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The Mighty Generals— A Story of Basketball Championships and Racial Unity
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On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that dual school systems for white and black students were unconstitutional. The decision stated that public school segregation violated the equal protection granted to all U.S. citizens under the 14th Amendment. Throughout school districts in the Deep South, change was slow. By 1961, seven years after the Brown decision and 100 years after the attack on Charleston's Fort Sumter by Confederate forces, South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi had essentially avoided integration of public schools as required by the 1954 Supreme Court ruling.

After the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, schools in Greenville, South Carolina continued to operate under the dictate of "Jim Crow" laws which called for separate but equal facilities for whites and blacks. During the era of Jim Crow, schools in Greenville were clearly separate, but they were not equal. While attending a local political function at an all-white school in the early 1960s, Greenville's A.J. Whittenberg could not help but notice the difference between that school and the all-black school attended by his 11-year-old daughter. Whittenberg ultimately led an effort to help black children attend white schools in Greenville. In 1964, the "freedom of choice plan" was implemented whereby black citizens could petition to have their children attend white schools. These petitions were often met with resistance and by 1969, the freedom of choice plan had resulted in only half of the 100 public schools in Greenville County being racially mixed.

By 1970, Greenville County School District operated 12 predominately white high schools. Enrollment in these schools consisted of 13,057 whites and only 838 blacks. It is highly unlikely that this was the kind of desegregation the nine Supreme Court justices who ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* had in mind in 1954. The Federal Government eventually grew weary of the lack of meaningful progress on school integration in states like South Carolina. On January 19, 1970, Judge Clement Haynsworth, Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Virginia, ordered the immediate dismantling of Greenville County's dual school system.

On February 17, 1970, 12,000 of Greenville County's 57,000 students were reassigned in the middle of the school year in order to establish an 80-20 white/black ratio at each school. Faculty ratios were targeted for 4-1 in elementary schools and 5-1 in secondary schools which meant that 531 teachers had to accept mid-term reassignments.

Five all-black high schools existed in Greenville in 1970: Beck, Bryson, Washington, Lincoln and Sterling. As part of the district's integration plan, Beck and Bryson were converted to junior high schools. Washington was closed and Lincoln and Sterling remained in use for the remainder of the school year but were closed the following September.

Once school integration became inevitable in Greenville, a core group of local leaders and volunteers organized and focused their efforts on preparing for a peaceful transition to a unified school system. Area leaders were keenly aware of the negative impact that could result if the school desegregation resulted in violence, riots and chaos. Etched in their minds were the nightly news scenes from other Southern cities such as Little Rock and Birmingham where school integration required oversight by significant armed forces. Remarkably, the forced integration of the public schools in Greenville County was accomplished without significant incident.

As the decade of the '50s ended, the Greenville County School Board grappled with the issue of a growing suburban population as well as the problem of two aging high schools in the northern part of the county. In September 1959, the board approved the construction of an eighth through 12th-grade school on 33 acres on Pine Knoll Drive, near the intersection of Wade Hampton Boulevard (U.S. Route 29) and North Pleasantburg Drive (S.C. Highway 291). The school would eventually be named Wade Hampton in honor of former Confederate General Wade Hampton III.

By 1970, Wade Hampton was fast becoming a melting pot of students from a wide variety of backgrounds. As the business community flourished, skilled workers, professionals and many corporate executives were migrating to Greenville from Northern cities. Many of the city's best new suburban housing options were in the Wade Hampton school district. Greenville had no Catholic high school at the time, and once Catholic students completed junior high, they transferred to the public high schools. The city's Jewish temple was located within Wade Hampton's school zone. But even with this diversity, only 43 of the school's 2,161 students were black in 1970.

On the morning of February 17, 1970, 300 black students were added to Wade Hampton's enrollment. Most of these students came from either Beck or Washington High School. The new students were ushered into an opening assembly in the school auditorium. A large handmade colorful banner hung the length of one wall and read, "Wade Hampton Generals Need You." Principal Dewey Huggins spoke to the group and said the school "has a tradition that any student who is new here enters with the same privileges and the same rules and regulations that apply to all. We feel that this is a tradition that will not be broken here."

At one point during the assembly, Washington High Student Body President Alister Dial was brought to the stage to meet his counterpart, Bob Lentz, Wade Hampton's student body president. Lentz crouched at the edge of the stage and extended his hand to Dial. A local photographer captured the symbolic handshake between the two student leaders. Subsequently, the picture was picked up by a national wire service and appeared in the March 2, 1970 issue of *Newsweek*.

Wade Hampton Student Body President Bob Lentz shakes hands with Washington High School Student Body President Alister Dial during a welcoming assembly at Wade Hampton High School on February 17, 1970. *(Photo courtesy of the Upcountry History Museum, James Wilson Collection)*

