1. Briars of Discrimination

Injustice will not forever be borne silently.

W. B. Harvey

In an undated speech, Rev. J. A. De Laine wrote, “A long story is behind the first of the five cases [the Briggs case] which caused the courts to reverse ‘Separate-But-Equal.’ The story takes its beginning in 1946 and continues until the present day. On the banks of the Santee River in South Carolina, where the Santee Hydro-Electric Dam was built, colored children were not transported to and from school like other schoolchildren. Neither did they have comfortable buildings where they could warm their little bodies when they arrived at school. In the Jordan section of Clarendon County, the backed-up waters flooded some of the bridges and thus colored children had to paddle a boat across the water and walk the rest of the way to their inferior school. A minister of the community tried every possible source to have this condition adjusted.” Rev. De Laine—the man I usually called Daddy—was that minister.

Clarendon

In 1946 Clarendon was one of the poorest counties of South Carolina, which in turn was one of the nation’s poorest states. Nothing of particular significance had happened in Clarendon County’s 607 square miles since 1780 when Gen. Francis Marion (the Swamp Fox of Revolutionary War history) and his brigade ambushed British troops on River Road near the Santee River.

More than two-thirds of Clarendon’s approximately 31,500 residents, including our family, were descended from slave women. Mostly poor and uneducated, the majority of these people of color lived in the lower part of the county, many on farms that belonged to descendants of slave owners. Large numbers of the population whose ancestors had been held in involuntary bondage dwelled in unpainted, two- or three-room cabins that sometimes sheltered families of six or more. They tilled the same soil and grew the same crops as their ancestors had done a century earlier. The children helped the adults with farm chores, enabling families to survive from one year to the next. Only in winter, when the ground
lay fallow, were children free to go to school. Even then the farm chores had to be done before leaving for school, as well as upon returning. Rain or shine, summer or winter, cows had to be milked, hogs fed, and eggs collected.

The primary crop was cotton, with tobacco being a close second. Paid a penny a pound, expert cotton pickers might top three hundred pounds a day. Most laborers, however, didn’t make it to the two-hundred-pound mark, so they took home less than two dollars for a day’s work. Earlier in the year, a family might have earned another hundred or so dollars from tying tar-laden tobacco leaves or doing other equally dirty work.

Life was a little better for the few black people who were landowners. With a little help, a lot of hard work, and the best possible circumstances, a husband and wife might harvest six or seven bales of cotton by the end of the season. The sale of that cotton might gross a little more than two thousand dollars for almost seven months of backbreaking plowing, seeding, chopping, weeding, and picking. From this money all expenses had to be met and debts paid.

Most black people who didn’t labor in the fields did other menial tasks, such as loading trucks, sawing wood, cooking, cleaning, or caring for children. They
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were not prepared to do any other work because the education of practically all black people ended before seventh grade.

Clarendon’s white people owned most of the land and the businesses. They were the money lenders, as well as the collectors. They were the lawmakers, the judges, and the law enforcers. They were also the ones who were permitted to vote in the Democratic Party primary, who were served first in stores, who were allowed to go to toilets at gas stations, and whose children could ride to school on buses. That was the way things had been for generations, and the entire social system—economic, political, educational, and customary—was designed to keep them that way, preserving what some people called the “time-honored southern way of life.”

For black people, however, that way of life fostered a festering discontent that was sown by the thorny briars of discrimination, fertilized with the manure of disenfranchisement, and kept warm by the heat of an inner rage generated each time a fully grown man was called “boy.” That discontent germinated in fields and forests, at cookstoves and washtubs, on wagons, in rowboats, and beside
army jeeps. Nurtured by the anger of war veterans who were denied the democratic rights for which they had fought, cultivated by the frustration of individuals wronged by an unjust legal system, and watered by tears of men and women who didn’t know where their ancestors had come from—but who knew without a doubt that their children were destined for a dead-end future—the discontent grew until it ripened into *Briggs et al. v. Elliott et al.*, a school desegregation lawsuit.

