

[Back to Top](#)

Integration Comes to Southern Appalachia: Clinton, Tennessee

Don Casada May 16, 2023 (with October 14, 2023 postscript)

Court-ordered integration began in the fall of 1956 in Clinton, Tennessee. It was the first such case in the south. Clinton is the Anderson County seat, but Anderson is also the home of Oak Ridge¹ and about half of the Department of Energy's national laboratory and defense facility complex.

Many circumstances in Clinton were remarkably similar to those in Swain County in 1956. Clinton had about twice the population of Bryson City at the time. Black students, who were, as in Bryson City, a small minority in the Clinton area, had been forced to make a bus trip of 18 miles to attend Austin High School in neighboring Knox County. But there was one significant difference: Clinton was under federal court order to desegregate.

A pair of videos on the Clinton desegregation effort (particularly the first one below) are well worth the investment of time required to watch:

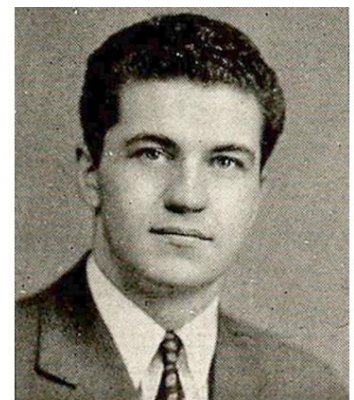
[The Clinton 12](#), a documentary produced by [Green-McAdoo Cultural Center](#)
[Clinton High School and the Law](#), narrated by Edward R. Murrow.

A 1952 lawsuit², with backing from the NAACP (future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was one of the attorneys for the plaintiffs), sought access for black students in Clinton High School. The initial ruling by US District Court Judge Robert Taylor (in Knoxville) went against the plaintiffs. But shortly after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed Taylor's decision. In January of 1956, Taylor [ordered the school to end segregation by the fall term of 1956](#). Taylor was a Johnson City, TN native, son of a Republican Tennessee Governor and nephew and namesake of his uncle, who was a Democratic Tennessee Governor.



Robert L. Taylor (1899-1987)
[US District Court, East TN](#)

Incited by New Jersey native and Columbia University-educated KKK member John Kasper, opposition both outside the school and among a relatively small group of students in Clinton High School was organized. School enrollment began on Monday, August 27, 1956. A couple of high school boys were carrying picket signs apparently left by others, but the black students entered and enrolled; Principal Brittain reported that school opened "without any trouble." That thought was probably offered in a hopeful vein. Rioting broke out over Labor Day weekend; a group of local men, mostly WW II veterans, heroically kept matters somewhat at bay until the arrival of the National Guard, which remained through September. Harassment and threats continued; in late November, the black families collaboratively made a decision to halt their children's attendance at Clinton High.



Paul Turner, Union University Annual
Lest We Forget 1943 (Ancestry.com)

But Pastor Paul Turner of Clinton's First Baptist Church met with the discouraged families; after a day of consideration, on December 4, 1956, six of the original twelve made another attempt. Turner,

¹ Part of Oak Ridge is in neighboring Roane County.

² [McSwain et al v. County Board of Education of Anderson County, TN et al](#). Also see [HERE](#), where District Court Judge Robert Taylor ordered the school desegregated by the fall of 1956.

along with white attorney Sidney Davis and Leo Burnett, both members of Turner's church, escorted them.

Pastor Turner remained for a bit after the other men left. Shortly after leaving to go to his church, he was surrounded and beaten by several men. Indignities and hatred heaped on the black students had done little to stir the community, but the beating of a white pastor did. The next year, six individuals, including John Kasper and five locals: Alonzo Bullock, carpenter and preacher, Lawrence Brantley, a car dealer, William Brakebill, service station operator, Clyde Cook, an Oak Ridge fireman who had first jumped Turner, Mary Nell Currier, a housewife, and Williard Till, a machinist at Oak Ridge, were charged with violating the injunction issued by Judge Taylor. The trial was held before Robert Taylor, whose injunction against interference they had violated. Their convictions were appealed to the Sixth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals and later the U.S. Supreme Court, to no avail. All but Kasper were placed on probation; he was sentenced to six years in prison. Kasper was college educated. That was certainly not the case for the others for whom data could be uncovered; according to the 1940 census, both Bullock and Brantley had 8th grade educations, Mary Nell Currier completed 7th grade, and Clyde Cook completed 6th grade.

