

Jelani Favors

5 The Road to Democracy: How the Gerrymandering of North Carolina A&T State University Transformed Politics and Protest at the Nation's Largest HBCU

During the summer of 1934, students attending North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College (later renamed North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University; NC A&T) gathered for their weekly chapel exercises that frequently provided them an opportunity to hear from nationally renowned scholars and politicians. During the month of July, Dr. Harold L. Trigg, the State Inspector of Negro High Schools, greeted over 400 students and faculty and addressed them on the subject “Changing Concepts in Government.” As Trigg spoke, the nation was in the clutches of the Great Depression that not only swept in widespread economic despair, but also ushered in an era of political liberalism and radicalism that fundamentally reshaped government and provided a catalyst for the early civil rights movement. “Times bring about new changes and it is the duty of each Negro teacher and principal to be alert to them,” declared Trigg. “The future of the nation lies in the hands of the boys and girls that are under your guidance. Therefore, instill in them, and even allow them to participate in those organizations that are making for political goals, for we learn by doing.”¹ It is certain that Trigg understood that the participatory democracy that he urged his listeners to become involved in was not accessible to most Black Americans in the South. However, Greensboro, North Carolina offered Black folks a unique sliver of mobility and progressivism that allowed for political participation from which most Black southerners were systematically and violently barred. Trigg also understood that there were few places in America where his advice to Black youth carried more weight and potential than the sacred grounds of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) such as NC A&T.

Black colleges have served as one of the most important laboratories for dissent in higher education. Since the first HBCU was founded in 1837, these institutions have birthed ideals, activists, and powerful social movements that have fought to expand American democracy for all. HBCUs were one of the few Black enclaves where Black youth en masse were exposed to a steady stream of

1 “Three Important Addresses Heard,” *The Register*, July 6, 1934, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/24/>.

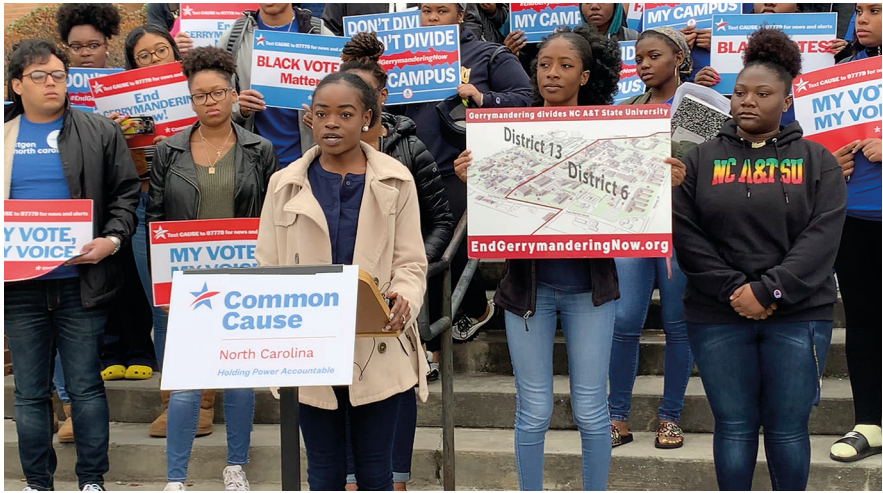


Figure 1: North Carolina A&T student Love Caesar speaking at Common Cause Press Conference, March 26, 2019. Photo Courtesy of Common Cause North Carolina.



Figure 2: North Carolina A&T student protesters, March 26, 2019. Photo courtesy of Common Cause North Carolina.

race men and women such as Trigg that shaped their political consciousness by arming them with the intellectual tools to wage war against white supremacy. In order to deconstruct the pernicious ideals targeting Black youth, HBCUs were deliberately exposed to a second curriculum. This pedagogy, that was delivered by successive generations of Black college faculty and administrators, countered



Figure 3: North Carolina A&T student protesters, 2019. Photo Courtesy of Common Cause North Carolina.

the corrosive effects of Jim Crow through the promotion of race pride that encouraged Black youth to build and invest in institutions that would serve their community.² But perhaps the most important result of this second curriculum was the creation of generations of students who championed the ideals of democracy and citizenship and believed in these sacrosanct values despite being denied them on a daily basis. With Greensboro providing the moderately progressive backdrop, the scene was set for the city's two HBCUs, Bennett College and NC A&T, to serve as a bastion of Black political radicalism throughout the 20th century.

In his classic study entitled *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom*, historian William Chafe identified the centrality of Black education to the political mobilization taking place in the

² For more on the 'second curriculum,' see Jelani M. Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

city during the depression. In fact, beginning in 1933, a year before Trigg spoke on NC A&T's campus, Chafe notes that "Blacks ran for city-wide office on a regular basis."³ This was precipitated by the strong presence of Greensboro's Black educational institutions that turned out a steady stream of conscientious alumni trained to view civic engagement as a necessary tool for agency and activism. While it would still be several years before any African Americans would make a successful run for political office in the city, Chafe documents that "news reports noted the increasing registration of Blacks after 1935, and a new responsiveness by the city council to Black needs as evidenced by construction of a recreation park and a swimming pool in the Black community."⁴ African American citizens in Greensboro once again leaned on the burgeoning activist energies stemming from the city's two HBCUs and other traditional Black institutions, such as the city's only Black high school at the time and a myriad of local Black churches. The result was a more concentrated drive for Black voter registration in the city, with students from Bennett College leading the way. In large part, their "Operation Door-knock" campaign in 1951 proved critical in the election of Dr. William Hampton as Greensboro's first Black city councilman. Hampton went on to serve two consecutive terms and his candidacy and subsequent election established a permanent inroad into the political process for the city's Black citizens.⁵ As Hampton represented the best interests of his constituents, the 1950s ushered in a new era of Black militancy. Nothing represented that more than the radical mentorship taking place at HBCUs during America's Cold War years.

In December of 1950, students at NC A&T heard from renowned civil rights lawyer and president of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Belford Lawson, Jr. The university held a "Human Rights Day" that month and the celebrated litigator stood before a packed auditorium to address the students on the subject "Human Rights, the Task at Hand." "We are no longer a meek and lowly people standing in the shadow of a great disappointment," Lawson asserted. "We refuse to believe any longer in some of the hypocrisies of Democracy." Lawson's exhortation was one of the many examples of the radical mentorship and instruction that NC A&T students were receiving that primed the militant atmosphere throughout the decade. By the end of the decade, students at NC A&T were being encouraged to think about "the total emancipation of the people of Africa from foreign domination in every sense—political, economical, social, and cultural." That appeal came from Daniel Chapman, ambassador of Ghana to the United States, who addressed

³ William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 24.

⁴ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 25.

⁵ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 23.

a crowd of 3,000 people gathered for NC A&T's 60th commencement. Later the next year, NC A&T students held a mass meeting in the gymnasium to protest budget cuts that the state was making to the already underfunded institution. But nothing better represented the brewing student militancy during the 1950s than the stunning episode that took place on campus in the middle of the decade during the university's Founder's Day observation in November of 1955.⁶

Governor Luther Hodges came to address the student body to honor the 64th anniversary of the campus. As he spoke, Hodges consistently pronounced the word "negro" as the racial slur "niggra" and criticized the work of the NAACP. As Hodges moved deeper into his prepared remarks, the student body grew restless and booed the governor so badly that the Jim Crow politician abruptly stopped mid-speech and left the stage. The campus newspaper reported that students were already on edge due to the lynching of Emmet Till. Hodges merely "threw gasoline on smoldering embers."⁷ By February 1, 1960, the campus was more than ready to unleash a social revolution that would rock America to its core and radically reshape youth culture forever.

