

# Seeking Educational Equality in the North: The Integration of the Hillburn School System

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Hillburn is a sleepy little village in New York, situated along the border with New Jersey just forty miles northwest of New York City. Its population is approximately 1000, as it has been for decades. I grew up in Hillburn, and, for most of my life, I heard stories from my father that the elementary school that my brother and I attended was once segregated. My father and his siblings were unable to attend our school because it was a white-only institution until the 1940s. And no matter how many versions of the story were told, the ending was always the same—“and Thurgood Marshall<sup>1</sup> came to town and integrated the school system.”

As exciting as it might be to think that Thurgood Marshall actually visited our village and integrated our school district, it was a difficult sell. There were many questions. Why would Marshall choose to help the residents of Hillburn? How did he find out about the Hillburn school issue? What did he do to help integrate the schools? Was he successful?

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1. Prior to his appointment to the federal bench, Thurgood Marshall worked as an American civil rights lawyer and served as Solicitor General. Marshall was also the first African American appointed to the United States Supreme Court. During his decades-long legal career, Marshall fought for civil rights for all Americans, litigating school-segregation cases in conjunction with the NAACP. *See generally* RAWN JAMES, JR., *ROOT AND BRANCH: CHARLES HAMILTON HOUSTON, THURGOOD MARSHALL, AND THE STRUGGLE TO END SEGREGATION* (2010); JUAN WILLIAMS, *THURGOOD MARSHALL: AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY* (1998).

This essay attempts to answer those questions and others regarding one of America's more surprising Jim Crow legacies. Yes, Thurgood Marshall did come to my village, and he was instrumental in the integration of our segregated school system, but Marshall had considerable help from several brave and determined citizens, including my grandfather, Thomas Ulysses Alexander. My father and I have co-authored a book<sup>2</sup> that describes in some detail many of the activities that led to the integration of the Hillburn school system, and this essay describes the journey of discovery that led us to write the book.

## II. SEGREGATED SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH

Everyone is aware of the sad chapter in American history when Jim Crow laws made it acceptable to segregate public schools by race.<sup>3</sup> Much attention has been paid to segregated schools in the South, but surprisingly little has been written about segregated schools that existed *north* of the Mason-Dixon Line. The village of Hillburn is far from the South. It is nestled among the Ramapo Mountains, right on the border between New York and New Jersey.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it was—and still is—a racially diverse community.

My ancestors are African, Dutch, and Native American, and after years of inter-marriage, there are few relatives or other residents of color in Hillburn who can confidently identify themselves simply as black or white.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the nonwhite people in Hillburn were most often referred to as “colored” for many decades. Race is a difficult construct under any

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2. LEONARD M. ALEXANDER & PETER C. ALEXANDER, *IT TAKES A VILLAGE: THE INTEGRATION OF THE HILLBURN SCHOOL SYSTEM* (forthcoming 2015).

3. For more on the history of Jim Crow laws, see JERROLD M. PACKARD, *AMERICAN NIGHTMARE: THE HISTORY OF JIM CROW* (2002); *REMEMBERING JIM CROW: AFRICAN AMERICANS TELL ABOUT LIFE IN THE SEGREGATED SOUTH* (William H. Chafe et al. eds., 2001); RICHARD WORMSER, *THE RISE AND FALL OF JIM CROW* (2003).

4. See DAVID STEVEN COHEN, *THE RAMAPO MOUNTAIN PEOPLE*, at xi (1974) (describing the geography and topography of the area); see also *VILLAGE OF HILLBURN: 1893–1993*, at 4 (1993) (“Nestled in the Ramapo Mountains, some 40 miles from the Big Apple, exists a small New-England like village of 1,100 people.”).

5. See COHEN, *supra* note 4, at xi (“The Ramapo Mountain People today are a relatively small group. They number only approximately 1,500 and live in Mahwah and Ringwood, New Jersey, and Hillburn, New York. Yet they are distinct from the surrounding society. Their racially mixed ancestry socially isolates them as a separate racial group. Marriage within the group over many generations has resulted in their being a separate kinship group.”).

circumstance, but “colored” was an easy shorthand within our village for anyone who was not white.<sup>6</sup> For my father and his contemporaries, being labeled as “colored” meant he had to attend the “colored” grammar school in the village.