The school was closed for the balance of the week after the attack on Turner. But it reopened on Monday, December 10. On that day, Anderson County Attorney Eugene Joyce read the Federal injunction which Judge Taylor had issued to the student body. The school year was completed; Bobby Cain became the first black graduate from a formerly segregated Tennessee high school.

However, in spite of broader community support, turmoil persisted; Clinton High School was bombed in December, 1958. The culprits were never apprehended, but the bombing steeled the resolve of the Clinton community. Syndicated columnist Drew Pearson took a special interest in their plight, and coordinated a nationwide solicitation of donations; he noted that a number of the donations came from black communities across the country:

“WCHB, a radio station operated by Negroes with a Negro listening audience, staged a public drive to help rebuild the Clinton school and collected \$1,900.....Fisk University Choir in Nashville sent \$100 with this message: *The one hundred voices of Fisk University Choir are enclosing a contribution toward 'Bricks of Brotherhood' to be used in rebuilding the Clinton High School.* Howard University in Washington, largest Negro college, sent \$500.” (*Long Beach Press-Telegram*, 22 Nov 1958, newspapers.com)

The Clinton High School principal, D.J. Brittain, Jr, was a son of the Smoky Mountains. He grew up less than 25 miles as the crow flies from Bryson City, on Tuckaleechee Road in Townsend, where his father, grandson of Irish immigrants, taught school after attending Maryville College. Brittain himself attended Maryville College where he was the class president in his senior year, 1937. In that same year, a young woman from Bryson City, Jessie Casada, was named the junior class “Highland Lassie.” Given the relative smallness of the school, there's no doubt that the two were acquainted.



Senior David James Brittain
The 1937 Chilhowean, Maryville College (ancestry.com)



Junior Jessie Patricia Casada
The 1937 Chilhowean, Maryville College (ancestry.com)

Brittain was a slight man; his WW II draft registration indicated he was 5'8" and weighed 130 pounds. He was Principal at Clinton High at least as early as 1947, when the school annual, *The Dragon*, indicated that he served a second role: Bible teacher. The 1952 *Dragon* school annual,

dedicated to him, noted his characteristics included: “good Methodist, lover of sports, fisherman, loser of hats, absent minded, red ink, announcements, friendly, sincere, interested in students, patience, pushing projects that are outward signs of progress at Clinton High.” His attractive wife Clarice taught home economics, was faculty sponsor of the annual, and was, no doubt, responsible for some of the good-natured teasing.



Clarice Jones Brittain, 1952 Clinton *Dragon* D.J. Brittain, 1956 Clinton *Dragon*, Ancestry.com

In an interview made during the 1956-57 school year at Clinton, Principal Brittain spoke softly and eloquently of how educators needed to set the standard in upholding the rule of law. Besieged by phone and mail, including dozens of anonymous threats of violence and death, he admitted that it took a toll on both him and his wife, who taught Home Economics at Clinton High and had herself been shoved in a school hallway; there were times when they had to sleep with friends or out of town.

During the school year, Brittain had enlisted the assistance of white students, led by class valedictorian and Student Council President, Jerry Shattuck, captain of the Clinton High football team who was a guard on the all-East Tennessee team. Brittain completed the school year, and oversaw the commencement exercises in the spring of 1957, when Bobby Cain became the first black student to graduate from Clinton High School. He assigned a group of boys to stay with Bobby while at the graduation exercise for fear of problems. There were none during the graduation program itself, but he (Cain) was afterwards jumped and beaten by a group outside. Brittain resigned the position at Clinton at the conclusion of the school year and accepted a teaching fellowship at New York University, where he completed his doctorate in school administration. His wife Clarice took a teaching job at Rutherford, NJ High School and remained there through the 1973-74 school year. After completing his doctorate, Brittain served as Superintendent in Rutherford, NJ school systems. They moved on to Trenton, NJ for similar work. He was awarded New York University's Ernest O. Melby Award for Outstanding Contributions – Human Relations, in 1964. Like Turner, the final resting place of the Brittains is in Tennessee – at Sinking Springs Methodist Church Cemetery, just across the trout-laden Clinch River tailwaters of Norris Dam from the town of Clinton. [Clarice died on January 10, 1988](#); [David died less than a month later, on February 8](#).