Time Magazine once referred to American Cold War youth as "the silent generation."⁸ As it pertained to Black students being trained at HBCUs, that designation was largely inappropriate and never truly an apt description. Students at NC A&T and other Black colleges had been more than vocal in their distress and anger with Jim Crow policies. Youth chapters of the NAACP grew in number during the 1940s and 50s at HBCUs and campus newspapers were brimming with both incendiary student editorials that called into question white supremacy while also documenting the constant parade of speakers and activists who circulated through Black colleges.⁹ The postwar militancy that gave rise to the modern

6 "Fraternities are Urged to Fight Tyranny, Injustice," *The Register*, December 1950, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/111/>; "Ghana Ambassador Speaks at A&T 60th Commencement," *The Register*, July 16, 1958, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/150/>; Spurgeon Cameron, "Students Hold Mass Meet in Gymnasium to Rally Against Cuts," *The Register*, April 1, 1959, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/152/>.

7 William D. Mason, Jr., "A&T and Gov. Hodges," *The Register*, November 15, 1955, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/141>.

8 "People: The Younger Generation," *Time Magazine*, November 5, 1951, <https://time.com/archive/6794406/people-the-younger-generation/>.

9 For more on post-World War II militancy and radicalization of Black youth see Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm*, 70–200; Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Johnetta Richards, *The Southern Negro Youth Congress: A History* (University of Cincinnati Press, 1987); Lindsay Swindall, *The Path to the Greater, Freer, Truer World: Southern Civil Rights and Anti-colonialism, 1937–1955* (University Press of Florida, 2019).

civil rights movement only helped to accelerate and intensify elements of dissent that had been increasingly cultivated on Black college campuses since the end of World War II. With the arrival of the sit-ins in 1960, NC A&T students provided an opening salvo in the direct-action phase of the struggle for civil rights. Sit-ins morphed into Freedom Rides, and jail-ins packed local prisons in Greensboro and throughout the South as conscientious objectors to Jim Crow policies placed their bodies and their lives on the line for liberation.

Indeed, Greensboro was a hub of activism throughout the explosive decade of the 1960s. As calls for Black political and economic empowerment grew towards the latter half of the decade, NC A&T students helped to ensure that Black colleges would remain central touchpoints in the freedom struggle. Activists gravitated to the city, launching independent and alternative schools, and creating new student-based organizations like the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) that was founded on NC A&T's campus in 1969. SOBU carried forth the legacy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which largely comprised students from HBCUs. SNCC's legacy loomed large over the movement, and as the organization became frayed, SOBU was created in part to safeguard the advancements that SNCC activists had fought so hard for.¹⁰ Among those concerns and interests were the expansions of Black political power. NC A&T's very own alumnus, Henry Frye won a seat to the North Carolina Assembly in 1968, providing some hope that the era would usher in a new wave of Black politicians who would penetrate the citadel of conservatism and bigotry that existed at the state and local levels. According to historian William Chafe, the swell of activist energies that assembled in Greensboro transformed the city into "the center of Black Power in the South," yet the persistence and intractable nature of white supremacy represented significant challenges that threatened to delay, if not derail, the local movement for justice. Much like the rest of the country, "the white response in Greensboro," wrote Chafe, "was resistance, repression, and, subsequently, an effort to separate Black reformers from radicals." As significant as internal squabbles over class and idealism were, it was the external threat of the white power structure that made liberation so elusive for the Black community in Greensboro.¹¹

¹⁰ David Lee Brown, "University to Be Site of First Conference for Black Students," *The A&T Register*, May 2, 1969, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/364>; "Over 600 Attend SOBU Conference," *The A&T Register*, November 7, 1969, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/373>.

¹¹ Brown, "University to Be Site"; Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 220, 247. For more on the legacy of independent Black schools during the Black Power movement and the relocation of Malcolm X Liberation University from Durham to Greensboro, see Russel Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

The liberation movement ebbed and flowed in the decades that followed Greensboro's outburst of Black Power radicalism. Expansions in the Black middle class and the removal of de jure segregation laws provided a mirage of hope that was further buoyed by the rise of Black elected officials. However, it was also abundantly clear that systemic racism would not dissipate in Greensboro or throughout the country as Black neighborhoods remained marginalized and neglected, Black institutions such as HBCUs continued to endure historic underfunding that blocked their access to vital resources, and aggressive policing continued to plague Black neighborhoods and target African American leaders.¹² The latter unleashed one of the most violent episodes in the city as Klansmen attacked a peaceful march in 1979, resulting in the death of five activists. Two separate trials acquitted the shooters of any wrongdoing and failed to hold the Greensboro Police Department responsible for their failure to properly protect the marchers.¹³ Despite these atrocities and setbacks, many Black citizens of Greensboro continued to place their faith in political progressivism and the expansion of American democracy. The movements towards social justice that arose from the city had largely emanated from Greensboro's two Black colleges that had drilled their students in idealism that bolstered Black youth's faith in the tenets of democracy and citizenship and their belief that these ideals were capable of reclamation and rehabilitation. While conviction in these principles provided the fuel for a moral movement that reshaped the political contours of America, it also increasingly identified the campus of NC A&T as a threat to the political status quo. Moving forward, those seeking to repress and dilute Black political power in the city increasingly saw NC A&T as an essential target.

¹² Historian Martha Biondi documents the fact that Black colleges were more likely to sustain violence from local and state police and national guardsmen than students at predominately white institutions. This reality resulted in violent outbreaks and often murder at South Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T, Howard University, Voorhees College, Jackson State, Texas Southern, and Southern University. See Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (University of California Press, 2012), 157. In August of 1972, GAPP organized a 'people's court' that heard a case against the Greensboro Police Department that was charged with several instances of police brutality against the Black community. The case recognized episodes of violence that were inflicted against A&T students and other Black citizens. See "Police Brutality Trial of the Greensboro Black Community," Greensboro Association of Poor People Papers, personal archive of Mr. Lewis Brandon.

¹³ For more on the impact and legacy of the Greensboro Massacre, see Aran Shetterly, *Morningside: The 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the Struggle for an American City's Soul* (Amistad, 2024) and Sally Avery Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors' Eyes: From the Sixties Through the Greensboro Massacre* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

1 The Path Towards Partition: Gerrymandering the Nation's Largest Black College and the (In) Action that Ensued

The latter half of the 20th century saw most HBCUs in a state of flux. Black colleges entered into a new golden age of growth aided by Hollywood depictions of their unique campus culture. Spike Lee's film *School Daze* was the first on-screen film depiction of HBCUs and the Cosby Show spinoff *A Different World* helped to boost enrollment at HBCUs during the late 1980s and 90s.¹⁴ As Black students registered in greater numbers at schools like NC A&T, the Reagan and Bush eras exacerbated political divisions in the country, a factor that was not lost on Black college students, many of whose families were victims of Reaganomics that slashed funding for vital programs that targeted under-resourced and impoverished communities.¹⁵ NC A&T alumni Jesse Jackson, who was a significant player in the student protests of the 1960s, rose to political prominence and mounted two serious bids to secure the Democratic nomination for president in 1984 and 1988. NC A&T students not only rushed to support his campaign, but the fervor that Jackson's candidacy created also carried over into enthusiastic support for the candidacy of Harvey Gantt. Gantt, a Black politician from Charlotte, unsuccessfully challenged Jesse Helms for his Senate seat in 1990 and 1996 but his campaign injected life and heightened political awareness among Black youth in the state.¹⁶

14 Juan Cherry, "School Daze Stirs Emotions: If Black is Beautiful, What's the Issue?," *The A&T Register*, April 29, 1988, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1096/>.

15 Audrey L. Williams, "Beware of Reaganomics," *The A&T Register*, January 22, 1982, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/925/>.

16 "Students Start Campaign Fund," *The A&T Register*, January 24, 1984, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/996/>; Jamie C. Ruff, "More Power to Jesse Jackson," *The A&T Register*, March 23, 1984, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1004/>; James Etheridge, "Jackson Swings Through Triad; Advises Students to Vote," *The A&T Register*, April 27, 1984, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1009/>; Albert Spruill, "Jackson's Candidacy Offers Sense of Hope," *The A&T Register*, August 28, 1984, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1010/>; "Students, Faculty Debate Candidacy," *The A&T Register*, November 13, 1987, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1084/>; "Jackson to Address Commencement," *The A&T Register*, April 8, 1988, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1094/>; Rhonda Debnam, "Gantt Visits Greensboro," *The A&T Register*, September 21, 1990, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1138/>; Josephine Kerr, "Gantt Falls Short at Polls Regardless of Increased Aggie Voting Turnout," *The A&T Register*, November 15, 1996, <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1204/>.