Even in a village with a population of approximately 1000, the elementary schools were segregated. Curiously, the local high school was in the neighboring village of Suffern, New York, and it was integrated; however, children in the Hillburn schools were divided by race until the ninth grade.<sup>7</sup> White students attended Hillburn Main School, known locally as the “white school.”<sup>8</sup> Colored children attended Brook School, which was known as the “colored school.”<sup>9</sup>

The two schools were remarkably different. An NAACP report from 1931 described the white school in the following way: “[G]ood looking and a fairly large brick building with good equipment. It has two stories and a basement; fairly ample ground outside for recreational purposes, including a tennis court and other outdoor facilities and it also has running water

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6. For purposes of this essay, I will use “colored” to maintain historical accuracy and, hopefully, to instigate a discussion about racial labels and racial identity. The term “colored” is commonly used by the Ramapo Mountain people to describe themselves. *See id.* at xii (“The Ramapo Mountain People who reside in the section of the mountains southwest of the Ramapo Pass use the term *colored* to describe their race. By this they mean nonwhite.”). For helpful reading about racial identity, see DERRICK BELL, SILENT COVENANTS: *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION* AND THE UNFULFILLED HOPES FOR RACIAL REFORM (2004); BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM, “WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA?”: AND OTHER CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE (1997). For further information on racial difficulties, see Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *Progressive Race Blindness?: Individual Identity, Group Politics, and Reform*, 49 UCLA L. REV. 1455 (2002); John A. Powell, *The “Racing” of American Society: Race Functioning as a Verb Before Signifying as a Noun*, 15 LAW & INEQ. 99 (1997).

7. *See* VILLAGE OF HILLBURN: 1893–1993, *supra* note 4, at 28–30 (discussing the history of primary and secondary education in Hillburn).

8. *See id.* at 28 (noting Hillburn Main School as one of two schools in the village).

9. *Id.* at 29. Hillburn schools were not the only segregated institutions in the village. Within our small community, there were also two Presbyterian churches. Ramapo Presbyterian Church was the “white church,” and Brook Presbyterian Church was the “colored church.” My great-great-grandfather, Samuel DeFreese, Sr., along with another of my great-great-grandfathers, John DeGroat, constructed the original structure of Brook Presbyterian Church, known as “Brook Chapel.” DeFreese served as the first pastor of this church, where members of my family have worshipped from 1877 to the present. In 1997, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. dissolved Ramapo Presbyterian Church. *See* PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA), MINUTES: 209TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY 1997, PART II: STATISTICS, at V-3 (1997) (on file with the *Arkansas Law Review*).

within the building for sanitary purposes.”<sup>10</sup> The colored school was much different:

[A] little neat, nice looking four room wooden structure. One room has some braces to support tor [sic] strengthen one wall. These braces had been put up since the building was erected. Two classes are held by individual teachers, both in the same room. The building was clean, well heated, well lighted and has running water for drinking purposes in the halls and one toilet for the teachers indoors. The pupils’ toilet facilities has no running water and were about 25 feet removed from the building and made, altogether, a walk of about 150 or 200 feet from the steps to the little houses. They were clean but unlighted and unheated. For ventilation purposes one window had been broken out and wooden bars placed across it. There was very little space for recreational purposes.<sup>11</sup>

My father, who attended the colored school, clearly remembers the challenges the conditions posed to his education. All of the teachers were African American, brought into the village from further south. There was no playground at his school, so the children played in the street until cars would pass by, and the students lacked regular access to a nurse or a music program.<sup>12</sup> A nurse and music teacher from the white school would visit the colored school from time to time and the music teacher, Miss Duvall, used her time with the colored children to teach them songs like “Ol’ Black Joe,” “Possum Meat,” and “Poor Old Ned.”<sup>13</sup> These are the words to “Poor Old Ned”:

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10. Report on Visit to Hillburn from William T. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP, at 1 (Feb. 2, 1931) [hereinafter Report on Visit to Hillburn] (on file with author).