**A State of Education?**

Clarendon’s 6,500 black schoolchildren attended about sixty ramshackle one-, two-, three-, or four-room structures and three or four larger ones that were divided among more than thirty independent school districts. Each school district was under the auspices of an officially appointed trustee board, composed of white men who had little interest in the shabby black schools. As in other areas of the South, another set of men—black and self-appointed—actually saw to the welfare of the schools. These volunteer trustees had to beg for every penny of assistance they got from the official trustees. More often than not, their requests for aid to the indigent schools were denied by the officials with declarations such as “I’m real sorry, but y’all’s school already got as much as we can spare.”

![This unidentified, two-room elementary school building, with its small windows and separate classroom doors, was typical of many black schools before 1951. The foundation pillars that supported the structure may have been bricks or logs. Note the absence of a chimney. Courtesy of the De Laine Family Collection](image)
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When cold winter air seeped through the cracks between a classroom’s floorboards, the classroom teacher or the principal had to see that a fire was lit. If there was no wood for a fire, students were sent to collect and cut firewood. If educational supplies were needed, the instructors had to be resourceful, inventive, and willing to purchase school supplies from their meager monthly salaries.

Two hundred years earlier, in 1740, South Carolina’s legislators banned education of black people in an effort to curb the threat of slave rebellions. When the slaves were emancipated more than a century later, practically all of them were unable to read. During the brief period of Reconstruction, many gained a rudimentary education in free public schools. But, too soon, political power shifted to politicians who had no regard for universal education. They drastically reduced all education funding and virtually eliminated centralized control of the state’s schools.

In 1895 South Carolina adopted a constitution that made racial segregation mandatory. Around the same time, the United States Supreme Court condoned the practice of segregation with its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Racial separation of public facilities was declared lawful if the facilities were equal. With the practice of “separate but equal” thus given legal status, Jim Crow laws and Black Codes further disenfranchised African Americans in the South. Deprived of practically all rights as United States citizens, black people were denied a voice in their government, relegated to the fringes of society, and essentially stripped of any recourse for justice. Using the crutch of “separate but equal,” South Carolina’s Act of Separation went a step further and made it a crime for black and white children to attend the same schools.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, practically all South Carolina schools were poorly equipped and in a state of disrepair. White politicians saw little need to educate black children who were destined to become laborers and farmers. So, as the years passed, the racially separate school systems became less and less equal. Practically all support for black education came from private sources: philanthropists, missionaries, fraternal organizations, and churches. Erected on private property, even the school buildings for black children were paid for with money raised largely (sometimes completely) by parents. Some philanthropies, such as the Julius Rosenwald Fund, encouraged both parental and public support by requiring cash contributions from black communities to build schools and agreements from the white-run school boards to operate them. These places for the education of black children came to be considered part of the public school system, despite their having been built on private land with non-governmental money. Nevertheless the public school boards supported them grudgingly.

Academic performance by the state’s children lagged behind that of the rest of the nation, with black children faring far worse than white children. In an effort to improve matters, school attendance was made compulsory in 1921. Of
course no attempt was made to enforce the law for black children; they had too few schools and no means of transportation to get to them. Three years later the state’s legislature passed the 6-0-1 law, with the hope that education would improve in poor school districts. The state would pay for six months of school if a school district paid for one additional month of instruction. There was no required contribution from the county, as represented by the zero. The 6-0-1 plan also facilitated consolidation of schools and provided assistance to purchase school buses.

As a result of this law, numerous small schools were abandoned and replaced by brick or stone buildings to which rural children were transported by bus. Once there the students enjoyed the luxuries of indoor toilets, drinking fountains, central heating, and yet-to-be-filled libraries. Janitors, paid by public funds, kept the school buildings in good condition, and lunchroom aides served hot lunches. The results were good. Attendance rose, fewer children repeated grades, and not as many students dropped out of school. Only one thing prevented the new system from being ideal.