Although neither Jackson nor Gantt won their races, it was abundantly clear that NC A&T's campus, when united around a cause and a candidate, could play a significant role in driving and uplifting political agendas. In 2008, this trait dovetailed perfectly into the historic candidacy of Illinois senator Barack Obama, who convincingly won Guilford County by close to 60 % during his presidential run in 2008 and again for his re-election campaign in 2012. Once again, NC A&T students served as a major factor in tipping the scales towards a liberal and progressive agenda. By the end of Obama's second term in 2016, there were two things apparent to NC lawmakers. Conservative legislators throughout the state were well aware of NC A&T's legacy as a seedbed for activism, and any effort to subdue the political agency emanating from the Greensboro campus, that by 2014 had become the largest HBCU in the country, would call for decisive and aggressive action that targeted the institution—right down the middle.

Greensboro had been no stranger to the age-old political tactic of gerrymandering. Through this scheme, both conservative and liberal politicians have historically sought to gain leverage in specific communities by marginalizing their political foes, often with a scalpel-like precision. Perhaps the most absurd example of this in North Carolina was the infamous 12th congressional district that was reestablished and redrawn in 1992 in a serpentine fashion that created the only Black majority district in the state. The district, which included Greensboro, merged and simultaneously reduced the political power of the state's minorities.¹⁷ Following a long run of progressive politics coming out of the city, state legislators took aim at Greensboro once again in 2010. During that year, Republicans took hold of both houses of the state legislature for the first time since 1898, which ironically was the year that white conservative forces violently seized control of the state in order to repress Black political mobility.¹⁸ Republicans also took control of redistricting, thanks in part to a state law that denies the governor the ability to veto any changes made to election maps. Democratic Governor Bev

17 For more on the history and legacy of the North Carolina 12th Congressional District see Gerald L. Ingalls and Toby Moore, "The Present and Future of Racial Gerrymandering: Evidence from North Carolina's 12th Congressional District," *Southeastern Geographer* 35, no. 1 (1995): 58–74, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sgo.1995.0009>.

18 The Wilmington Massacre was a seminal moment in the rise of white terrorism during the Nadir. Wilmington, North Carolina is located 200 miles from Greensboro and centered on the southern coast of the state. By the late 19th century, racial violence had become epidemic throughout the South and whatever form of Black political power that existed throughout the region was violently eliminated through the actions of vigilante groups and through the acts of conservative legislators who worked in tandem to reassert white supremacy as the law of the land. For more on the Wilmington Massacre see David Zucchino, *Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy* (Grove Press, 2021).

Purdue was rendered powerless as members of the GOP set their sights on Guilford County and conspired a plan to weaken Black political power in the city that had been a consistent source for militancy and mobilization.

Laurel Street is a major artery that runs through the heart of NC A&T's campus. The university experienced a meteoric rise in student population in the first decade of the 21st century which brought the construction of new dorms and facilities on both sides of the campus thoroughfare. In 1969, the university had come under fire from local police and national guardsmen who shot up the campus and drove tanks down Laurel Street following student protests against authoritarian control at a local high school. Conservative white legislators sought to suppress social upheaval coming out of NC A&T's campus in the 1960s by invading the university.¹⁹ By 2010, their focus had shifted to finding new ways to bottle up the threat of political mobilization that the university and its students posed. Gerrymandering became a perfect scheme to subtly enforce their conservative agenda. Aggressively reshaping the political district to produce an outcome in the electorate that favored and empowered the GOP was far less heavy handed than older intimidation tactics of deploying white mobs to uphold Jim Crow policies or sending tanks and soldiers down Laurel Street to terrorize a campus that had long been a force for social and political change in the city and throughout the state. In 2016, in the quiet backrooms of Raleigh and with the silent stroke of a pen, conservative lawmakers attacked the Greensboro campus with the same animus and derision as their predecessors who saw the campus as a threat to the status quo. Their actions would not go unnoticed or unaddressed.

In 2013, the United States Supreme Court rendered a decision in the case of *Shelby v. Holder*. Its ruling added weight to the nefarious actions of North Carolina's state legislators by removing pre-clearance as a provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Under this ruling, states no longer had to receive consent from the federal government in order to make sure changes they made to their voting rights laws did not violate the civil rights of their citizens. With these protections removed, governing bodies such as the North Carolina legislature had an open lane to engage in voter suppression and redraw districts along racial and partisan lines. The Obama administration pushed back against these rulings as much as it could. "This law, we think, will have a disproportionate negative impact on minor-

¹⁹ For more on the National Guard and local police invasion of A&T's campus in 1969, see North Carolina Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Trouble in Greensboro: A Report of an Open Meeting concerning Disturbances at Dudley High School and North Carolina A&T State University," March 1970, 14, <https://www2.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr12t75.pdf>; "650 Troops Sweep A&T," *Greensboro Daily News*, May 23, 1969; Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 185–186.

ity voters,” declared acting United States attorney general Eric Holder. “We’ve looked at these laws across the country. They have a disproportionate negative impact on people who are young, people of color, people who are poor and I think at a minimum have a partisan basis to them.” For the next decade, the state would engage in a back-and-forth chess match, with conservatives and progressives countering each other’s moves in court. While this was taking place, their efforts had slowly awakened a sleeping giant embodied within the NC A&T student body.²⁰

In the same year that the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act via *Shelby v. Holder*, a young student by the name of Vashti Hinton-Smith arrived as a freshman on the campus of NC A&T. Admittedly, she was not intimately familiar with the long legacy for civil rights that defined the campus that she now called home. She arrived as a marketing major in the College of Business but that, too, was about to change. “And so my freshman year, I took a class with a man named Derick Smith,” she recalled. “And this was right after North Carolina had passed the voter ID law. And he’s like on the table going off about this voter ID law that’s going to restrict early voting, get rid of same day registration, also making it impossible for college students to vote, they’re going to need a voter ID. And so he’s literally standing on top of the desk, like going off. And I’m like what is happening right now? I felt like something out of *A Different World* or something. And so it was really, I don’t say it was cool, but it woke me up.”²¹

While Hinton-Smith’s recall to the prime-time television show showed its influence and reach for a new generation, it also highlighted the fact that the vibrancy and militancy of the HBCU space that the show attempted to capture, interpret, and broadcast to the world was still very much alive and well at NC A&T. “And so immediately, my interest was piqued,” remembered Hinton-Smith. “I can say weeks later, I went and changed my major to political science. And I took every single one of his classes that I could, and I absorbed it all.”²² Professor Derick Smith, who was himself a graduate of Fayetteville State, an HBCU located in the eastern portion of North Carolina, had effectively engaged in the second curriculum that set HBCUs apart as critical sources for the politicization and mobilization of Black youth against the forces of bigotry and intolerance. Hinton-Smith not only changed her major, but she became active in a new student movement against the gerrymandering of the campus and the attempts to suppress the Black vote in Greensboro and beyond. She joined the North Carolina state chapter of Common Cause, a watchdog and advocacy group with chapters across the country whose

20 “NC Republicans Vow to Fight US DOJ Over Voter Laws,” *The A&T Register*, October 2, 2013.

21 Vashti Hinton-Smith (former A&T student), interviewed by Seamus Heady, July 19, 2023.

22 Vashti Hinton-Smith, interviewed by Seamus Heady, July 19, 2023.

own tagline states they are dedicated to “holding power accountable” and “upholding the core values of American democracy.”²³ Students at NC A&T and all HBCUs had been engaged in that mission since their founding. While Hinton-Smith knew hardly anything about NC A&T prior to her enrollment in 2013, she quickly received a crash course as to why Black colleges were essential to advancing the freedom dreams of Black people in America.