11. *Id.* at 4-5.

12. ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 30.

13. *Id.*

There was an old darkie  
 His name was Uncle Ned.  
 He died long ago, long ago.  
 He had no wool on the top of his head  
 In the place where the wool oughta to grow.

Hang up the fiddle and the bow;  
 Lay down the shovel and the hoe.  
 There's no more work for poor old Ned.  
 He's gone where the good darkies go!<sup>14</sup>

The lyrics are unquestionably and outrageously offensive, and it is unthinkable that a music teacher once thought it appropriate to teach such a racist song to students. However, the colored students did not know anything was wrong; all they knew was that a music teacher was asking them to learn a song.

Hillburn was hardly the only location where the races were educated separate from one another. Noteworthy school segregation existed in neighboring counties in New York, as well as in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and other locations.<sup>15</sup> The reasons segregated schools existed outside of the South varied from community to community. In Hillburn, segregation was relatively easy to accomplish, in part because of geography. The village was roughly bisected by Route 17, a major state highway and the main route between New York City and the Catskill Mountains.<sup>16</sup> The Catskills were home to

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14. *Id.*

15. See, e.g., *Segregation*, OHIO HIST. CENT., <http://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Segregation?rec=1585> (last visited Nov. 28, 2014) (“While discrimination seemed most prevalent in the South, it also existed in Northern states. In Ohio, a number of people refused to treat African Americans equally. Some school districts in Ohio refused to admit African American students to schools with white pupils.”); see also Michael Pustorino & Justin Sulsky, *School Segregation in the NY - NJ Metropolitan Area*, SOC. SCI. DOCKET, Summer-Fall 2011, at 51, 51-52 (noting instances of segregated schools in suburban New York City).

16. The Catskill Mountains are “located about ninety miles northwest of New York City, [and] from the 1920s through the 1970s these mountains were a retreat for millions of Americans, predominantly Jewish-Americans.” See Alison Zavos, *The Ghostly Remains of “Borscht Belt” Hotels and Resorts*, FEATURE SHOOT (Aug. 8, 2012), <http://www.featureshoot.com/2012/08/the-ghost-like-remains-of-borscht-belt-hotels-and-resorts>. They were also known as the “Borscht Belt” and the “Jewish Alps,” and entertainers such as Milton Berle, Phyllis Diller, and Don Rickles frequently headlined the clubs in the region. See *Borscht Belt*, TELEVISION TROPES & IDIOMS, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BorschtBelt> (last visited Nov. 28, 2014); see also Christina Clusiau, *The Disappearance of the Borscht Belt Hotels*, TIME LIGHTBOX (June 23, 2011), <http://>

entertainment venues that featured headline acts such as Mel Brooks, Joan Rivers, and Jerry Seinfeld.<sup>17</sup> Nearly every one of the colored families lived north and west of Route 17, and all but one white family lived south and east of the highway. It was a true dividing line.

Harsh economic realities also led to school segregation within the village. From the late 1800s until the mid-1900s, Hillburn was a busy manufacturing hamlet. Two local factories provided work for most of the residents, including the men of color. In fact, the town's two factories were the only place where able-bodied colored men were likely to find employment. Interestingly, one of the factories was led by a man named J. Edgar Davidson, a long-time Hillburn resident who was widely regarded as a pillar of the community, and who also happened to be the president of the school board.<sup>18</sup>

Davidson was a key player in the struggle for civil rights in Hillburn. He was an educated man, a 1908 graduate of Cornell University.<sup>19</sup> Not only did he lead the school board and work as the vice president of one of the local factories, he was also the chairman of the local savings and loan in nearby Suffern.<sup>20</sup> Davidson was generally considered a philanthropist in town, but my father and his family members questioned the man's motives:

He wasn't seen around the village very often, except at school board meetings. He would make occasional appearances to my side of the village, however, just before each municipal election. He would drive his big Chrysler Imperial over to the colored section of town and would hand out candy to the children. He would ask each kid what his or her name was and what their fathers did for a living. As long as the surname wasn't Alexander, they would get candy. I recall that he was not shy about denying candy to my siblings and me. On each election day, he would again drive to the homes of certain families in the colored section and give them rides to the polling station. Many of the colored residents had very little in the way of

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[lightbox.time.com/2011/06/23/the-disappearance-of-the-borscht-belt-hotels/#1](http://lightbox.time.com/2011/06/23/the-disappearance-of-the-borscht-belt-hotels/#1) (discussing the history of the Jewish-American vacation community in the Catskill Mountains).

17. Clusiau, *supra* note 16.

18. ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 13-14.

19. See CORNELL UNIV., CORNELL ALUMNI NEWS 63 (1920).

20. ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 14.

material things, so Mr. Davidson's largesse was a welcome gift and would ensure that Mr. Davidson's people would remain in power.<sup>21</sup>

Because of Davidson's position of power, it was very difficult for the colored residents of Hillburn to protest the school conditions. However, not every citizen was under Davidson's control.

### III. THE PUSH TOWARD INTEGRATION

Thomas Alexander was a transplant to Hillburn. He grew up in the Washington, D.C. area and moved to the village after marrying Sara DeFreese, my grandmother.<sup>22</sup> He worked for the post office in Manhattan and was not reliant on J. Edgar Davidson in any way.<sup>23</sup> "Grandpop," as we called him, was outraged by the disparate school conditions, and he set out to seek equality for the colored children of Hillburn.<sup>24</sup> He became the president of the Hillburn chapter of the NAACP, and, in that capacity, he lodged a complaint with the NAACP regional office in New York City which alleged the segregated school system infringed upon the civil rights of Hillburn's colored children.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the early 1930s, Grandpop worked with William T. Andrews, the Special Legal Assistant with the NAACP, to document the discrimination in Hillburn.<sup>26</sup> The two men corresponded regularly, and Andrews ultimately traveled to Hillburn for a fact-finding investigation.<sup>27</sup> He met with J. Edgar Davidson, among others, and reported that Davidson "contended that [the] harmonious relationship between the two races in Hillburn w[as] aided by the separate schools and the discontinuance of the policy would precipitate trouble."<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Alexander's name appears in a few publications that chronicled the efforts to integrate northern schools.<sup>29</sup>

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21. *Id.* at 14-15.

22. *Id.* at 18.

23. *Id.* at 28.

24. *Id.* at 25.

25. ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 24-25.

26. *Id.* at 25-26.

27. *Id.* at 26.

28. Report on Visit to Hillburn, *supra* note 10, at 3.

29. See, e.g., Thomas Sugrue, *Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler: Wartime Activists Think Globally and Act Locally*, in *FOG OF WAR: THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT* 87 (Kevin M. Kruse & Stephen Tuck eds., 2012) [hereinafter

However, he is usually referred to as “T.N. Alexander,”<sup>30</sup> and little has been written about his specific contributions. Grandpop provided considerable background information to the NAACP’s special investigator, in part because he was serving as the president of the NAACP chapter in Hillburn at the time. He held that position largely because he was an outsider who married a woman from the village; he did not grow up there, nor did he work locally. His post office job in New York City gave him a certain amount of freedom, and he was not afraid to speak up.<sup>31</sup> Grandpop’s activism reached its most intense phase in the summer of 1930 when the school board voted to purchase land next to the white school for a playground for the white children.<sup>32</sup> He questioned the purchase because nothing similar was being done for the children at the colored school, but the school board refused to provide similar recreation facilities for the colored children.<sup>33</sup> He told the NAACP that “it was now time to take up the entire matter of separate schools in the district [and] that the majority of colored citizens were ready to fight the condition.”<sup>34</sup>

The correspondence between Grandpop and the NAACP included:

- (1) The demographics of the Hillburn School District;<sup>35</sup>
- (2) The date of incorporation for the Village of Hillburn;<sup>36</sup>
- (3) Information regarding changes imposed by the school board on the enrollments at the two schools;<sup>37</sup> and

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Sugrue, *Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler*]; THOMAS J. SUGRUE, SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY: THE FORGOTTEN STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE NORTH 165 (2008).

