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## **Dabney S. Lancaster Community College**

### **About Dabney Stewart Lancaster**

In the summer of 1967, the College was renamed Dabney S. Lancaster Community College, honoring the prominent Virginia educator and long-time resident of the College's service area.

Dabney Stewart Lancaster was a graduate of the University of Virginia where he joined Delta Tau Delta Fraternity and studied Mathematics, French, and Latin. After graduating in 1910, he taught briefly at Chamberlayne School for Boys where he also coached football. In 1913, he attended Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) where he completed graduate work in animal sciences and taught French. Lancaster graduated from VPI in the spring of 1915 and taught for a short period at the institution until he entered another graduate studies program at the University of Missouri. He completed this program in 1917 and soon after returned to VPI as Associate Professor in the Agricultural College where he taught from 1917-1919.

In 1923, Lancaster joined the Virginia State Board of Education and in 1925, he was named Secretary of the State Board of Education and Assistant Superintendent. In 1929, Lancaster took a job as Dean of Men at the University of Alabama and stayed for more than eight years. In the spring of 1937 he returned to Virginia and took a position at Sweet Briar College.

Dr. Lancaster was appointed State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1941. In 1942, he completed his Doctorate of Laws (LLD) at the University of Richmond. As Superintendent, Lancaster pushed to reform education in a way that would better most school systems and in 1945 fought and won in the General Assembly for more money to be allotted for public schools.

On July 1, 1946, Lancaster was appointed President of the State Teachers College at Farmville, now Longwood University. He would remain in this position until his retirement in 1955.

After his retirement, Dr. Lancaster took over as President of Sweet Briar College and joined St. Andrews Church in Clifton Forge where he preached sermons while the preacher was on leave. In 1956, he was asked to head the newly formed State Council for Higher Education, which forced him to leave Sweet Briar College. He would serve on this council for eight years, during which time he earned another LLD degree from the College of William and Mary (1958). After his service to the State Council for Higher Education was completed in 1968, he would serve on the Madison College Board; the Stuart Hall Board in Staunton, Virginia; and the Executive Committee of the Virginia Historical Society.

Dr. Lancaster retired to Bath County where he served on the school board. Over his lifetime, Dr. Lancaster served on the boards of Madison College (currently James Madison University), Sweet Briar College, Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School.

He passed away at the age of 85 years of age on March 11, 1975. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Longwood University, <http://libguides.longwood.edu/dabneyslancaster>

### **Brown versus Board of Education**

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), was a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that U.S. state laws establishing racial segregation in public schools are unconstitutional, even if the segregated schools are otherwise equal in quality. Handed down on May 17, 1954, the Court's unanimous (9–0) decision stated that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal", and therefore violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. However, the decision's 14 pages did not spell out any sort of method for ending racial segregation in schools, and the Court's second decision in *Brown II* (349 U.S. 294 (1955)) only ordered states to desegregate "with all deliberate speed".<sup>2</sup>

The case originated in 1951 when the public-school district in **Topeka, Kansas**, refused to enroll the daughter of local black resident Oliver Brown at the school closest to their home, instead requiring her to ride a bus to a segregated black elementary school farther away. No bus service was provided for white students, who were required to walk to their schools, and the physical facilities and teaching at the black schools were substantially equal to the white schools. The Browns and twelve other local black families in similar situations then filed a class action lawsuit in U.S. federal court against the Topeka Board of Education, alleging that its segregation policy was unconstitutional. A three-judge panel of the U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas rendered a verdict against the Browns, relying on the precedent of the Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which the Court had ruled that racial segregation was not in itself a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause if the facilities in question were otherwise equal, a doctrine that had come to be known as "separate but equal". The Browns, then represented by NAACP chief counsel Thurgood Marshall, appealed to the Supreme Court, which agreed to hear the case.

The Court's decision in *Brown* partially overruled *Plessy v. Ferguson* by declaring that the "separate but equal" notion was unconstitutional for American public schools and educational facilities. It paved the way for integration and was a major victory of the Civil Rights Movement, and a model for many future impact litigation cases. In the Southern United States, especially the "Deep South", where racial segregation was deeply entrenched, the reaction to *Brown* among most white people was "noisy and stubborn". Many Southern governmental and political leaders embraced a plan known as "Massive Resistance", created by Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd, in order to frustrate attempts to force them to de-segregate their school systems. Four years later, in the case of *Cooper v. Aaron*, the Court reaffirmed its ruling in *Brown*, and explicitly stated that state officials and legislators had no power to nullify its ruling.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, [347 U.S. 483](#) (1954)

<sup>3</sup> *Wikipedia*

### Gray Commission

The **Commission on Public Education**, known as the **VPEC** or **Gray Commission** (after its chair, Virginia state senator Garland Gray), was a 32-member commission established by Governor of Virginia Thomas B. Stanley on August 23, 1954 to study the effects of the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* issued on May 17, 1954 and May 31, 1955 (p. 311).<sup>4</sup>

Even before establishing the commission, Stanley had announced his opposition to the *Brown* decision. Stanley was allied with U.S. Senator, Harry F. Byrd, head of the Byrd Organization that had long dominated politics in the state, and who as time passed would become more and more staunchly against racial integration, which he rationalized on anti-miscegenation grounds.