Professor Smith’s influence did not stop with Hinton-Smith’s recruitment to the cause. Also arriving on NC A&T’s campus in 2015 was a student by the name of Nikolaus Knight who had originally come to the university to study theater but had quickly gravitated towards the powerful and timely instruction being provided by the Political Science Department. Knight, a resident of Greensboro, came from a long line of local activists, and his migration over to political science seemed like a natural transition. Derick Smith’s lectures on contemporary issues struck a nerve and emboldened students like Knight not to simply digest lessons on how government is structured, but to see themselves as the levers upon which government can and should be changed to justly serve the people. “He mentioned just teaching us about what gerrymandering is, how it was used as a political strategy,” recalled Knight. “We were listening to him talk about it. And we had heard that a year prior to us hearing it from him, that they had done this on our campus.”²⁴ As Smith poured race consciousness, cultural nationalism, and idealism into his students, he was utilizing the same second curriculum that had powered previous social movements originating out of Black colleges. Smith’s instruction was both revelatory and a catalyst for civic engagement for Knight and his peers. “We began to learn about the gerrymandering,” Knight recalled. “And once we learned about it, and students began to talk with each other about it, some of us began working with some training organizations.”²⁵

Former NC A&T student Tylik McMillan had a similar experience. However, unlike Hinton-Smith and Knight, McMillan was acutely aware of and specifically drawn to the historic campus because of its legacy and reputation as an incubator for activism. He eagerly enrolled as a freshman in 2015, coming to Greensboro with the spirit of activism already in his blood. McMillan had previously worked with the National Action Network and received direct tutelage from nationally

23 Common Cause, “Common Cause: Holding Power Accountable,” <https://actionnetwork.org/groups/common-cause-holding-power-accountable>. Notably, Hinton-Smith and her peers are featured on the cover of this book, at an on-campus press conference on March 26, 2019, the day the United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Common Cause-North Carolina’s* partisan gerrymandering challenge in *Rucho v. Common Cause*.

24 Nikolaus Knight (former A&T student), interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 21, 2024.

25 Nikolaus Knight, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 21, 2024.

known civil rights activist Rev. Al Sharpton. “I always knew I wanted to come to A&T,” he recalled. “Not only because of Reverend Jesse Jackson and the history of NC A&T that sparked the sit-in movement in 1960 ... but it was just a rich history that this campus had with civil rights. With Reverend Sharpton being a mentor of mine, and Reverend Jesse Jackson being a mentor of his, it was like it perfectly aligned.”²⁶ As much as it seemed as though McMillan was born for the moment, students don’t head off to college with designs of majoring in dissent. Nevertheless, Black students like McMillan enrolled at HBCUs have often carried the inescapable burden of using their intellectual talents and skills that they have honed while attending schools like NC A&T to join in the long struggle for Black liberation. For McMillan and his peers, that massive challenge was finding a way to thwart Republican efforts to divide and dilute the political power of the largest HBCU in the country.

By 2016, (Figure 4) the fight to reverse the redistricting and partition of NC A&T’s campus had reached a fever pitch. Also angering students were changes to voter ID laws and efforts to shut down provisions for same-day registration, all of which directly impacted students. While all these efforts were pernicious attempts to suppress young Black voters, it was the redistricting issue that appeared to strike the biggest nerve. As a young student just settling in, McMillan recalled the consternation and confusion that the gerrymandering efforts unleashed. “I think we have this understanding that politicians should not choose their voters, but voters should choose their politicians,” declared McMillan. “We were talking about the campus being split down the middle. We were targeted.”²⁷ That same year, the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina agreed, ruling that the partitions of the 1st and 12th congressional districts along clear racial lines were unconstitutional. The United States Supreme Court upheld that ruling and informed state legislators that they were required to redraw the electoral map of the district. What happened next fooled no one. Whatever joy NC A&T students felt from this ruling was quickly dashed as they received a hard lesson in the creative and malleable nature of white supremacy and the long tradition of voter suppression.²⁸

Republican legislators in North Carolina moved quickly to absorb and deflect the ruling of the high court, unashamedly declaring that their goal was to abandon

26 Tylik McMillan (former A&T student), interviewed by Seamus Heady, July 18, 2023.

27 Tylik McMillan, interviewed by Seamus Heady, July 18, 2023.

28 For more on the history of *Cooper v. Harris* that ruled that racial gerrymandering was unconstitutional in the state of North Carolina, see Democracy Docket, “The Decade-Long Fight Against Racial Gerrymandering,” May 6, 2021, <https://www.democracydocket.com/analysis/the-decade-long-fight-against-racial-gerrymandering/>.

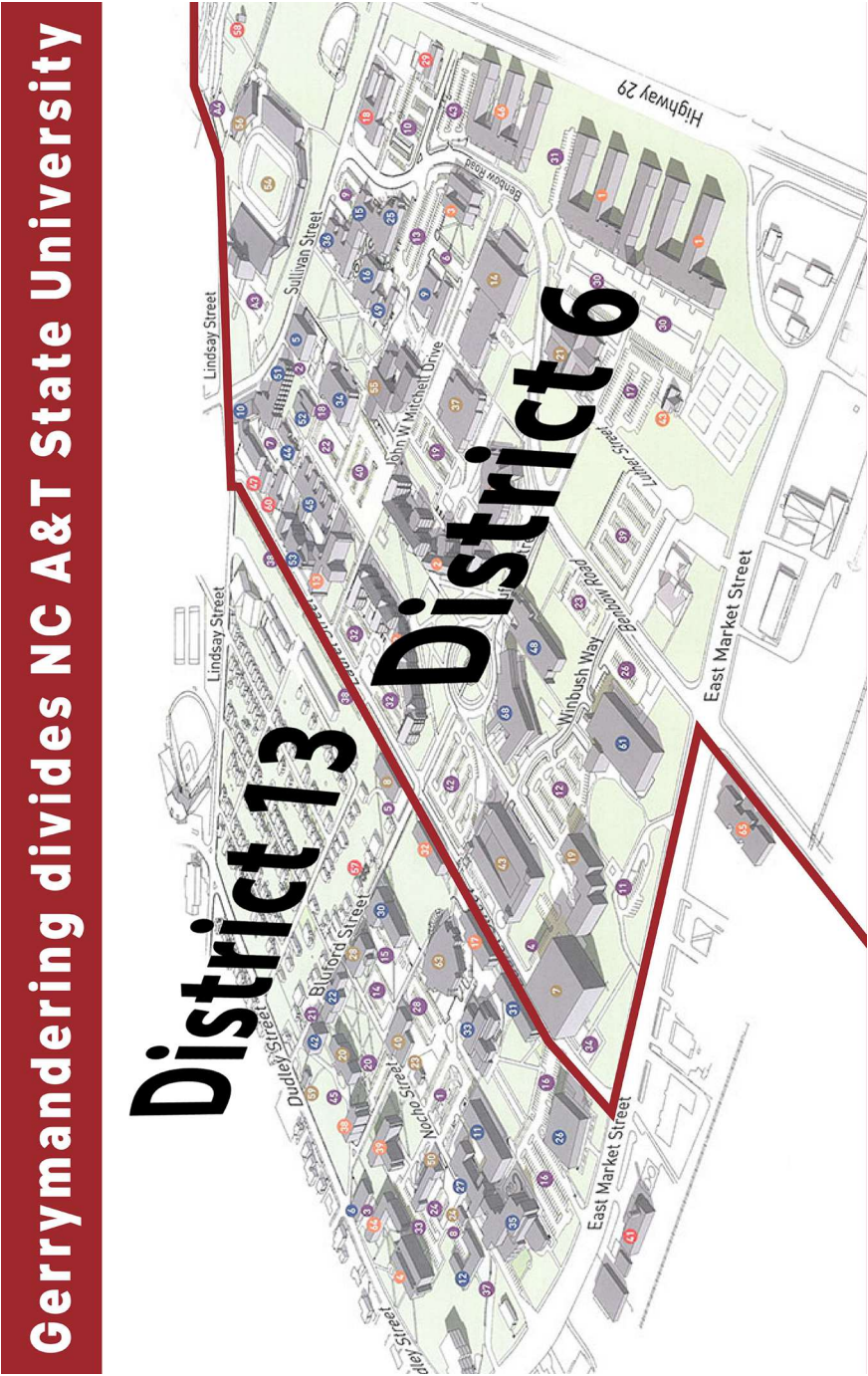


Figure 4: Image of a Common Cause poster sign depicting the North Carolina A&T gerrymander down the middle of campus along Laurel Street. Photo courtesy of Common Cause North Carolina.

