CHAPTER 2

“Wait a Minute...I’m a White”

On May 31, 1955, a little more than a year after the *Brown* ruling, the Supreme Court in *Brown II* turned down the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s request for immediate and complete school desegregation in favor of a more gradual approach. The Warren Court delegated the task of deciding the pace of desegregation to local federal judges, requiring only that “a prompt and reasonable start” to desegregation begin “with all deliberate speed.” In the nation, in North Carolina, and in Camden, this ruling resulted in what Peter Irons in *Jim Crow’s Children* (2002) called, “too much deliberation and not enough speed.”

Camden County went with the national reactionary tide that did whatever tactically possible to evade the de facto implementation of school desegregation. In the state both white power brokers and popular sentiment opposed school desegregation. In 1955 the North Carolina General Assembly and Governor Luther H. Hodges backed the education committee recommendation that:

The mixing of races forthwith in the public schools throughout the state cannot be accomplished and should not be attempted. The schools of our state are so intimately related to the customs and feelings of the people of each community that their effective operation is impossible except in conformity with community attitudes. The committee feels that a compulsory mixing of the races in our schools on a statewide basis and without regard to local conditions and assignment factors other than race would alienate
public support of the schools to such an extent that they could not be operated successfully.

In addition to supporting the committee report, the General Assembly passed a resolution to the Supreme Court denouncing the *Brown* decisions.

Despite North Carolina’s initial reactionary stance, Tar Heel politicians and businessmen alike realized that the inflammatory rhetoric used by some southern states could “harm the state’s reputation for racial moderation, forestall new economic development, and invite judicial intervention in the operation of the schools.” As a result, North Carolina, as it had historically done, took a more “moderate” approach to race relations and education. North Carolina won national acclaim as a beacon of moderation as its white leaders promoted a code of civility that put a premium on peaceful race relations and managed incremental change—a policy called the “progressive mystique,” by some skeptics. This strategy of gradualism resulted in an integration rate of North Carolina schools even lower than the diehard states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas.

Of the number of obstructionist plans attempted, the Pearsall Plan, named after North Carolina’s speaker of the House Thomas J. Pearsall, was most significant. In July 1956, in an extra session of the General Assembly convened to deal with the issue of school desegregation, the assembly adopted the Pearsall Plan. This legislation basically stated that parents not wishing to send their children to school with children of another race were not required to do so. A legal tactic included in the plan shifted the power to implement desegregation to the local school boards. This was in step with the national strategy to avoid federal class-action suits. Like many rural, conservative counties across the South, the all-white Camden school board welcomed this maneuver that gave them control over the pace of implementing desegregation.

The *Greensboro Daily News* wrote in an editorial supporting the legislation: “North Carolina wants no violence and North Carolina wants no abandonment of its public school system. The path is tortuous and narrow. But with moderation, goodwill, understanding, and wise, sound, and far-seeing statesmanship, we can and shall tread it safely.” The Pearsall Plan became an amendment to the state constitution by popular referendum in September 1956.

Despite the outspoken resistance to desegregating with “all deliberate speed,” moderate Terry Sanford ran on a gubernatorial platform that made public education his top priority. Sanford publicly supported *Brown v. Board of Education* and sent his children to integrated schools. In 1960 North