The day after *Brown I*, Stanley had called for "cool heads, calm study, and sound judgment" and said he would write to Byrd, who at first was neither defiant nor conciliatory. But within days, the governor's office was deluged with letters expressing fears about communist plots (this being the McCarthy era and early Cold War) and race mixing. Stanley assured those citizens that schools would remain segregated for the 1954–1955 school year.

On June 20, 1954, twenty legislators from Southside Virginia met in a Petersburg firehouse, called together by state Senator Garland Gray (in whose district the firehouse lay) and declared themselves "unalterably opposed" to racial integration in the schools. They included U.S. Congressmen Watkins Abbitt and Bill Tuck, as well as state senators Gray, Mills Godwin and Albertis Harrison. Four days later many fourth District citizens descended onto the state capitol.

On June 25, 1954, after meeting with other Southern governors in Richmond (and learning about the Petersburg firehouse meeting, but about two months before announcing this commission's membership), Stanley had vowed, "I shall use every legal means at my command to continue segregated schools in Virginia". Section 140 of the State Constitution had specifically provided for racial segregation in public schools. Stanley now proposed repealing Section 129 of the State Constitution, which required the state provide free public schools. Radical segregationists proposed to close public schools to avoid integration, which upset other Virginians.

Because all 32 of Governor Stanley's appointees on August 30, 1954 were legislators (13 senators and 19 delegates), all were male Caucasians. The Virginia Council of Churches had urged Stanley to appoint commissioners of both races, but he announced that a legislative commission would be better because legislators would have to consider and act upon its proposals. Republican Ted Dalton had also called for a nonpartisan biracial commission to work out a desegregation program for Virginia. State superintendent of public instruction Dowell Howard expressed his hope that the problem could be solved gradually.

Stanley's appointees were weighted towards those districts with the largest black communities by percentage, which thus would be most affected by the Supreme Court's rulings. Thus, the 4th and 5th U.S. Congressional districts (Abbitt's and Tuck's) accounted for ten members and the 1st U.S. Congressional district (then represented by ex-football coach Edward J. Robeson Jr.) had five members. All three of those districts were Byrd Organization stronghold and had many counties with more black than white residents, although poll taxes, Jim Crow laws and other tactic restricted blacks' voting power

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<sup>4</sup> E. Griffith Dodson, *The General Assembly of Virginia 1939-1960* (Richmond: Virginia State Library 1961)

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(sometimes those southern and eastern Virginia counties were referred to as "Black Belt"). By that autumn white leaders in those affected communities had formed the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties, which would radicalize their response.

The commission's first meeting was held on September 13, 1954; members elected Gray chairman. Gray then selected an eleven-member executive committee. The full commission decided that all its sessions, as well as those of the executive committee would be closed to the public, although it could hold public hearings.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that Dabney Lancaster was **not** a member of the Commission.

### **Dabney Lancaster's Work in Virginia**

Dabney Lancaster was a well-respected educator in the Commonwealth of Virginia. His time as State Superintendent of Public Schools and President of Longwood College brought numerous accolades including an editorial in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* on his retirement announcement from Longwood which said, "The Commonwealth can ill afford to spare the services of a man so admirably trained to contribute constructively to its educational progress."<sup>6</sup>

"We think we have had great leaders to president of Longwood College, One, Dr. Dabney Lancaster, now very unpopular because he advocated and I think, made himself equalization of salaries between fought tooth and nail for the white and Negro teachers."<sup>7</sup>

The Gray Plan without its local option feature was just another plan to avoid integration.

The fear among massive resisters was that some communities would opt for local option. That fear was given credibility when the Arlington County School Board approved its plan to begin integration.<sup>8</sup>

Prominent men of moderate persuasion such as Colgate Darden and Dr. Dabney Lancaster, former State Superintendent of Public Instruction and president emeritus of Longwood College, lent their good names in support of the Gray Plan. It was their understanding that local option was to be an inseparable part of the plan. Such an understanding worked well for the organization as they campaigned for a constitutional convention.<sup>9</sup>

"Dabney Lancaster led the drive to pass the Gray Commission recommendation for a constitutional convention to amend section 141... Lancaster campaigned for local-option responses to desegregation and against state control over schools even if that meant tolerating integration in some localities. Despite Dabney's preference for local-option, the Gray Commission plan strongly predicted

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<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>6</sup> Richmond Times-Dispatch, *Editorial*, Sunday, June 15, 1954.