30. The “N” comes from a misreading of his middle initial; it is actually “U” for “Ulysses.”

31. ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 28.

32. *Id.* at 25.

33. *See id.*

34. Memorandum from William T. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP, to Herbert H. Lehman, Lieutenant Governor, State of N.Y. (Feb. 18, 1931) (on file with author).

35. *See* Letter from William T. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP, to T.N. Alexander, President, Hillburn, N.Y. Chapter, NAACP (Aug. 14, 1930) (on file with author).

36. The village was incorporated in 1894. *See* Letter from T.U. Alexander, President, Hillburn, N.Y. Chapter, NAACP, to Wm. T. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP (Mar. 3, 1931) (on file with author).

37. Letter from T.U. Alexander, President, Hillburn, N.Y. Chapter, NAACP, to Robert W. Bagnall, Dir. of Branches, NAACP (Jan. 6, 1932) (on file with author).

- (4) Information concerning a bequest of \$1800 in the will of J. Edgar Davidson's late mother "to build a new colored school," but construction never took place because the school board reportedly could "not find any place to build."<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to my very active grandfather, the New York State Education Department was a rather passive player in the integration effort. In February 1931, Ernest Cole, the Department's Deputy Commissioner, suggested that Hillburn's practice of segregating schools was lawful. He wrote to Andrews: "Provision for separate schools for instruction of colored children has been made by Article 36 of the Education Law, and Section 921 of that article<sup>39</sup> . . . . I assume that the schools at Hillburn to which you call attention are maintained pursuant to the provisions of this article."<sup>40</sup> In his letter, Cole cited decisions issued by the New York Court of Appeals upholding the legitimacy of the law.<sup>41</sup>

His research, however, was deficient. Andrews responded just three days later with a tersely worded summary of the current state of the law:

Your letter of Feb. 13th with reference to the schools at Hillburn, N.Y. has been received. I believe that Section 921 of Article 36 of the Education Law has been superseded by Sec. 40 of Chap. 196 of the Laws of 1918 which is commonly called the Civil Rights Law. . . . Indeed, and in fact, separate schools are against the policy of the state, and I believe that the legislature intended to

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38. Letter from T.U. Alexander, President, Hillburn, N.Y. Chapter, NAACP, to Wm. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP (Feb. 27, 1931) (on file with author).

39. Section 921 provided:

The trustees of any union school district, or of any school district organized under a special act, may, when the inhabitants of any district shall so determine, by resolution, at any annual meeting, or at a special meeting called for that purpose, establish separate schools for the instruction of colored children resident therein, and such school shall be supported in the same manner and receive the same care, and be furnished with the same facilities for instruction, as the white schools therein.

N.Y. EDUCATION LAW § 921 (McKinney 1916) (repealed 1938).

40. Letter from Ernest E. Cole, Deputy Comm'r & Counsel, N.Y. State Educ. Dep't, to William T. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP (Feb. 13, 1931) (on file with author).