racial gerrymandering in favor of partisan gerrymandering. North Carolina State Representative David Lewis became a ringleader in the political circus that was unfolding. “I acknowledge freely that this is a political gerrymander,” declared Lewis. Representing Harnett County and the interests of his party, Lewis continued with an explicit description of the power grab to come. “I propose that we draw the map to give a partisan advantage to 10 Republicans and 3 Democrats, because I do not believe it’s possible to draw a map with 11 Republicans and 2 Democrats.”²⁹ Lewis’ articulation of the GOP effort sent a clear message, and the brash move made two things abundantly clear. The first was that Republicans in the General Assembly were fully committed to use gerrymandering as a tool to leverage and exploit their political power for their own gain. Second was the fact that they still viewed the largest HBCU in the country as a focal point in their efforts to fracture and weaken the Black vote in Guilford County, a move that would reverberate across the Tar Heel state and have a serious impact on local, state, and national elections. NC A&T students concretely understood the racist ramifications of the GOP’s actions, despite its disingenuous efforts to describe them as a partisan move rather than a racial one. During a press conference that highlighted the growing resistance on campus to the GOP’s moves, NC A&T student Aleecia Sutton astutely observed, “With this university being split into two congressional districts, it undermines and diminishes its political influence and its lobbying power.”³⁰

The NC A&T student body raised various options to protest the gerrymandering of campus. Long a stalwart of campus activism and mobilization, the Divine 9 organizations, composed of nine historically Black national fraternities and sororities, marshalled their resources to raise political consciousness concerning voter suppression. The ‘stroll to the polls’ initiative invoked the long tradition and ritual of ‘party strolling’ for which so many Divine 9 organizations are known. In doing so, they encouraged their members to get out the vote in order to counter voter suppression tactics. Other historic Black institutions responded to the call as well. Black churches across the country have always been pillars of resistance against white supremacy and attempts to politically marginalize the Black community. In Greensboro, several Black churches joined the fight, promoting their own get-out-the-vote campaign that was coined ‘souls to the polls.’ Black churches were

29 “NC Republicans Admit to Partisan Gerrymandering (Part 1),” February 16, 2016, posted October 16, 2017, by Common Cause NC, YouTube, 0:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scpfzpL8Q>.

30 “NC A&T Students Speak Out on Campus Gerrymandering,” posted March 22, 2016, by Common Cause NC, YouTube Video, 2:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01zyvZxY3u8>.

no stranger to joining forces with NC A&T students in the long struggle for Black liberation, particularly in the Black communities that surrounded campus that served as the church homes for both students and alumni that lived in the city. “In the past, churches have stopped services to take their entire congregation to voting locations,” wrote Allison Gilmore, editor of the NC A&T student newspaper. “Pastors figured if they could get people to come to worship God, they could get them to the polls, too.”³¹

As the push to counter voter suppression trudged onward, the Black community in Greensboro increasingly leaned upon each other to chip away at this new surge of aggression coming from political conservatives. NC A&T students couched their position in terms that were familiar with the marginalized communities that they knew so well—the new tactics emerging from the GOP were indeed old strategies, familiar rhetoric, and similar outcomes. Confronting and defeating these measures would take a consolidated and determined community that included traditional sources such as the Black church. But calls for consolidation were careful to make sure that nontraditional sources of protests were not alienated. “Souls to the Polls is not an initiative to only get Christians to vote but rather for all people who believe in the justice system,” wrote Gilmore. “Sponsors of the event include churches in the east Greensboro area and the NAACP.”³² As NC A&T students consulted with their traditional allies, they ultimately found new and perhaps unexpected ones in the court system.

Historically, African Americans have always been leery of court rulings dealing with race and the removal of social and political barriers. Indeed, emerging out of slavery, Black folks placed great trust in the judicial system and our nation’s system of checks and balances with the hope that these institutions would expand and uphold democracy and justice for all. The result was a pendulum that moved very quickly in establishing swelling optimism in our nation’s Reconstruction Amendments that abolished slavery, brought millions of formerly enslaved under the banner of citizenship, and enshrined voting rights for Black men. This trust was utterly dashed with the deliberate undermining of the Reconstruction era that saw America retreat from all of these promises as Jim Crow was codified and crystallized as a fixture of American life and white terrorism went virtually unchecked, wreaking havoc in the lives of Black people. Repeatedly the high courts in America either completely ignored these developments or were complicit in advancing systems of inequality. Although by the mid-20th century, the civil

³¹ Allison Gilmore, “Voter Suppression Hinders Progression of Black Community,” *The A&T Register*, October 16, 2018, <https://ncatregister.com/14329/the-word/voter-suppression-hinders-progression-of-black-community/>.

³² Gilmore, “Voter Suppression.”

rights movement had created the necessary pressure to create a thin veneer of justice, many African Americans concretely understood that the system could at any moment provide either loopholes or full-blown pathways towards their disfranchisement and oppression. Nothing about the court cases surrounding voter suppression in the early 21st century signaled anything different for Black people. The legal cases that emerged yet again resembled a pendulum that vacillated between rulings on gerrymandering and redistricting, with cases often being swung back and forth depending on the political makeup of the court and the justices that held the fate of the Black community and NC A&T's campus in their hands.

With the position of the courts uncertain and the wheels of justice grinding ever so slowly, NC A&T students took up lobbying and consolidating their efforts with external allies. Common Cause became a major source of support as the campus came under attack. Much like Hinton-Smith, who gravitated towards the non-partisan organization in 2013, Braxton Brewington arrived on campus as a freshman (one year later) and soon infused the intellectual talents he was honing at NC A&T into the organization that was playing a vital role in the fight against gerrymandering. Brewington lamented the scenario of painstakingly waiting for the litigation to proceed and found inspiration and an outlet for his talents in the lobbying efforts being employed by Common Cause. Launching a public campaign on campus to raise awareness of what was taking place became Brewington's mission. "We needed to draw attention to this," he recalled. "Like, can we somehow politicize this as much as possible? So, part of it was just, like, letting everyone know. So, we had a lot of events. You know, we did the chalk on the ground, and we did press. And then, also, a lot of it was just, like, let's just increase voter turnout."³³ Brewington also became a standout spokesperson on behalf of Common Cause and his fellow Aggies who were being targeted and victimized by Republican state lawmakers. On October 17, 2017, Common Cause held a press conference in Raleigh where Brewington took to the podium to publicly speak truth to power and to call for transparency and action. "Out of all the places in Greensboro to separate the districts, lawmakers chose the middle of NC A&T, the largest public HBCU in the nation," he announced:

This is not only an unconstitutional gerrymandering, but it's an attack on our campus. Voting is the most basic way to make your voice heard, to stand up for what you believe in, and let politicians know what issues you care about. And when that power, when that right, when that fundamental integrity is stripped, especially from students of color achieving higher education, that is suppression.³⁴

³³ Braxton Brewington (former A&T student), interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 31, 2024.

³⁴ Braxton Brewington, "NC A&T Students Speak Out Against Gerrymandering,"

Brewington and his peers were engaged in a public battle against GOP lawmakers in defense of NC A&T. While they were bolstered by the support of community institutions and organizations which were equally appalled by the move to divide the campus, students were often left discouraged by the absence of the ally they had hoped to count on the most during their confrontation with the state—NC A&T's administrative leadership.