That one thing? The authorities didn’t consolidate, or even improve, the black schools. Although the number of black schools in Clarendon County had increased during the twenty years following the passage of 6-0-1, conditions remained essentially unchanged. Black schools were still dilapidated, small, and poorly lit. White children rode buses to school; black children didn’t. White schools had janitors; black schools often didn’t even have fuel to make fires.

By 1944 most Clarendon school districts had increased the length of the school year for black children from three to at least six months, with a couple of districts making it as long as seven and a half months. But not one of Clarendon’s black schools was open for eight and a half months—as the white schools were. Many rural children didn’t begin school until they were nine or ten years old, when they were able to walk several miles along the unpaved roads that, depending on the weather, were either muddy or dusty. Even then they couldn’t get to school if the weather was bad or if farmwork had to be done. The spotty attendance resulted in few students being promoted annually and some first-grade students being teenagers.

In their overcrowded classrooms, students often sat squeezed together on long benches behind equally long tables. If many children were in school, they just pushed closer together so everyone could have a seat. On winter days body heat supplemented the warmth from stoves that were stuffed with leaves and twigs collected by male students or filled with wood cut by fathers or maybe even stoked with a little coal bought by teachers. Most schoolbooks, rented from the district, were dog-eared discards from the white schools. If the books were new (which wasn’t often), they were stamped “FOR USE IN COLORED SCHOOLS.” Apparently those books had information that was forbidden to white children.
South Carolina’s segregated facilities for education were far from equal and everyone knew it. For example, practically every penny generated for education in Clarendon County was used for the education of white children. State funds for white teachers’ salaries and other educational needs were supplemented by local money. On the other hand, the salaries of Clarendon’s black teachers were paid solely by the state. No public money was allocated for supplies in black schools, and black school budgets had to include student fees to pay for essentials such as brooms, coal, and chalk. Many white people didn’t think black people deserved equality—either of school facilities or of teacher salaries. A clipping from a June 1943 issue of the Sumter Daily Item included the statement “The white taxpayers will, soon or late, conclude that they cannot carry the great burden of sustaining a school system for 814,000 colored people whose relative contribution to the tax fund is small.”

Although the economy of Clarendon County depended on the labor of black people and although its black students outnumbered white students by a ratio of three to one, in 1945 the county’s white school property was valued at more than four and a half times that of black school property. The previous year the county’s black schools received a combined grand total of $19.00 from public funds for “new buildings / building alteration / grounds.” Also in that year county spending for fuel, water, light, power, and janitorial supplies at black schools was $300. Averaged out among the 67 black schools, the amount came to a little less than $4.50 per school. County records for the following year, show that $51.00 of the budget for black schools was spent on “wages, operation and repair” of school buses, although the county operated no buses for black children! The sum worked out to less than a penny per student. In contrast an average of $8.99 per child was spent on transportation for white students in the same year.

Another thing that South Carolina’s General Assembly did when it passed 6-0-1 in 1924 was to establish a four-tiered salary scale for teachers based on both gender and race. Salaries of white males were at the top; those of black males were less than half those of white females; and black women were at the bottom. In 1940 the average yearly salary for the 2,915 classroom teachers in 1,758 white schools was $1,067. During the same year the average pay for the 5,780 teachers in 2,343 black schools was $535. The situation was similar in other southern states.

When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled favorably on a Virginia salary equalization lawsuit in 1940, South Carolina’s legislators publicly announced that no one could force them to equalize black teachers’ salaries. To emphasize their stand, they approved salary supplements for white teachers and completely ignored the black educators. Knowing that South Carolina’s white people did not take kindly to the idea of equal salaries, the black leaders of the statewide black teachers’ organization refused to press for salary equity. State education authorities even
sent representatives to the black teachers’ meetings to discourage black teachers from suing, and the black association’s leader cautioned members, “These white folks aren’t going to let you make as much money as they make. You’re a fool if you try to get them to do it. All you gonna do is to get fired.” Only after electing new leaders was the teachers’ association able to engage the NAACP to file a lawsuit for equal salaries.