41. *Id.*; see also *People ex rel. Cisco v. Sch. Bd. of Borough of Queens*, 56 N.E. 81 (N.Y. 1900) (cited by Cole); *People ex rel. King v. Gallagher*, 93 N.Y. 438 (1883) (cited by Cole).

discontinue such schools when certain portions of the Consolidated School Law was repealed during the time that Governor Grover Cleveland was in office.<sup>42</sup>

For their part, Davidson and school principal C.E.C. Longyear did all they could to preserve the segregated school system. When Andrews met with the pair in 1931, they tried to justify the need to keep the races separate:

Both the Principal and Mr. Davidson undertook to show the advantages of separate schools some of the reasons being that pupils do better work under their own teachers; contending that this is shown, first, by the curriculum maintained by the Negro high school students at Suffern, where the township of Hillburn sends all of its high school students; secondly, that the Negro teacher understands the peculiarities of the race.<sup>43</sup>

Ultimately, Grandpop's effort to integrate the Hillburn school system fell short of its intended goal. The colored citizens were just not ready to engage in the kind of fight that was necessary to bring about real change. By the 1940s, however, Hillburn *had* changed. Like many other communities with men fighting in World War II, the village saw many of its women—white and colored—working in the area's manufacturing plants.<sup>44</sup> In addition, factories increased production to support the war effort, so people were much less concerned about losing their jobs.<sup>45</sup> Speaking up was then a real option for Hillburn's colored families. Across the United States, and in Hillburn, the 1940s also saw a shift in attitudes about civil rights.<sup>46</sup> Citizens of African descent were much more militant in their push for equal opportunities, especially in education.<sup>47</sup>

By 1943, my grandfather had stepped down as president of Hillburn's NAACP chapter.<sup>48</sup> He was succeeded by Marion

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42. Letter from William T. Andrews, Special Legal Assistant, NAACP, to Ernest E. Cole, Deputy Comm'r & Counsel, N.Y. State Educ. Dep't (Feb. 16, 1931) (on file with author).

43. Report on Visit to Hillburn, *supra* note 10, at 2.

44. See ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 36.

45. See *id.*; see also Sugrue, *Hillburn, Hattiesburg, and Hitler*, *supra* note 29, at 95 (describing the impact of the wartime economy on the civil rights movement in Hillburn).

46. See ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 36

47. See *id.*

48. *Id.*

Van Dunk, who, along with other village leaders, decided to enlist the services of a young NAACP lawyer named Thurgood Marshall.<sup>49</sup> Marshall was in the throes of litigating civil rights cases around the country that would collectively lead to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>50</sup> decision more than a decade later. Marshall's plan sought to enroll one colored student at the white school and, once the child was denied admission, urge colored parents to boycott the Hillburn school system until all children could attend the white school.<sup>51</sup> A colored student named Allen Morgan was selected to enroll in the white school.<sup>52</sup> As predicted, he was denied admission, and the strike against the school district began.<sup>53</sup>

All of the Hillburn colored parents were on board with Marshall's plan and kept their children out of school, just as he had orchestrated.<sup>54</sup> School authorities advised the parents that they were in violation of state law and that there would be serious consequences if they continued their actions, but the parents continued the boycott.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the parents were subpoenaed to appear in family court.<sup>56</sup>

While the pressure mounted on the parents, the school board faced pressure of its own—the citizens formally asked the board to integrate the school system.<sup>57</sup> The board voted to maintain the segregated schools, and the parents appealed to the New York Commissioner of Education.<sup>58</sup> The Commissioner sided with the parents and ordered the segregated school system

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49. *Id.*

50. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

51. See ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 37-39. My father's version of the key facts is as follows:

For decades after the integration of the white school, Hillburn residents have reminisced about the day that Thurgood Marshall padlocked the front doors of the white school. I don't remember the specific event, but I have heard the story from dozens of relatives and friends. Marshall is reported to have said that "if the colored children can't attend the Hillburn Main School, no children will attend," and he padlocked the school's front door.

*Id.* at 38-39.

52. *Id.* at 39.

53. *Id.*

54. See VILLAGE OF HILLBURN: 1893-1993, *supra* note 4, at 30.

55. *Id.*

56. *Id.*

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

in Hillburn be dismantled.<sup>59</sup> Despite the “victory,” segregation continued in an unexpected way.

