

Paying the Price For Freedom

By Tom Hanchett, Levine Museum of the New South

May 17, 2014 marked the 60th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision that banned racial segregation.



The De Laine family amid the ruins of their burned house. Courtesy of Levine Museum of the New South

In 1947 African American preacher Rev. J.A. De Laine helped his neighbors in Summerton, SC, ask for a school bus. When that request failed, over 100 work-a-day people – farmhands, maids, gas station attendants – joined in a lawsuit demanding that all school facilities be made equal.

As NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall guided the case to the Supreme Court, local whites made their displeasure clear.

“The Ku Klux Klan came out and drove around the house. I was looking out the window and could see the white hoods. They just circled the house four or five times in three or four cars – to threaten you,” recalls James Morris Seals, grandson of Rev. De Laine’s ally, Rev. J.W. Seals.

The threats were not empty ones. Rev. Seals lost his teaching job. Harry Briggs, whose name appeared first on the lawsuit, suffered the same fate. “They were outraged that I was one of the petitioners and so I was fired from my job as a Service Station Attendant,” he remembered years later; “I was 32 years old with a wife and four children.”

Tenant farmer Henry Scott was ordered out of the fields he had worked: “He was told ‘you can’t farm this land because you signed this petition and what you planted, you can forget about it,’” granddaughter Learnese Trammell says. “He had planted, and they took it. He had no seeds, nothing. They took everything.”

Many signers lost their homes. “I was fired from my job as a maid at one of the

local motels of Summerton and later had to move from the house I was renting with my family,” plaintiff Annie Gibson told an interviewer. Mazie Solomon recalled, “My landlord, Mr. Robert Gail, approached me at my house and indicated that I could no longer live in his house if my name remained on the petition. He told me that if he allowed me to stay, all of his privileges to gin cotton and to sell his farm produce would be taken away from him.”

When white friends tried to help, they, too, faced reprisals. “Petition signer James Brown worked delivering oil, and people put pressure on his white boss to fire him. The boss refused – the two were close friends,” relates Joseph De Laine, Jr., Rev. De Laine’s son. “So whites boycotted the oil business, sending it toward bankruptcy. To save his boss, Mr. Brown quit. Moved his family to Detroit. Never came back.”

Rev. De Laine, leader of the lawsuit, did his best to hold fast in the face of reprisals. His home in Summerton mysteriously burned to the ground – while the fire department stood by and watched. A death threat came, and days later arsonists torched his church. Finally he and his family fled north to New York.

Seven long years after filing their initial suit, the petitioners heard the Supreme Court ruling on their case, now bundled with four others as *Brown v Board of Education*. On May 17, 1954, the Justices delivered their historic decision: “Separate

educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

Those words helped make the suffering worthwhile. “[T]o sacrifice our friendship, our happiness, our economic opportunities and generally ourselves and our friends – this we did,” Rev. De Laine wrote. It was a high price, paid without any guarantee of success. Now success had arrived.

Annie Gibson, the Summerton woman who had lost her job as motel maid, spoke for many others when she said, “Those were hard years, but as I look back over them – they served a good purpose and I’m glad.”

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Based on the traveling exhibition *Courage: The Vision to End Segregation, the Guts to Fight for It*, created by Levine Museum of the New South, Charlotte, N.C. www.museumofthenewsouth.org

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Draw conclusions: The black citizens of Clarendon County paid a high price “without any guarantee of success.” Does the news tell of others who are making sacrifices without any guarantee of success? What are the sacrifices? Why are people willing to take such risks? How do they explain their choices? Look for quotes.