

### Albert Joyner, Civil Rights Pioneer

In 1950, one of North Carolina's earliest grassroots movements for school integration began in the tiny mountain town of Old Fort, four years before the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision desegregated American schools. The Catawba View Grammar School, an all-black elementary school, was built on land purchased by the black community of Old Fort. In addition, black citizens built its washrooms, graded and landscaped the grounds, and "equipped [its] auditorium with expensive curtains. Black citizens shared stories of "mortgaging their homes to buy the school grounds."



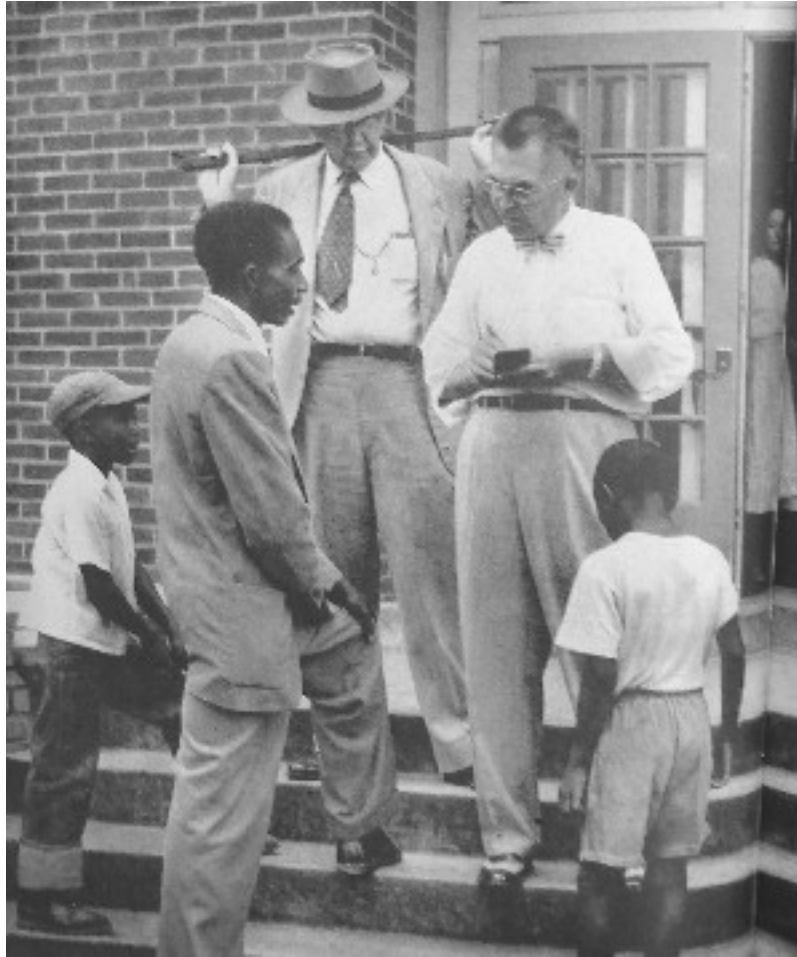
One Sunday in September of 1950, the residents of Old Fort were startled to see dozens of African American children marching down the main street of town carrying signs saying, "We Want Our School Back" and "What Happened to Our School". Local officials unilaterally decided to shut down the Catawba View Grammar School and bus its 75 elementary students to a poorly equipped black school in Marion, 30 miles round trip. Faced with losing an institution that represented years of personal investment, school patrons hired a white attorney [Sandlin] and collected eighty-six signatures on a petition demanding the school's preservation. At the time, parents were not demanding integration, but rather reestablishment of a black school at Old Fort. Despite black opposition, petitions by parents, and protests by children, the school was shut down in 1952 and razed. A state investigator found that "there was not one person interviewed who did not regret the removal of the school from the community." One white Old Fort resident published an opinion in the local newspaper calling the closing and razing of the black school "acts of aggression" and "disgraceful."



After the Catawba View School was destroyed, black parents in Old Fort began to submit petitions to the McDowell County Board of Education for their children to be allowed to attend the all-white Old Fort Elementary. The applications were denied, and the families tried every legal avenue available to them without success. Then came *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional but left the timing and speed of desegregation to the states and to the individual school systems. *Brown* had altered the legal terrain on which such cases could be adjudicated. In July 1955, the Old Fort case was dismissed. The Judge argued that *Brown* rendered the request for a segregated black school unconstitutional.