Paul Turner left Clinton in 1958, accepting a job as pastor of a church in Nashville. He later took a position of professor at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. After being dismissed by the school in 1980, he committed suicide; his family indicated³ that although there was no permanent physical damage, his spirit was never the same after the Clinton experience.

³ [Findagrave.com](#). He is buried in the expansive Woodlawn Memorial Park in Nashville, along with notable country musicians George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Marty Robbins, Eddy Arnold and Porter Wagoner. Also see [THIS ARTICLE](#).

Remembering

D.J. and Clarice Brittain, and Pastor Paul Turner were heroes, as were the two Baptist Church members who accompanied Turner, Sidney Davis and Leo Burnett. In the case of the Brittains, they didn't volunteer for the job, but they stuck it out through the entire school year. Without the calm demeanor, kind and mature perspective of D.J. Brittain – with apparently minimal to non-existent support from either the superintendent or the school board – the entire effort would likely have fallen apart. It's impossible to imagine the ramifications, had that happened.

Turner probably didn't see his actions as heroic, but needful. As indicated by his family, it cost him greatly over the long haul.

The core heroes, of course, were the young black students, their families, and in particular, their parents. Apparently, many never mentioned the experience to their own children until it was brought to light by others decades later.



Clinton High School Students on the way to school. Source: [Green McAdoo Cultural Center](#)

A community which once accepted integration with reluctance, now rightly takes considerable pride in the wonderful work done by the Green McAdoo Cultural Center to remember and honor The Clinton 12.

Postscript

A month or two after this article was completed, I received a book I'd previously ordered, *A Most Tolerant Little Town* by Rachel Louise Martin (Simon & Schuster). Its subject is the Clinton school desegregation story. For those interested, a copy should be available through your local library. For those in the Bryson City area, it is available through the [Marianna Black Library](#). Given the 30-buck price tag, I personally wish I'd made that choice.

As I'd noted in the body of this article, as well as in the article which prompted this one, [School Integration in Swain County](#), the similarities between Clinton and Bryson City were striking. Martin pointed out an element which had not occurred to me which was also similar – the role of the federal government (Tennessee Valley Authority) in taking of nearby land for the Norris Dam project and the federal lands on the Oak Ridge reservation in previous years. However, Martin's proposition that animosity associated with either would have been a factor warrants considerable skepticism. The implicit concept is that locals would be so simple-minded as to be unable to grasp the differences between court-ordered desegregation and eminent domain taking by the government. Both Norris and Fontana Dams provided employment opportunities during dam construction, and it is likely that

some who were displaced made a better life for themselves. Further, thousands of lasting jobs were created in Oak Ridge.

There *has* long been resentment here in Swain County associated with Fontana Dam. But overwhelmingly that is related not to the taking of land for the dam, but for a) the long-term failure of the federal government to fulfill the promise to build a road along the north shore of Fontana, and b) the taking of land well removed from the impoundment, and then turning it over to the Park Service, reducing Swain County's tax base which had already taken a huge hit by the original Park formation a decade before. While there has been no controlled evaluation study, from the combination of discussions with affected individuals and review of correspondence in North Carolina Park Commission records, it is clear that a significant portion of those who were displaced were, particularly in retrospect, glad because they established better lives after removal. A dear friend, Pearl Cable (1920-2015) told me "You couldn't pay me to go back down in there (Pilkey Creek). We had a hard, hard life."

It should be noted here that more people left the north shore area after the timber jobs were gone than were forced to leave by the Fontana Project. That included not just those who had come from the outside for the timber jobs, but previous residents who clearly took a liking to work for which there were cash wages.

Martin revealed that D.J. Brittain – like Pastor Paul Turner – committed suicide. It seems likely that his wife's death was a far greater and temporally proximate contributor, but as a reporter cited by Martin noted, there were symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder exhibited by some of the black students who had gone through the ordeal. Surely, the same was true for both Brittain and Turner.

Martin indicated that Brittain asked his family to destroy all papers and records related to the Clinton desegregation. The proposition that he would leave that word instead of just doing it himself is beyond passing strange. One wonders if whoever inherited the papers might have used that purported request as a reason for not sharing the papers at this point in time; there could very well be materials which shed an entirely different light on the events. If that is the case, perhaps they will be revealed at some point.