In his brilliant study entitled *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom*, historian Eddie Cole astutely notes that “desegregation, equal educational and employment opportunity, fair housing, free speech, economic disparities—were intertwined with higher education. Therefore, the college presidency is a prism through which to disclose how colleges and universities have challenged or preserved the many enduring forms of anti-Black racism in the United States.”³⁵ Cole's assessment is spot on and few institutions in America have directly impacted policy and popular culture as much as our nation's colleges. Missing from Cole's list was the significant role that higher education has played in shaping and reshaping our fundamental understanding and deployment of democratic principles. For Black colleges, the ability to serve as a spear tip in the fight to preserve and expand American democracy has largely hinged upon the skilled and deft way in which university leaders have approached the complexities that surround their jobs. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Black college presidents, dependent upon private and public funding, walked a tightrope regarding the social and political environment they cultivated for their students. The men and women who led HBCUs were expected to remain largely apolitical and dispassionate, particularly as it related to racial politics.

Yet behind closed doors, Black college presidents played an instrumental role in administering a second curriculum that directly oversaw an active lecture circuit that placed outspoken leaders and activists before their student body, as well as hiring faculty who were militant in their political beliefs and created space for radical mentorship for students who found their voices in the broader fight for liberation. This was the cat-and-mouse game played by HBCU administrators at the height of the civil rights movement that made the freedom struggle's emergence from institutions such as NC A&T possible. But that was during the Jim Crow era. Few Black college students enrolling at NC A&T in the 21st century could have ever imagined that administrators overseeing a school that proudly touted its legacy as birthplace of the sit-in movement would fall under the

press conference, October 17, 2017. Posted October 17, 2017 by Common Cause NC, Facebook, 2:19, <https://www.facebook.com/CommonCauseNorthCarolina/videos/10155548174531223/>.

35 Eddie Cole, *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 4.

same constraints and hesitations as its predecessors. As students sought direction and support in their fight against voter suppression, there was concern that NC A&T's administration did not provide the full-throated endorsement and support for their actions in the way they had originally hoped.

Dr. Harold Martin was appointed Chancellor of NC A&T in 2009, four years prior to the GOP's all-out assault on voting rights in the state that ultimately targeted the Greensboro campus. As an alumnus of NC A&T, Martin was intimately familiar with NC A&T's legacy for activism, having arrived on campus as a student a few months after the campus was invaded by national guardsmen in May of 1969. Nevertheless, the responsibilities and weight of being Chancellor for the largest HBCU in the nation that was beholden to the state of North Carolina for its funding seemed to catch up with Martin, who tried his best to navigate the tense situation that was brewing. Regardless of his intentions for handling the dilemma, student activists felt as though he and other administrators weren't doing enough—a common view of previous HBCU student activists who often saw administrators as a roadblock to their agenda. Commenting on this generational and seemingly ideological divide, Brewington recalled,

I think once we got an analysis that made sense, we were like, well, wait a minute, the university is not doing its part, because why is the university allowing it to be split? And they haven't said anything. So, we were, like, pressuring them to make a public statement, which we're like, the law is on your side here. Like, you know, you should be saying this is diluting the voting power of your students. This is anti-democratic.³⁶

From the perspective of Brewington and his peers, students seemed to have a plethora of ideas that they believed could effectively counter Republican lawmakers' efforts to undermine the political power of the campus, while campus administrators had none. According to Brewington, not only did administrators fail to come to the table with opinions on how to resist, but they also proceeded to deter and delay students' opposition plans. One such plan called for coordinated busing routes to take students to the polls to vote. "And we had a bus system that took you all around campus," recalled Brewington. "And we were like, why don't we have a bus that takes you to a polling place? Like, the university doesn't need to tell people who to vote for; just, like, take them to the polls." However, getting students back and forth to the polls was something that at least initially the university moved very slowly on, much to the disdain of Brewington and his comrades. Student activists became caught up in the campus bureaucracy and what seemed like an endless cycle of deferral. The students were sent to one office

³⁶ Braxton Brewington, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 31, 2024.

after the other, and never given a straight answer on how to address the problem or even a notion that the administration seemed to care about the partition of the campus in the same way that many of the students did. In one particular meeting, Brewington recalled, “we were in the chancellor’s office, and they kept telling us that they couldn’t afford it, or it was excuse after excuse after excuse.”³⁷

The division of the campus and the suppression of young Aggies was clearly a serious situation that Brewington cared deeply about. When the university suggested that the main deterrence was cost, Brewington informed campus administrators that he would pay for it out of his own pocket which, as a struggling college student, wasn’t very deep at all. But by this time, Brewington’s passion and commitment to the cause were at a point of no return and his primary hope was that the university would get behind the students with equal fervor, or at the very least channel the spirit of activism and righteous idealism that made the institution a critical and celebrated launching point for the modern civil rights movement. “When I offered to pay for it, I think they realized how serious I was, and probably, looking back, that would’ve been, like, a really bad look,” recalled Brewington. “Then they were like, hey, we found some money. And so then they paid for buses. Then they made it a thing, and it was like, get on the A&T bus.” Campus administrators’ delayed response to creating a busing campaign was disappointing to the students, who were deeply engaged in the fight. Moreover, for students who were well aware of NC A&T’s legacy as an incubator for activism, there was a growing sense of betrayal. “I mean, when you tour the campus, they show you bullet holes at the Scott Hall memorial,” noted Brewington.

They show you bullet holes, and you meet the sole living survivor of the NC A&T Four at the breakfast every year. And so, it felt disingenuous for the university to hide behind this history. So I don’t know. I think the legacy of A&T both implored us to demand better of the university, but also gave them a shield to hide behind.³⁸

Nikolaus Knight was similarly disenchanted by the failure of NC A&T’s administration to resist the division of its campus. According to Knight, students not only saw the gerrymandering of the campus as a political stunt, but they also saw it as “evil.” Feeling morally violated, students hoped that the administration who had accepted the charge to lead the university and to care for its undergraduates would either put up a direct fight with the political forces assaulting the university, or at least find clandestine ways to support students. Previous NC A&T administrations had employed a variety of schemes and tactics to facilitate the Sit-In

³⁷ Braxton Brewington, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 31, 2024.

³⁸ Braxton Brewington, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 31, 2024.

movement and Black Power movement during the struggle for liberation in the 1960s and 70s. As Knight saw it, it wasn't as though NC A&T students did not understand the systemic nature of the voter suppression. For Knight and his peers, it was more an issue of expecting the administration to offer some kernel of support or even clandestine advice on how to resist the malicious attempts to disenfranchise students attending the largest HBCU in the nation. "We began to look at these things, like tier by tier," recalled Knight. "And then we also began to point fingers at the UNC Board of Governors at the time, and we pushed back against the university. We wrote an entire statement demanding that the university host or hold a press conference, a press conference stating what's happening, and then also stating that what's happening is racist."³⁹

Knight's recollection of the meetings that took place with the chancellor's cabinet was similar to Brewington's. As Knight observed, NC A&T administrators were motivated by self-preservation. Protection of one's job and livelihood were natural impulses that defined the Black experience in America that had also sidelined previous generations of Black folks from becoming more directly involved in a variety of movements for social justice. And much like the historic tensions that often brewed between the young and the old, whatever tacit support was being offered by Chancellor Martin's administration felt insufficient given the pressing nature of the "evil" to which students were being subjected. "I remember specifically when we had a meeting with the chancellor in his cabinet," recalled Knight.

And they sat down with us and said, look, you know if we say that what's happening here is racist, if we use that terminology and we use that language, someone from the UNC Board of Governors, who might be playing golf with this man [Martin], or playing golf with the folks that drew those lines could potentially gut us, gut our funding, you know.

Much as with Brewington, the chancellor's cabinet attempt to placate the racist forces dividing the campus in order to preserve funding relationships not only failed to register as a sufficient response, but it also felt like a betrayal of the activist branding that the university proudly marketed and displayed. "We heard all of that, and we were like this is A&T, you know," recalled Knight. "Just remember that this is still the school that has a statue of the A&T Four prominently displayed on its campus."⁴⁰ For Knight, Brewington, and their peers, whatever quiet, back-room professions of solidarity the Martin administration was making to show support, paled in comparison with the public endorsement that they had hoped for but were being regrettably denied.

³⁹ Nikolaus Knight, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 21, 2024.

⁴⁰ Nikolaus Knight, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 21, 2024.