The South Carolina teachers won two lawsuits with favorable decisions by Judge J. Waties Waring in the federal district court. After his 1945 ruling that tiered salary scales were discriminatory, South Carolina’s lawmakers had to find a way to make salaries uniform. Using the premise that white teachers were better trained than black teachers, the decision was made to base state aid for salaries on individual qualifications. Under the new rules, each teacher would be placed in a class (from I to a low of V) determined by education and given a grade (from A to D) according to achievement on the National Teachers Examination. Within that framework their final salaries would be determined according to years of teaching experience. A situation should no longer exist in which elementary school teacher salaries averaged $998 for white males, $856 for white females, $411 for black males, and $372 for black females.

Much discussion preceded adoption of the new certification standards. A March 27, 1946, article in Columbia’s State (South Carolina’s major newspaper), quoted Senator W. B. Harvey of Beaufort as saying, “If we pass this . . . and the Negroes fail to qualify for higher salaries, I warn you, they will claim they were given unequal educational facilities. They will say . . . give us schools equal to yours . . . and they’ll say it in court and the courts will sustain them.”

The senator also publicly acknowledged, “The real reason for this . . . is to set up, by a legalized method, a standard by which . . . the majority of . . . white teachers can qualify for higher salaries, and the Negroes cannot, thus legalizing a difference in their salaries.” Then, accurately foretelling the future, he advised, “Injustice will not forever be borne silently. The day is not far distant, if we don’t correct injustices, when the Negro will try to correct them at the ballot box.”

It wasn’t just the conditions of school buildings and teacher’s salaries that kept African Americans in Clarendon and the rest of South Carolina uneducated. Transportation was a major problem. Often the rural students couldn’t get to school to take advantage of the meager learning opportunities. Black students who graduated from one of Clarendon’s elementary schools could continue their education only by attending a distant high school, one perhaps as much as ten miles away. With no means of transportation, students needed to board in town. Most families couldn’t afford that expense. Some young people tried walking to high school, finishing their chores before dawn, then taking the straightest route to the school, cutting across fields along the way. On days when the fields were too muddy, they walked along the road. School buses carrying white children splashed mud on them as they passed. Then, adding insult to injury, the young
riders—filled with scorn learned from their parents (and perhaps bored with the monotonous, bumpy rides)—diverted themselves by trying to hit the walking black children with spit or soda-bottle caps while yelling the most degrading epithets they knew. By the time the black students got to school, after as much as an hour and a half of walking, they were late, dirty, tired, and angry. After school they walked home where evening chores awaited. Most young people soon gave up the quest for more education.

State authorities knew their failure to provide black children with school bus transportation was discriminatory. When the topic of school buses was considered in the state senate in 1943, Senator Harvey advised, “Transportation is the one most vulnerable spot we have [regarding] discrimination against Negroes. . . . It takes the same muscular effort for a colored boy to walk three miles to school as a white. . . . We can get around the difference in teacher salaries on the basis of certification of fitness. . . . But on school bus transportation, as an attorney I could not file an answer to a charge of discrimination.”

A considerable number of rural black parents worried about school transportation for their children and often talked over the problem with each other. In school the teachers thought about it, although rarely voicing their anguish. On Sundays the preachers—sometimes teachers themselves—generally mentioned the problem only while praying for God to “give us the strength to carry on.” There seemed to be no outside solution to the problem so, at several places in the state, groups of parents addressed the problem by pooling resources and providing their own transportation for their children.