<sup>7</sup> As cited in Spear, Hugh W. (May 1968). A HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION OF TOPEKA WITH PRESENT AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS. US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

<sup>8</sup> Dabney, Virginius. *Across the Years: Memories of a Virginian*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, Bob. *They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951-1964*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1965.

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school closings, private education alternatives funded with publicly financed tuition grants, and widespread resistance to the federal court orders."<sup>10</sup>

This legislation was not supported unanimously. Moderates, including embarrassed members of the Referendum Information Center such as **Lancaster** and former governor Colgate W. Darden, Jr., as well as many members of the State Board of Education, were opposed to the Stanley Plan's fund-withholding provisions. In the end, however, black-belt legislators and the Byrd organization won an unusually close vote: 59 to 39 in the House of Delegates and 21 to 17 in the Senate (Gates, p. 173; Wilkinson, p. 133).<sup>11/12</sup> Virginius Dabney would conclude that "the racial attitudes of most whites in Virginia's black belt, comprising only a small fraction of the state's population, had been imposed on the entire Commonwealth" (pp. 537-538).<sup>13</sup>

Lancaster said, "The Supreme Court, in its decision on May 17, said that no child should be denied admission to a school on the grounds of race. **The Court did not say that integration should be enforced.** If then we are not to have enforced integration, there must be some alternative. The Gray Plan provided such an alternative. We believe in self-government. The Gray Plan allowed each city, county, and town the choice between full integration, partial, or no integration. If full integration is desired, no constitutional change and no legislation are required. If partial integration is acceptable, the assignment plan will meet the need in most cases. If there is to be assurance that there will be no forced integration, tuition is needed in addition to the assignment plan" (p.123).<sup>14</sup>

In 1956, Dr. Lancaster, Director of the State Referendum Information Center, spoke of the Gray Plan. The Gray Plan's "**report proceeded from the belief of its members that the Brown decision was bad law and wrongheaded social policy. "No one dreamed that it had any application to segregation in the public schools," the Commission explained of the 14th Amendment's origins. The Brown case, the Commission asserted, "uprooted the law long laid down and followed by eminent judges"**"<sup>15</sup>

Speaking in support of the position advanced by Darden, Dr. Dabney Lancaster warned the General Assembly that "**the people of Virginia are not going to stand for the closing of schools. Some might be closed in some areas, but even there the people will stand for it only a brief period**"<sup>16</sup>

The State Referendum Information Center was established in Richmond on December 9, 1955. Its purpose was to create public awareness of the need to vote in favor of tuition grants. Dr. Dabney Lancaster, a widely respected moderate who was a president emeritus of Longwood College and a former state superintendent of public instruction, was named its director. The efforts of the center were supported by most of Virginia's political elite, including the entire Byrd organization, by the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties, and by nearly all of the state's white presses. Lancaster and other leaders of the center issued a statement indicating that the amendment of Section 141 would in

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<sup>10</sup> University of Virginia, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilrightstv/glossary/people-014.html>

<sup>11</sup> Gates, R. L. (1962). *The Making of Massive Resistance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, J. H. (1968). *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

<sup>13</sup> Dabney, V. (1971). *Virginia, The New Dominion*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

<sup>14</sup> Lee, S. R. (2017). *Trails and Trailblazers*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing Co.

<sup>15</sup> University of Virginia, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilrightstv/glossary/topic-009.html>

<sup>16</sup> Hershman, J. H. (August 1978). *A RUMBLING IN THE MUSEUM: The Opponents of Virginia's Massive Resistance*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia

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no way affect the Gray Commission's recommendation that localities be allowed to determine the degree to which they would integrate, if at all<sup>17/18</sup> (Dabney, pp. 533-534; Gates, pp. 76-82).

**“What the state might put up for private schools won’t begin to cover the costs,”** said Dr. Lancaster referring to the Gray Commission proposal to amend the State Constitution so that public funds could be used for private schooling by those who refuse to accept integration (no page).<sup>19</sup>

As one who has worked for 30 years to assure equal facilities for white and Negro, Dr. Lancaster said the Supreme Court decree has created grave problems in Southern States which hurt both races. Citing possible consequences if public funds are made available for private schooling, **Dr. Lancaster said many children will not go to school at all, and the state would be faced with the problem of policing standards of education in the private schools** (no page).<sup>20</sup>

**“Some of the Gray proposals have merit, but we must go slowly in working out the problem,”** Dr. Lancaster said (no page).<sup>21</sup>

### **Dabney Lancaster’s Comments**

As former president of Longwood College, Dr. Lancaster **“spoke against abandoning public schools but also declared that integration would set education back half a century. “We'll fight it from the housetops, from the street corners, in every possible way,”** he said. **“We are going to maintain our way of life”** (p. 82).<sup>22</sup>

A president of Virginia’s prestigious state-run Longwood College, **Dabney S. Lancaster even proclaimed that black children were happier in separate, albeit inferior, public schools “due to the fact that the Negro race has a fine sense of humor”**<sup>23</sup> (p. 502).