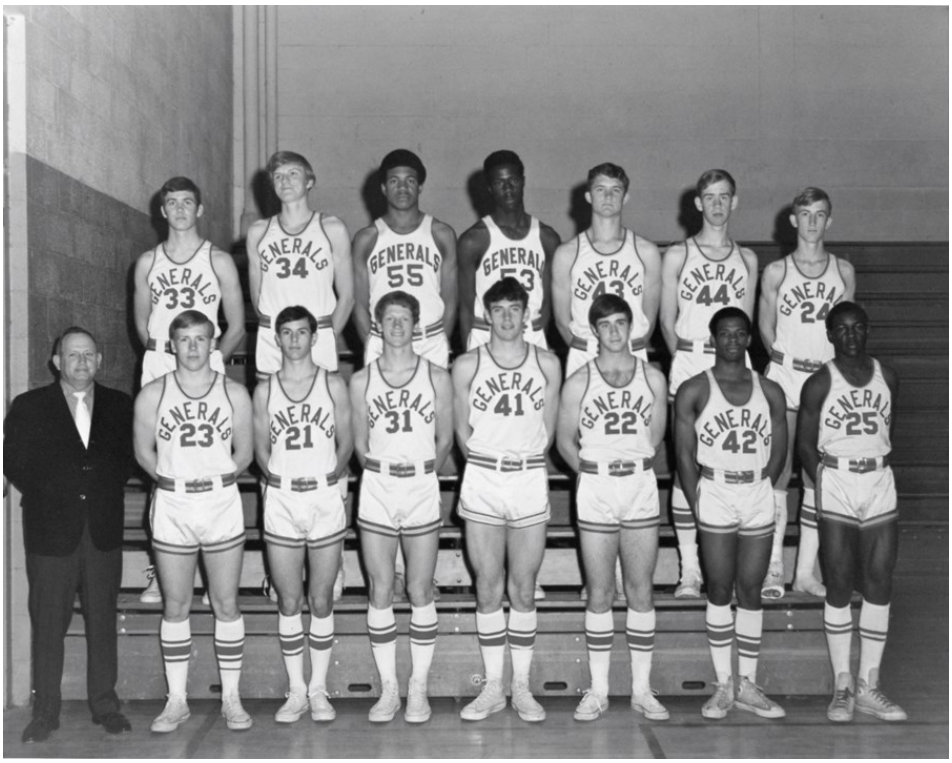
On the surface, it appeared that Wade Hampton had pulled off the impossible, a peaceful integration of its campus in the middle of a school year. Other than a couple of buses that arrived late as the drivers learned their new routes, the day went off without a hitch. Former students described the day as "uneventful" and "not a big deal at all," but even with all the admirable volunteer efforts, welcoming committees, banners and personal escorts, it would have been impossible to completely eradicate any form of racial taunting in a school so steeped in Southern culture. Administrators could not police every hallway, bathroom and locker room.

At the time of school integration, the Wade Hampton High School boys basketball team was 11-7 and fighting to earn a spot in the post season playoffs. As it turned out, good fortune came to Coach Johnny Ross's team as a result of the forced integration of public schools on February 17, 1970. With the closing of Washington and Beck High schools, a collection of talented basketball players made their way to Wade Hampton. In mid-season, Ross added five new black players to his team's roster, including 6'7" Clyde Mayes, a standout player from Beck. Over the next two seasons at Wade Hampton, Mayes established himself as the most dominant high school basketball player in South Carolina. Mayes grew up in the Nicholtown community and the Greenville County School integration plan literally split his household, sending his older sister to J.L. Mann High School while Clyde was assigned to Wade Hampton. But Clyde was determined to make the best of the mid-year transfer and at Wade Hampton, he not only excelled athletically, but was also a recognized leader on the Wade Hampton campus where he forged many life-long friendships with white teammates and students. Mayes went on to have an outstanding collegiate career and played professional basketball for 14 years before returning to Greenville.

After desegregation of the public schools, the revamped Generals' basketball team became a powerhouse. Over the next two seasons, they won 34 games while losing only twice. They captured the state 4A basketball championship in both 1970 and '71. These were the first athletic state championships won by teams at Wade Hampton High School.

Prior to 1971, South Carolina's black high schools competed for separate championships with little or no public recognition. The 1971 state championship game between Wade Hampton and Dreher High School was played in Columbia's 12,000 seat Carolina Coliseum. The game matched up Wade Hampton's Mayes against Dreher High's Alexander English. Never had two black superstars led historically white high schools on a stage as large as the Carolina Coliseum.

The game symbolically ushered in a new era of integrated athletic competition in South Carolina and inspired the next generation of young athletes. Mayes and English became the first two black athletes at their respective colleges, Mayes at Furman and English at South Carolina, to have their jersey numbers retired.



1969-70 Wade Hampton boys basketball team after the desegregation of public schools on February 17, 1970. Bottom row: Coach Johnny Ross (left), Billy Spink, Bobby Estes, Norman MacDonald, Tom Goodman, Willie Allen and Levi Mitchell. Top row: Mel Tate, Donald Wing, Clyde Mayes, Horace Anderson, Will McNamara, Paul Myers and Johnny Ayers. Not pictured James Starks. *(Photo courtesy of Kelly Ross.)*

In a post-Civil Rights Era in the Deep South, at a high school named in honor of a Confederate general, the game of basketball became a unifying force between white and black teammates. It propelled a diverse group of young men to look beyond their differences, bond together and become champions. The unified spirit of the team spilled over to the entire student body as well as the local community.

On their way to becoming champions, a few important life lessons were also learned, none more important or profound than the one shared James "Big O" Brooks, a former Beck High student and member of Wade Hampton's 1971 championship team. Brooks said simply: "When you play basketball together, you realize that you really aren't that much different," Brooks said.

Note: The complete story of *The Mighty Generals* can be read in Mike Chibbaro's book, *"The Mighty Generals, A Story of Basketball Championships And Racial Unity in the Deep South."* Thirty-Seven Publishing, 2019. A copy can be purchased at the office of the Greenville County Historical Society or at www.thirtysevenpublishing.com.