**The Primary Gate**

The matter of voting rights was as important to black leaders as the condition of the children’s education. Like most southern states, South Carolina was overwhelmingly Democratic. As a consequence, the outcome of every general election was predetermined by the outcome of the Democratic Party’s primary election. However, black people were not allowed to vote in the party’s primary elections and, therefore, had no voice in government. A similar situation existed in other southern states. Lonnie E. Smith, a black man, sued for the right to vote in the Democratic Party’s primary elections in Texas. On April 3, 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Texas Democratic Party could not exclude black voters from participating in its primary elections. Because it was governed by a number of state regulations, the party was ruled to be acting as an arm of the state.

South Carolina’s white people were angry. They rebelliously declared their Democratic Party had excluded black people from primary elections since the 1890s, and they vowed to never open the elections to them. Immediately after the Texas ruling, the South Carolina governor, Olin D. Johnston, announced, “History has taught us that we must keep our white Democratic primaries pure and unadulterated.” In a rallying cry, he declared, “We South Carolinians will
Before

use the necessary methods to retain white supremacy in our primaries and to safeguard the homes and happiness of our people.... White supremacy will be maintained."

Hell-bent on keeping the state's black people from having a voice in government, Governor Johnston promptly recommended that South Carolina's laws be made foolproof enough for the Democratic Party to circumvent the Court's ruling. So, eleven days after the Supreme Court's decision, South Carolina's General Assembly met in a special six-day session, and the lawmakers proved their expertise in manipulating the law. In a concentrated and coordinated affirmation of the governor's declaration, more than 140 state laws that regulated either the Democratic Party or its primary elections were repealed. The action allowed the party to operate as a bona fide private club, making it exempt from the Supreme Court's ruling. By the seventh day, the legislators' work was done. Presumably they rested.

Summerton

Before the massive gates of the Santee Dam were closed in 1941 and the rising waters formed the new Lake Marion, one of Clarendon's borders was the Santee River. Ten miles north of the river lay an insignificant little town called Summerton. At the time it didn't even have a traffic light. Appearing as a tiny speck on the South Carolina map, Summerton was about equidistant from Columbia and Charleston, the state's largest cities. Of the three incorporated towns in the county, Summerton was the second largest, with about 1,500 individuals residing inside its official boundaries. The homes of most black “townspeople” were just beyond the town limits. The rest of the area’s population lived up to nine miles from town—near hamlets and villages with names like Davis Crossroads, Davis Station, and Silver.

Three black schools fell within Summerton's school district. The buildings were erected in 1935 or later, after parents raised enough money to “qualify” for supplementary public funds. All three schools accommodated the elementary grades, but only the ten-room Scott’s Branch School offered high school classes for black students. It was built just outside the town limits after the old four-room school was accidentally destroyed by fire in 1935.

In 1946 Scott’s Branch had real desks, not tables like the other two schools. The desks were the old-fashioned kind with a fold-up seat attached to the front of a metal frame and a desktop attached behind. Purchased from the white schools after being discarded, they were covered with ink stains and carved initials. Their joints were so loose that a child using the desk had trouble writing when the child on the attached seat moved. Long boards were suspended between two desks when there weren't enough seats. To serve its six-hundred-plus students, the school had two outhouse toilets, each with four or five seats. The single schoolyard pump, so heavily used that the ground around it was
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muddy before midmorning, was replaced with outdoor running water taps around 1945.

In the years approaching the middle of the twentieth century, Jim Crow laws, disparities in allocation of funds for education, and lack of school transportation were keeping Clarendon’s African Americans uneducated in the same way that levying fines for teaching black people to read had done two hundred years earlier. With no voice in government, the people of Clarendon seemed damned to an eternal state of poverty and ignorance.

De Laine

In 1946 the time was right for a man like Rev. Joseph Armstrong “J. A.” De Laine to assume the mantle of civic leadership. An unpretentious man who walked with God and—sometimes—with a pistol by his side, his concern for the unlettered rural people of Clarendon County and their children succeeded in inspiring some of them, igniting their allegiance so much that they dared to do the unthinkable. They undertook a formidable quest to make change happen, to claim their “piece of the pie.” Their journey took them from asking for school bus transportation to challenging public school segregation, the legal and widespread practice of “separate but equal” in the nation’s education systems.

