil Rights Battle* (New York: Harper, 2015). For my critique of Green’s approach, see “When a Memoir Tells Half the Story: Prince Edward County and School Desegregation,” *JSTOR Daily*, November 11, 2015, <http://daily.jstor.org/prince-edward-county-desegregation/>

⁸³McAdam, *Freedom Summer*.