In October 1943, colored children entered the Hillburn Main School, formerly the “white school,” and discovered only one white child remained.<sup>60</sup> All of the other students had enrolled in schools in neighboring Suffern and Tuxedo.<sup>61</sup> Tuxedo is not far from Hillburn, but it is in another county. The expatriation of the white children was noteworthy—at the time, attendance in a private school or at a public school in another county required parents to pay tuition, and most Hillburn parents, even white parents, were working class or working poor and did not have the money for tuition.<sup>62</sup> Eventually, the white students returned, and the renamed “Hillburn Elementary School” became a K–6 facility until it closed in 1967.<sup>63</sup> My parents enrolled me in kindergarten in Hillburn Elementary School in 1963, and my brother followed me two years later.

I grew up about three blocks from the school, and although the walk to and from the building was not terribly long, the expanse between my father’s educational apartheid experience and my integrated education was vast. Hillburn had been transformed from a small village with complacent and segregated residents into a historically important community because ordinary citizens and extraordinary heroes joined forces to defeat Jim Crow in their small part of the world. Indeed, Countee Cullen, a poet who rose to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance, wrote a poem about the integration struggle in my village. It was called “Hillburn—the Fair,” and it was published in the very popular *The People’s Voice* in New York City. The poem reads:

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59. VILLAGE OF HILLBURN: 1893–1993, *supra* note 4, at 30.

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*; see also ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 40 (analyzing the event).

62. ALEXANDER & ALEXANDER, *supra* note 2, at 40; see also *White Pupils Quit Main Hillburn School After Negroes Are Ordered Admitted; Go To Private Schools*, N.Y. AGE, Oct. 23, 1943, at 1 (news coverage of the event).

63. VILLAGE OF HILLBURN: 1893–1993, *supra* note 4, at 30.

God have pity  
 On such a city  
 Where parent teaches child to hate;  
 God looks down  
 On such a town  
 Where Prejudice the Great  
 Rules drunkenly  
 And evilly  
 What should be Liberty's estate.<sup>64</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the United States, all things truly are possible. In a small village, nestled within the mountains along the New York-New Jersey border, discrimination took root, and generations of people of color were oppressed at the hands of white community leaders who believed it best if the citizens of color were kept in their second-class status. In that same village, the colored people were forced to send their children to school in a sub-standard building ill-equipped to serve the needs of their sons and daughters. Also in that village, one of the most celebrated community leaders was not only the head of the company that employed most of the colored residents, but also the school board president who worked diligently to preserve the segregated school system.

It is also possible in the United States that people—good people—can band together to change the status quo and free colored students from their collective second-class experience. One of those people was my grandfather, Thomas Ulysses Alexander. He was not from Hillburn; he moved there when he married my grandmother, a lifelong resident of the village. He was not beholden to the racist community leaders and was not tolerant of the Jim Crow traditions that existed within the village. He summoned the courage to work with the NAACP to document the systemic educational discrimination endured by the children of Hillburn since the 1800s. His correspondence with the national civil rights organization and his willingness to speak up against injustice were just enough to nudge the needle of change in the direction of integration.

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64. Countee Cullen, *Hillburn—the Fair*, in COUNTEE CULLEN: COLLECTED POEMS 264, 264 (Major Jackson ed., 2013).

Another of those change agents was Thurgood Marshall, a civil rights lawyer with the NAACP and future Justice of the United States Supreme Court. In Hillburn, he saw an opportunity to use the training he had received from legal giants like Charles Hamilton Houston to bring educational parity to the people living in a relatively small community near New York City.

The Hillburn school desegregation case was not a *cause célèbre* that grabbed national headlines. Hillburn was not a community in the South, which was the more common setting for these types of civil rights battles. However, the village had a problem that required these brave men—and others—to wage war on years of ignorance, fear, intolerance, and hatred. They did, and the children of Hillburn, New York were the beneficiaries of their hard work and dedication.

I am one of those beneficiaries. I attended Hillburn Elementary School, a school my father was unable to attend because of the color of his skin, and I owe my opportunity to be educated at Hillburn Elementary School to people like my “Grandpop,” Thomas Alexander, and Thurgood Marshall. Thank you, gentlemen.