The earliest known De Laine ancestor is said to have been an African who came to American shores as a free mariner in the late 1700s or early 1800s. Probably jumping ship, he remained in the Charleston area, where a number of free black people lived, until he acquired a white “protector” and moved inland to the future Clarendon County. There, using the name Charles De Laine, he worked in the building trades. He sired a son, also named Charles, who earned his living repairing mills. Since the millwright Charles was a free man who often traveled around the countryside at a time when almost all nonwhites were confined to plantations as slaves, the name De Laine became widely known.

After Emancipation, the De Laines became landowners, tradesmen, and operators of small businesses. One of them—Henry Charles, my paternal grandfather—became a preacher and pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, a denomination founded by free black people in 1787 because of racial harassment. In the years following Emancipation, AME churches proliferated in South Carolina. My grandfather probably found it easy to accept the church’s motto—“God, Our Father; Christ, Our Redeemer; Man, Our Brother”—for the men of his family had never been held in bondage. For my Grandmother Tisbia, who bore my father and twelve other children, the part that said “Man, Our Brother” was only common sense. Both of her parents had been born as slaves, fathered by their mothers’ owners.

The eighth child of Grandma Tisbia and Grandpa H. C. was my father. Called JA by family members, he was born on July 2, 1898, near Manning, Clarendon’s county seat. In spite of the Jim Crow laws, his parents imbued their
children with a sense of self-sufficiency, a belief in the brotherhood of men, and
an expectation of justice. Although family members accepted the practice of seg-
regation, they refused to be subservient—or to be summarily deprived of their
rights.

When JA was fourteen, he soundly beat a white boy who touched one of his
sisters inappropriately. In the South Carolina of 1912, black boys who did such
things were subject to punishment. JA was sentenced to a dozen lashes with a
cane, administered by his school principal. The other boy would not be punished.
Refusing to submit to the unfair discipline, JA left home, hopped on a freight
train, and “rode the rails” like a hobo until he reached Atlanta.

There he eked out a precarious living and attended night classes at the
“Colored” YMCA. After several years he came home and, working in family
enterprises, learned carpentry and business skills. By that time his father had
become a presiding elder for the AME Church’s Manning District, a group of
thirty-some churches whose location coincided almost exactly with Clarendon
County’s boundaries. Having a religious bent, JA eagerly accompanied his father
when he visited the churches, and people throughout the county became
acquainted with the personable, outgoing young man.

Around 1917 he went to the state capital, Columbia, to pursue a teacher-
training course at Allen University, an AME Church college. For the next four-
teen years, he worked as a carpenter, teacher, and entrepreneur—supporting
himself, helping relatives, and buying property. Simultaneously he nurtured his
spiritual development, becoming licensed to preach by the AME Church in 1923,
and receiving his first assignment as a church pastor in 1925.

While at Allen he was exposed to the idea that black churches were duty
bound to provide more than spiritual nourishment and was taken under the wing
of civic activist E. A. Adams, a minister and faculty member. When he earned his
bachelor of arts degree at thirty-three years of age, Rev. De Laine became one of
the less than 1 percent of the nation’s black people who were college graduates.
He was immediately recruited into a special part-time program for agriculture
teachers that, when completed, would make him eligible to become principal of
a training (vocational high) school for black students.

In 1931, the year he graduated, he married Mattie Belton, a graduate of a
teacher-training course. Three years later, while serving as principal of a Baptist-
controlled training school, he was asked to change religious denominations
and become a Baptist. Never one to alter his allegiance for personal gain, Rev.
De Laine refused. The Baptist elders who ran the school did not renew his con-
tract.