It soon became clear that in excluding blacks from educational decision making and refusing to take seriously black priorities for their children, whites were fueling the integration movement they had hoped to contain. Having reached a dead end, 31-year-old nursing assistant and WWII veteran Albert Joyner resorted to direct action protest. Mr. Joyner was a new resident to Old Fort. He had no school-age children at the time. He knew of the plans for some leaders of the black community to escort a group of children to the elementary school on the morning of August 24<sup>th</sup>, but he was not involved until he noticed outside his window 5 black children standing alone. Earlier that week, word of plans had circulated through town and several hundred white spectators gathered that morning. There had been threats and warnings from some whites in town, and the designated escorts had gotten cold feet. They didn't show up. In an interview, Joyner revealed "That's the way it was back then. Blacks were afraid to stand up to the whites." Without a second thought, Mr. Joyner put on his best suit, walked outside, and led the children through town. "... that was only the business of the Lord... I take you by the hand." Joyner recalled. A mostly hostile crowd of 300-400 people lined the route, but Joyner felt no fear. He felt that he had been called by God to step into this role, so there was no need to be afraid. Some members of the crowd at the schoolhouse were reportedly armed, but there were no incidents. Joyner and the children approached the schoolhouse "in an orderly manner" and asked politely that the black children be registered. The county superintendent informed Joyner that the school board had not authorized integration but that a committee was studying the issue. Joyner and the children left without incident. The newspaper

headlines the next day read “Negro Pupils Report To Old Fort School, Denied Entry” and “Five Negro Children Attempt Admittance At Old Fort School.”

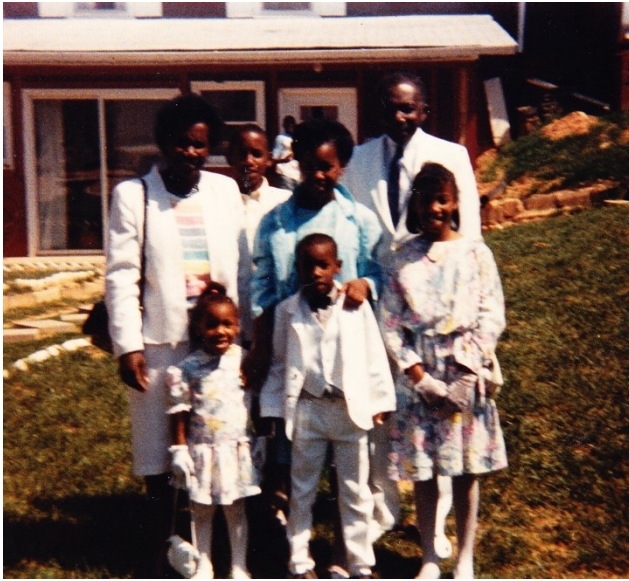


Several weeks after the attempt to enroll the children, Mr. Joyner was in downtown Old Fort taking his sister to meet the bus when a white railroad worker punched him, knocking him into the town fountain. Mr. Joyner remembered the incident by saying “That’s when they knocked me in the back ... I got beat up bad.” Mr. Joyner’s sister went across the street to a drug store to call the police, but the store personnel would not allow her to enter. The police came anyway, arresting Joyner and the railroad worker. Many times, over the ensuing years as the Old Fort integration case wound its way through the court system, Albert Joyner would be subject to threats and intimidation. He never backed down and always appeared in court.





In reviewing the case in late 1955, U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed that *Brown* had indeed “made inappropriate” the establishment of a segregated school as a form of relief, but the judges did not offer easy alternatives. In 1957, 66 black parents applied to send their children to Old Fort’s white schools, but the school board rejected them, arguing that they had incorrectly filled out their applications and that additional enrollment in already crowded white schools posed health and safety risks. The color line in McDowell County’s schools remained intact for another 7 years.



In 2004, Albert Joyner was 78 years old and was recognized in the McDowell News for his civil rights efforts. “It makes no difference what people think about you. You got to have a getting up spirit,” he said. In 2011 Joyner’s story came to the attention of Buncombe County Commission, and he told it before a capacity audience at an MLK, Jr. prayer breakfast in Asheville. In March of 2011, a road in Old Fort (formerly Baptist Side Road) was named Albert Joyner Drive in tribute to his heroic attempt. Albert died in 2011 at the age of 86.

