

## *The Condition of African Americans Improves— But Has a Ways To Go*

As a state with a reputation for moderation in white resistance to black racial progress, North Carolina must own up to some dubious distinctions. Lynchings, for example, were not as prevalent in the Old North State as in its neighboring states to the South, but North Carolina still recorded 75 lynchings by white mobs from 1882 to 1930.<sup>1</sup>

The bloodstains on the state's record of so-called moderation include the Wilmington race riots of November 10, 1898—in which an unknown number of blacks were killed, and black leaders were run out of town at gun point and never allowed to return—and a 1906 lynching in Salisbury where five black corpses were strung from the same tree.

The leader of the Salisbury lynchings was sentenced to 15 years hard labor, a fact noteworthy enough that the *New York Times* opined that N.C. Governor Robert Glenn would probably pay a political price.<sup>2</sup> It's hard to imagine a more lowly starting point from which to measure racial progress.

Yet progress has been made. Blacks served admirably in World War I and World War II, and began to realize economic gains as early as the 1940s, moving out of jobs that until then consisted mainly of sharecropping and manual labor.

Meanwhile, the nation was seeing other signs of black progress. Jackie Robinson of the National League's Brooklyn Dodgers broke the color line in Major League Baseball in 1947, to be followed 11 weeks later by Larry Doby of the American League's Cleveland Indians. Both endured racial epithets and hardships, but both excelled, paving the way for a steady stream of stars like Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, and Barry Bonds. Blacks have since come to dominate professional sports, with North Carolina producing arguably the best professional basketball player of all time in Michael Jordan of Wilmington, N.C., and best college basketball player in David Thompson of Shelby, N.C.

A unanimous May 17, 1954, ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>3</sup> of Topeka, Kan., overturned the legal doctrine of separate but equal established in the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*<sup>4</sup>—the notion that blacks and whites could have separate public facilities as long as they were equal. The *Brown* decision required that schools be integrated “with all deliberate speed.” Yet noted N.C. civil rights lawyer Julius Chambers says the school integration efforts saw “a lot of deliberation but not much speed.”

“A lot of black friends of mine are not sure integration is the right thing to do anymore,” said Chambers in April 2004 at the 50th anniversary celebration of the *Brown* decision in Durham, N.C. “That says to me we need to do a better job of helping people understand the situation.” Chambers won the historic U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Mecklenburg Board of Education* in Charlotte in 1971 and is a former chancellor of N.C. Central University. During his legal career, his house was bombed, his car was firebombed, and his office was bombed.

Prior to the 1960s, many blacks could not register to vote, could not serve on juries, and went to separate and unequal primary and secondary schools. They could not swim in public swimming pools, eat at local restaurants, stay in most hotels, or go to local movie theaters without entering side entrances and sitting in the balconies.<sup>5</sup>

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 further advanced the cause of school desegregation, allowing the federal government to cut funds for schools that remained segregated and allowing the U.S. Department of Justice to sue recalcitrant school systems to force integration. It also opened the way to fair employment practices and

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***This Collier's Magazine illustration on file at the N.C. Division of Archives and History depicts the Wilmington race riots of November 10, 1898, in which an unknown number of blacks were killed, and black leaders were run out of town and never allowed to return.***

the integration of public facilities such as restaurants, movie theaters, and restrooms.<sup>6</sup>

The 1965 Voting Rights Act outlawed such devices as literacy tests and poll taxes that were designed to prevent blacks from registering to vote and required that states covered by the act pre-clear any changes in election laws that might affect black turnout. Forty counties in North Carolina are covered by the federal Voting Rights Act. Today, blacks hold or have held every major political office short of the presidency, along with numerous high-level appointments, including current U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. In North Carolina, African Americans hold 24 seats in the 170-member N.C. General Assembly, three of 10 cabinet positions in Gov. Mike Easley's administration, and the chairmanship of the State Board of Education. African Americans also hold the State Auditor's Office and three

seats on the N.C. Court of Appeals—all of which are statewide elected positions.

These social advances did not come easily, as both blacks and whites marched in the streets, went to jail, and in some instances gave their lives to bring down the barriers to racial equality. Yet today it is clear that legal and political progress has been made.

On the economic front, there is a growing black middle class. Blacks have made huge strides in the professions and in every line of work. Comedian Bill Cosby once campaigned against demeaning images of blacks in the media and complained that black faces never appeared in ads marketing products to the masses. Now, talk show host Oprah Winfrey rules the airwaves, and blacks are deployed to sell everything from minivans to laundry soap, in some instances directing the companies that produce the products. And, the first professional sports team



The News & Observer, Raleigh, N.C.

"The moral arc of the universe is long,  
but it bends towards justice."

—DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

owned by an African American is Charlotte's NBA Bobcats, owned by Black Entertainment Television CEO Robert Johnson.

Still, with all of the recorded gains, there is huge progress yet to be made. The National Urban League reports that black Americans have 73 percent of the earning power of whites, are less likely to own their own homes, don't do as well in school, and don't live as long as whites.<sup>7</sup> In North Carolina, the 2000 U.S. Census indicates that the annual mean household income for blacks, at \$36,289, is 65.3 percent of that of whites, who earn \$55,589. More telling: black earnings are running about a decade behind those of whites, who were found to have mean household earnings in excess of \$36,000 in the 1990 census. Blacks also are much more likely to live in poverty in North Carolina, with 22.9 percent below the poverty line compared to 8.1 percent of whites.

And, there are more subtle challenges in the rates of progress for black women and black men. Katherine Boo, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and a reporter for *The Washington Post*, says the greatest policy achievement in recent history may be the significant numbers of formerly welfare-dependent black women who have successfully entered the work force. From a peak of 5.1 million families in 1994, national welfare rolls have dropped to 2 million while the poverty rate for African-American children has hit an all-time low. "African-American teenage childbearing has declined, and the median annual income for African American households has surpassed \$27,000, reaching the highest level ever recorded," she writes.

But the condition of black men stands in stark contrast. Boo says, "Today black women are more likely to work than white or Hispanic women, whereas black men are less likely than their counterparts. Among non-college-educated young blacks the gender gap is starker." Fully half of these young black men "are unemployed or not in the labor force—and these figures don't even include men in jail," she writes.<sup>8</sup> So despite decades of progress, still more decades may pass before we bridge the gap between the races on measures of economic and social equality.

—Ran Coble and Mike McLaughlin

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1992, Table 2–2.

<sup>2</sup> Information on the Salisbury lynchings is taken from the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition of souvenir postcards on line at [www.musarium.com/withoutsanctuary/](http://www.musarium.com/withoutsanctuary/). The postcards are from the collection of James Allen and have been exhibited at museums across the nation.

<sup>3</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>4</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

<sup>5</sup> David Halberstam, "Brown v. Board of Education: What It Means To Every American," *Parade*, April 18, 2004, pp. 4–6.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Simmons, "Brown decision still resonates," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., April 18, 2004, p. 1B.

<sup>7</sup> *The State of Black America 2004*, National Urban League, Washington, D.C., March 24, 2004, Executive Summary, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Katherine Boo, "The Black Gender Gap," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2003, pp. 107–109.