Undaunted, he returned to Clarendon County with his wife and his infant
son (my older brother, who was named after my father but always called Jay).
Many Clarendon people remembered him from his youth, and others were
familiar with the name De Laine. He had matured and was more learned, but his
convictions were much the same as when he first left home. He believed in respecting everyone, keeping his word, looking others in the eye, and accumulating little or no debt. He felt he had a duty, as a Christian leader, to be involved in the community. And he was convinced that God would guide and protect him, that Jesus Christ would redeem his soul, and that the brotherhood of men was not defined by color.

His bishop assigned him to serve as pastor of the small Spring Hill circuit of two churches. Both churches were located about five miles from Summerton. There was no parsonage. The usual practice in the AME Church was for a pastor to remain at an assignment for eight years. Since he needed a place to live, Rev. De Laine confidently used his own money and carpentry skills to help build a three-bedroom parsonage at Spring Hill.

He was hired as principal and head teacher of the six grade, three-room Bob Johnson Elementary School, near the village of Davis Station. The road to the shack that housed the school passed within a few feet of the homes of the Pearson brothers, Levi and Hammett. During his first year at the school, the new principal hired Mr. Hammett’s son, fourteen-year-old Jessie, to fell small trees, cut the wood, and start fires in the school’s stoves. Jessie later observed that “a strong friendship developed between Pop, Uncle Levi, and Rev. De Laine. But Rev. De Laine was a real practical man—he hired me because I was responsible and lived nearby, not because Pop was his friend.”

By the end of 1939, the family had expanded to include me and my younger brother, Brumit (known as BB). Rev. De Laine had moved on to become principal of the eight grade Liberty Hill School while Mis’ De Laine, as Mother was called, continued teaching at the little school in the dilapidated Masonic lodge beside Spring Hill Church. The four-room Liberty Hill school building was new, having replaced the hovel where Rev. De Laine had occasionally taught when he was a student at Allen. The school was close to Liberty Hill AME Church, a stately edifice designed and built by my great uncle Pete when my grandfather was the church’s pastor.

Our family was well off by local standards. As Rev. De Laine saw it, however, security was a matter of being free of debt and having an income made possible by property ownership. To that end he had bought a farm near Spring Hill and, with a trustworthy farm manager, started establishing a modern, highly productive farm.

His neat little world was turned topsy-turvy in December 1940 when his pastoral assignment was unexpectedly changed to the Pine Grove / Society Hill circuit. With a combined membership of almost nine hundred, it was the county’s third largest AME appointment and appropriate for a man of his education and experience. He should have been delighted, but he wasn’t. Located on Santee River Road southeast of Summerton, Society Hill was fourteen miles from our house; Pine Grove was nine miles farther. Both churches were in the remotest
part of the county; to get to either entailed a long, uncomfortable journey along unpaved back roads. Furthermore neither offered living accommodations. The change undermined Rev. De Laine’s financial strategy because his master plan had not included building a family home for two more years.

However, a man like my father is rarely caught completely unprepared. He immediately bought an excellently situated lot in Summerton, less than twenty feet outside the town limits and directly across from Scott’s Branch, the “town’s” school for black children. Four months later we moved into the house, even before it had inside walls. Some day it was supposed to become my mother’s

Spring Hill Elementary School continued to be housed on the first floor of this building, the Spring Hill Prince Hall Masons’ lodge, until 1950. The lodge stood on the grounds of Spring Hill AME Church. In this photograph, taken circa 1940, teachers Mattie De Laine and Helen Richburg (wife of Rev. E. E. Richburg) are standing with their students. The girl in the front row, middle, is the author as a child. Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library
dream house, but for the time being, we had no electricity (it had not yet come to
the area), an outside water pump (the water mains didn’t come to our side of
town), and no telephone (they were still a rarity in Clarendon).

As a conscientious pastor, Rev. De Laine made it a point to visit the members
of his church regularly. Roberta Mack was a teenager when he was assigned to
Society Hill, her family’s church. She described him as a humble man and
observed, “Some people act high and mighty when they get a little education or
money, but Rev. De Laine wasn’t like that. He didn’t act like he was better than
other people. He went to people’s houses no matter what kind of place they lived
in. And he’d sit and talk, or help out with the work—whatever the family was
doing.”