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<sup>17</sup> Dabney, V. (1971). *Virginia, The New Dominion*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

<sup>18</sup> Gates, Robbins L. (1964). *The Making of Massive Resistance: Virginia's Politics of Public-School Desegregation, 1954-1956*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>19</sup> *Dr. Lancaster Asks Assembly to “Go Slow” in Amending State Laws for Segregation*, 1956. *Virginian Review*, Covington, VA.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Wolters, R. (1984). *The Burden of Brown: Thirty Years of Desegregation*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

<sup>23</sup> Kluger, R. (2004). *Simple justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

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“On June 7, 1955 citizens of Prince Edward gathered in Longwood College’s Jarman Auditorium to discuss the county’s response to the Brown decisions. The meeting was called by the Farmville PTA and organized and orchestrated by the Defenders of State Sovereignty. Many of the speakers believed that the county should combat school integration at all costs, even going so far as to advocate closing the public schools. One of the notable speakers was Longwood’s President and the former State Superintendent for Public Instruction, Dr. Dabney Lancaster. He served as Longwood’s President from 1946, until his retirement in 1955. Lancaster was not on the organizers’ speaking docket, but felt moved by a previous discussion of school closure. **He argued that, “we could not afford to close the schools, that would be bad for whites and that we could not afford to have Negroes running in the streets.” Lancaster’s remarks concerned citizens on both sides of the issue, because he was seen as sensible, educated, and respected man in the community. He was without question a man of the public-school system**”<sup>24</sup>

### Dabney Lancaster’s Tributes

“It was he, more than anyone else, who clinched a two-year-college for this area by pointing out that Clifton Forge and Covington were the only two cities in Virginia then more than thirty miles away from an established institution of higher learning. This fact persuaded the state to participate in funding a two-year college, with area residents pledging \$100,000. The College was affiliated with Virginia Tech prior to the establishment of the community college system.

Along with many others, we shall miss the companionship and conversation with Dr. Lancaster as we watched suns setting across the Alleghanies from his porch and lawn on the bluff above the Cowpasture at Millboro Springs.”<sup>25</sup>

Dr. Dabney Stewart Lancaster died on Tuesday at 85 after a lifetime of furthering Southern education, and this column lost a valued correspondent because he was a close observer of trivialities and oddities that he often passed along.

My first encounter with him came when Gov. James Price, the anti-organization governor, nearing the end of his term in 1941 appointed Dr. Lancaster, then executive secretary of Sweet Briar College, to become state superintendent of public instruction. Colgate Darden, an organization man, had been elected as governor to take office in January 1942, and I wondered about Dr. Lancaster’s chances of being retained.

I got Dr. Lancaster on the phone, and, after getting other information that I needed, I asked him the \$64 question: “Did you confer with Mr. Darden before you accepted the job?” It was a proper question and I got a proper answer: “None of your damn business.” It was said pleasantly and was the beginning of a long and very pleasant friendship.

A few years ago, he sent me this rhymed commentary, which he found among the papers left by his father when his father died in 1902. I printed it once before, and I’ve asked on several occasions to

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<sup>24</sup> Gammon, D. (2016). Longwood College During the Civil Rights Era, 1955-1968. Farmville: Longwood University.

<sup>25</sup> The Daily Review, 1975. Obituary.

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reprint it. This I do now as a tribute to a departed friend who recognized the importance of unimportant things:

*The world grows old, and older yet.  
The older it grows, the worse things gets.  
Workers won't work, won't even try.  
Sellers won't sell, buyers won't buy.  
Rulers won't rule, shoppers won't shop.  
Fighters won't fight, the Irish won't stop.  
The wicked won't worry, the pious won't pray.  
Crops won't grow, hens won't lay.  
The world grows old, and older still  
As it always has and always will.  
In spite of it all, we do pretty well – And here comes spring, so what the hell!*

Dr. Lancaster has gone on, as all of us must, but his memory lingers with his friends and his name will live on in the Dabney Lancaster Community College at Clifton Forge. He did his work seriously, but never lost his sense of humor<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Houston, C. *Richmond News Leader*, March 14, 1975