Nevertheless, throughout the ordeal that students experienced from voter suppression, the second curriculum thrived at NC A&T and faculty members were able to carve out precious space to foster dialogue and resistance. At the height of the movement against gerrymandering, students had given faculty member Derick Smith the nickname ‘The People’s Professor,’ a designation that fully illustrated their love for and admiration of an instructor who stood atop tabletops to boldly declare the evils of the campus being targeted for voter suppression. Also standing in solidarity with the students was Professor James Steele, a faculty member in the Political Science Department who had been at the university for more than 20 years. Both professors not only encouraged students to use their voices in that crucial moment, but also gave the time-honored and student-cherished provision of extra credit for students using the unfortunate occasion as a laboratory for dissent. “We would hold meetings in the classrooms after classes were over,” remembered Knight. “So going to their office, bringing them papers, and they helped us to dissect what the language was saying, what the numbers were saying, what the data was saying. They helped us out with a lot of that, the research side of it, and then helping us put language to it, to tell the story.”⁴¹ The traditions of radical mentorship in the midst of oppression had always been the strongest legacy of Black colleges. As the 21st century unfolded and white supremacist actions had yet again targeted the Black community and Black institutions, it was the coordinated and collective response emerging from HBCUs that proved the vitality of the second curriculum as a primary force of resistance.

2 Road to Redemption: How Tragedy, Triumph, and Transition Have Reshaped the Campus of North Carolina NC A&T

As was the case in previous moments of racism targeting the campus of NC A&T, the mobilization and deployment of student activism proved effective in the fight against voter suppression. It was abundantly clear that the Greensboro campus had been targeted and deliberately partitioned along partisan as well as racial lines. The early 2000s rendered several tangible victories that may have caused Republican legislators to set their sights on the campus. In 2008, Senator Barack Obama secured a victory on the national stage, becoming the first Black president in the history of the United States. Students at NC A&T and at HBCUs across the

⁴¹ Nikolaus Knight, interviewed by Jonathan Becker, October 21, 2024.

nation enthusiastically rushed to volunteer for his campaign and to cast their votes in his favor. NC A&T's meteoric rise in student population began around the same time, and the university's brand had been publicly lifted on a national stage through successive appearances and victories in a nationally televised bowl game that, beginning in 2015, pitted the nation's two top HBCU football programs against each other in a contest that took place in Atlanta. As NC A&T increasingly found its way into the national limelight and friendly debates amongst Black people concerning which was the top HBCU in the nation, so too did GOP lawmakers in North Carolina, who controlled the campus' purse strings, find reasons to highlight and target the historic campus for repression.⁴²

The voter suppression and division of NC A&T's campus came to an end in 2019. In that year, a three-judge Superior Court panel heard the case *Harper v. Hall* and ruled that the will of the people was undermined by the establishment of partisan-based gerrymandering that skewed political districts in favor of conservatives. "For nearly a decade, Republicans have forced the people of North Carolina to vote in districts that were manipulated for their own partisan advantage," declared former United States Attorney General Eric Holder. "Now—finally—the era of Republican gerrymandering in the state is coming to an end."⁴³ Yet in that same year, another three-judge Superior Court panel ultimately ruled that it was far too close to the 2020 elections to order that the congressional maps be immediately redrawn in a way that was just and unbiased. The fight over redrawing districts in North Carolina ultimately reached the United States Supreme Court in *Rucho v. Common Cause* where the justices concluded that the fight was far too partisan for them to get involved, and thus threw the decision back down to the state courts to establish an appropriate approach for redistricting claims. The ultimate victory of reuniting the campus was bittersweet. Students at NC A&T still confronted challenges concerning voter ID, attempts to remove NC A&T's on-campus polling site, and the harsh reality that the Republican-controlled state legislator continued to weaponize gerrymandering by redrawing district lines to favor themselves across the entire state. Nevertheless, as the campus

42 Isaiah George, "An HBCU Bowl Game Wins Out Over NCAA Playoffs," *Andscape*, December 12, 2018, <https://andscape.com/features/an-hbcu-bowl-game-wins-out-over-ncaa-playoffs/>; Nick Anderson, "Some Large HBCUs are Getting Larger. The Biggest is North Carolina A&T," *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/02/11/ncat-enrollment-hbcus/>.

43 Gary D. Robertson, "North Carolina Judges Block Current Congressional Map," *Associated Press*, October 28, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/ebe3e179326d41daa5f8da577300299d>.

moved into a new decade, there were significant triumphs to celebrate—that even included the embattled Martin administration.⁴⁴

Over the course of the prolonged battles over voter suppression, student activists held the Martin administration at arm's length. While some conceded that the administration was in a difficult position and unable to provide the type of public support that students were looking for, others remained steadfast in their belief that the university could have and should have done more to denounce the targeting of the campus by hostile political forces. The collective history of HBCUs has consistently illustrated the resolve certain college administrators found to subtly advance the freedom dreams of Black youth. This often took place while being confronted with immense political pressure to succumb to the demands of hostile governing bodies that sought to undermine the mission of the institution. For Black colleges in America, that mission has included providing space for youth to be equipped with the intellectual tools to deconstruct bigotry, hatred, and intolerance that marginalized the lives of African Americans. When the sit-ins emerged at A&T in 1960, university president Warmoth T. Gibbs faced intense demands to shut down the protests and bring his students to heel. He famously retorted that “we teach our students how to think, not what to think.”⁴⁵ He was subsequently fired from his position but left the institution with his head held high, knowing that his actions aided his students in launching a movement that would radically reshape American democracy and civil rights for millions of people who had been denied these rights and freedoms for far too long. The questions confronting the administration of Chancellor Harold Martin were how his administration would answer this new challenge and whether his actions would in any way mirror the courageous steps taken by his predecessor, President Gibbs.

The answers provided a modicum of redemption for the Martin administration. After years of being silently ridiculed by student activists who believed he was not living up to the Aggie legacy as a forbearer for justice, Martin salvaged his reputation by taking key steps that insured that NC A&T would continue to be a space that cultivated and embraced the next generation of activists who could hone their skills and talents for the purpose of forging a more just society. Like other Black college students, young Aggies had always been able to lean upon interstitial spaces such as classrooms and office hours of faculty who endeared themselves to their causes. Beginning in 2020, the Martin administration ensured

⁴⁴ Michael Wines, “State Court Bars Using North Carolina House Map in 2020 Elections,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/us/north-carolina-gerrymander-maps.html>.

⁴⁵ Bruce Lambert, “Warmoth T. Gibbs, 101, Educator Who Backed Civil Rights Protests,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1993.

that these spaces would become more formal for the growing student population that called NC A&T home. In that year, the campus established the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement, whose purpose was to expressly link NC A&T students with organizations engaged in the work of preserving and expanding democracy and to apprise students of their voting rights. The office continues to promote the motto and mission of “developing your capacity to change the world.” In 2021, the Martin administration moved forward with the establishment of a Center of Excellence for Social Justice (CESJ). The CESJ was funded in part by a generous donation from philanthropist McKenzie Scott, and quickly secured major funding from other private donors and foundations. These private gifts ensured that the center would move forward in its goals to advance NC A&T’s enduring commitment to uplifting civil and human rights through the creation of various campus and community-based programs.⁴⁶

Chancellor Harold Martin retired from the university in the spring of 2024; however, these administrative moves largely created through his vision and desire to study and improve the human condition demonstrated that he was cut from the same cloth as those students who led the charge to defend the campus against those who sought to divide it for their political gain. His path to achieve these ends was circuitous, as is often the case for those who must navigate and balance the burdens and expectations of leadership. Nevertheless, Martin’s redemption created valuable space that continues to pour elements of leadership, race consciousness, and idealism into the next generation of Aggie activists. In recent years, both the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement and the CESJ have worked to establish programming that bolsters the identity of their students as civic actors and change agents while also deepening the university’s ties with civic organizations in the community that are dedicated to democracy and social justice for all.