She recalled how the people of Society Hill really liked my father—even
though he wasn’t the kind of “hollering preacher” they were accustomed to. “He
was always showing us how to live our daily lives—teaching when he was
preaching, and teaching when he wasn’t.” People came to him with their trou-
bles, knowing that whatever they told him in private would never be repeated.
But some things couldn’t remain private. If, for example, an unmarried girl got
pregnant, Rev. De Laine counseled her at home and then set a Sunday for the
people to welcome her back. Believing that people should get along together, he
always taught cooperation. When church members had arguments, he tried to
help them resolve the issues, facing problems before they became large.

My father was actively involved in statewide AME Church affairs and the
black teachers’ professional association. He avidly read the black-owned publica-
tions, keeping abreast of social issues. Like other socially concerned ministers, he
used black news media as educational resources for parishioners, sometimes
reading entire articles to virtually illiterate congregations who had no represen-
tation in the mainstream press.

He once read an editorial entitled “Are Teachers Children or Fools?”
Thinking the article was full of common sense, he invited the writer to speak to
his congregation. After the speech he received a warning that “somebody was
going to get a bullet in the belly.” Unintimidated, Rev. De Laine claimed, “That
was the beginning of my involvement with affairs about Negro Rights. I began
to work to raise money to help with the teachers’ salary case.” In Clarendon
County he was the only teacher who openly advocated financing a plaintiff in a
salary equalization case. Although he collected a little money at one county teach-
ers’ meeting, he said, “We raised more money from others than from teachers.”
One teacher told the county superintendent of education that Rev. De Laine was
trying to stir up a fight between white and colored teachers, and accused him of
being a Communist agitator.

Americans dreaded Communism. The establishment often branded the
NAACP as a Communist front, and many southerners were convinced that
NAACP members were trying to undermine democracy. With NAACP leaders
pushing for change, the organization was growing stronger in South Carolina, despite a fear that deterred some people from supporting the organization. To avoid the negativity associated with the NAACP, a less controversial organization called the Negro Citizens’ Committee (NCC) was used as a cover.

The president of South Carolina’s NCC was E. A. Adams, Rev. De Laine’s confidant and former teacher. In 1942 Dr. Adams and the state NCC secretary, James N. Hinton, who was also executive director of the South Carolina Conference of NAACP Branches, dispatched another activist to persuade my father to organize a Clarendon NAACP branch. Rev. De Laine agreed on the need for a county branch, but he had his hands full—pastoring, teaching, and operating a farm with four tenants. Saying, “The job is too big for me to undertake alone,” he helped his visitor seek cooperation from the county’s other two leading AME pastors.

The three pastors immediately formed a temporary organization, but the two others who were chosen must have been reluctant for my father made no further mention of them. By mid-1943 he had recruited six strong NAACP supporters. They were Hammett and Levi Pearson, James W. “J. W.” Seals (another AME pastor), home demonstration agent Sarah Daniels, Professor McFadden, and Mrs. House. According to Rev. De Laine, the small group was effective, “but there was a great price to be paid to get the message to people. Because we had no telephones, contact had to be door to door or on the street on Saturday evenings.”

He enthusiastically applied for a NAACP charter although there was a hitch in finding a meeting place. Pastors of Clarendon’s larger, centrally located churches were reluctant for the controversial organization to use their premises. Finally permission came from Edward Frazier, pastor of Summerton’s small St. Mark AME Church. The first formal meeting of the nascent NAACP branch was held in the modest structure.

Unfortunately Rev. De Laine fell ill a few months later and was hospitalized for an extended period. Dr. Adams came from Columbia to preach for him on Sundays. His farm manager continued overseeing farm operations. Mother took care of the family and her job. But no one had the skills, personality, and inclination to lead the fledgling NAACP branch effectively. It withered and died.