The fallout from the political battles over gerrymandering has unquestionably reshaped the makeup of the institution, and political threats to challenge the legitimacy and longevity of NC A&T and the Black community that surround it remain ever present. The history of the United States bears out the painful truth that the road to democracy for African Americans has been neither linear nor easy. Nor has that journey ever been fully achieved. With the gutting of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the threat of gerrymandering, and a host of other political maneuvers meant to suppress the Black vote, the road remains cluttered with a variety of ob-

⁴⁶ Jamille Whitlow, “N.C. A&T OSD Motivates Students to Vote,” *The A&T Register*, October 6, 2020, <https://ncatregister.com/17615/the-yard/n-c-at-osd-motivates-students-to-vote/>; Markita C. Rowe, “N.C. A&T Establishes Center of Excellence for Social Justice,” *Aggie Newsroom*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.ncat.edu/news/2023/09/social-justice-center-established.php>.

stacles intended to prolong and negate the full political empowerment of historically marginalized communities. Since 1837, Black colleges have served as shelters in a time of storm. Not only have they provided an enclave where Black youth were protected from absorbing messages from the dominant society that were intended to reinforce second-class citizenship and inferiority, but they also provided the most fertile ground for resistance, advocacy, and mobilization. When Dr. Harold Trigg spoke at NC A&T in 1934, he had no way of looking down the corridors of time to see that African Americans would still be encountering the same hostilities that defined the Black experience during the early 20th century. But his counsel for Black educators to remain vigilant in their work in order to advance the freedom dreams of those youth under their charge continues to be prescient and relevant. If this grand American experiment and the democratic ideals that it has professed but rarely practiced are to survive for future generations, then not only must it be open to healing and rehabilitation, but educators within our most valued and treasured institutions must also embrace Trigg's timeless message that "the future of the nation lies in the hands of the boys and girls that are under your guidance."

Bibliography

- "650 Troops Sweep A&T." *Greensboro Daily News*, May 23, 1969.
- Anderson, Nick. "Some Large HBCUs are Getting Larger. The Biggest is North Carolina A&T." *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/02/11/ncat-enrollment-hbcus/>.
- Bermanzohn, Sally Avery. *Through Survivors' Eyes: From the Sixties Through the Greensboro Massacre*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2003.
- Biondi, Martha. *The Black Revolution on Campus*. University of California Press, 2012.
- Brewington, Braxton. "NC A&T Students Speak Out Against Gerrymandering." Press conference, October 17, 2017. Posted October 17, 2017, by Common Cause NC. Facebook, 2:19. <https://www.facebook.com/CommonCauseNorthCarolina/videos/10155548174531223/>.
- Brown, David Lee. "University to Be Site of First Conference for Black Students." *The A&T Register*, May 2, 1969. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/364>.
- Cameron, Spurgeon. "Students Hold Mass Meet in Gymnasium to Rally Against Cuts." *The Register*, April 1, 1959. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/152/>.
- Chafe, William. *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Cherry, Juan. "School Daze Stirs Emotions: If Black is Beautiful, What's the Issue?" *The A&T Register*, April 29, 1988. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1096/>.
- Cohen, Robert. *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941*. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Cole, Eddie. *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

- Common Cause. "Common Cause: Holding Power Accountable." <https://actionnetwork.org/groups/common-cause-holding-power-accountable>.
- Debnam, Rhonda. "Gantt Visits Greensboro." *The A&T Register*, September 21, 1990. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1138/>.
- Democracy Docket. "The Decade-Long Fight Against Racial Gerrymandering." May 6, 2021. <https://www.democracydocket.com/analysis/the-decade-long-fight-against-racial-gerrymandering/>.
- Etheridge, James. "Jackson Swings Through Triad; Advises Students to Vote." *The A&T Register*, April 27, 1984. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1009/>.
- Favors, Jelani M. *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- "Fraternities are Urged to Fight Tyranny, Injustice." *The Register*, December 1950. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/111/>.
- George, Isaiah. "An HBCU Bowl Game Wins Out Over NCAA Playoffs." *Andscape*, December 12, 2018. <https://andscape.com/features/an-hbcu-bowl-game-wins-out-over-ncaa-playoffs/>.
- "Ghana Ambassador Speaks at A&T 60th Commencement." *The Register*, July 16, 1958. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/150/>.
- Gilmore, Allison. "Voter Suppression Hinders Progression of Black Community." *The A&T Register*, October 16, 2018. <https://ncatregister.com/14329/the-word/voter-suppression-hinders-progression-of-black-community>.
- Ingalls, Gerald L. and Moore, Toby. "The Present and Future of Racial Gerrymandering: Evidence from North Carolina's 12th Congressional District." *Southeastern Geographer* 35, no. 1 (1995): 58–74. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sgo.1995.0009>.
- "Jackson to Address Commencement." *The A&T Register*, April 8, 1988. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1094/>.
- Kerr, Josephine. "Gantt Falls Short at Polls Regardless of Increased Aggie Voting Turnout." *The A&T Register*, November 15, 1996. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1204/>.
- Lambert, Bruce. "Warmoth T. Gibbs, 101, Educator Who Backed Civil Rights Protests." *New York Times*, April 22, 1993.
- Mason, William D. Jr. "A&T and Gov. Hodges." *The Register*, November 15, 1955. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/141>.
- "NC A&T Students Speak Out on Campus Gerrymandering." Posted March 22, 2016, by Common Cause NC. YouTube, 2:37. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01zyvZxY3u8>.
- "NC Republicans Admit to Partisan Gerrymandering (Part 1)." February 16, 2016. Posted October 16, 2017, by Common Cause NC. YouTube, 0:15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scfpZ-pl8Q>.
- "NC Republicans Vow to Fight US DOJ Over Voter Laws," *The A&T Register*, October 2, 2013.
- North Carolina Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. "Trouble in Greensboro: A Report of an Open Meeting concerning Disturbances at Dudley High School and North Carolina A&T State University." March 1970. <https://www2.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr12t75.pdf>.
- "Over 600 Attend SOBU Conference." *The A&T Register*, November 7, 1969. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/373>.
- "People: The Younger Generation." *Time Magazine*, November 5, 1951. <https://time.com/archive/6794406/people-the-younger-generation/>.
- Richards, Johnetta. *The Southern Negro Youth Congress: A History*. University of Cincinnati Press, 1987.

- Rickford, Russel. *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Robertson, Gary D. "North Carolina Judges Block Current Congressional Map." *Associated Press*, October 28, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/ebe3e179326d41daa5f8da577300299d>.
- Rowe, Markita C. "N.C. A&T Establishes Center of Excellence for Social Justice." *Aggie Newsroom*, September 21, 2023. <https://www.ncat.edu/news/2023/09/social-justice-center-established.php>.
- Ruff, Jamie C. "More Power to Jesse Jackson." *The A&T Register*, March 23, 1984. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1004/>.
- Shetterly, Aran. *Morningside: The 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the Struggle for an American City's Soul*. Amistad, 2024.
- Spruill, Albert. "Jackson's Candidacy Offers Sense of Hope." *The A&T Register*, August 28, 1984. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1010/>.
- "Students, Faculty Debate Candidacy." *The A&T Register*, November 13, 1987. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/1084/>.
- "Students Start Campaign Fund." *The A&T Register*, January 24, 1984. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/996/>.
- Swindall, Lindsay. *The Path to the Greater, Freer, Truer World: Southern Civil Rights and Anticolonialism, 1937–1955*. University Press of Florida, 2019.
- "Three Important Addresses Heard." *The Register*, July 6, 1934. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/24/>.
- Whitlow, Jamille. "N.C. A&T OSD Motivates Students to Vote." *The A&T Register*, October 6, 2020. <https://ncatregister.com/17615/the-yard/n-c-at-osd-motivates-students-to-vote/>.
- Williams, Audrey L. "Beware of Reaganomics." *The A&T Register*, January 22, 1982. <https://digital.library.ncat.edu/atregister/925/>.
- Wines, Michael. "State Court Bars Using North Carolina House Map in 2020 Elections." *New York Times*, October 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/us/north-carolina-gerrymander-maps.html>.
- Zucchino, David. *Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy*. Grove Press, 2021.