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The dawn of the 1980s proved to be a troubling period in many southern cities in America because of racial conflict, class inequities, and frayed politics. These tensions often overlapped and, at times, were fatal. One of the most tragic examples of extreme racial violence occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, on November 3, 1979, when the multi-racial Communist Workers Party (CWP) attended a demonstration to protest against the notorious Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The procession, referred to as a “Death to Klan” march, was scheduled to begin in a public housing, predominately black working-class community called Morningside Homes. As the marchers were gathering, a group of Nazis and Klansmen drove through the protest site in a nine-car caravan and unloaded eighty-eight rounds of gunfire.<sup>1</sup> As a result, five people were killed including one African American woman, three Caucasian men, and a Cuban American male, all of whom were a part of the CWP.

This event, which was dubbed the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, has remained a contentious topic over the past thirty years. However, while the story appears to be straightforward, it will be demonstrated through this study that it is more complex than it appears. This work will present this one event through the lens of the personal stories of those who were directly involved in the tragedy. There were four main groups: the Communist Workers Party, the Ku Klux Klan, the Greensboro Police Department, and

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Southern Studies, “The Third of November,” *Southern Exposure* 9 (1981): 62.

the residents of Morningside Homes. They all have positions within the story of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, and when considering their interpretations, it is clear that there is no such thing as a single truth of this event. In fact, there are multiple truths. This work, however, is not relativistic on the issue of responsibility for the violence. Where possible, the perspectives of each group have been interwoven with the “facts” given in the criminal and civil trials as well as FBI files. What has become clear is that, with the exception of the residents, each party had a responsibility for the 1979 tragedy.

This study will discuss the realities of each group at the time the massacre happened, what they think now about the decisions that were made by those who were involved, and the way they continue to understand and recall this event. How the people who took part in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre “remember” is not only important for how one may view and understand the murders in years to come, but it is also important for putting to rest many of the misunderstandings and unsubstantiated claims that are often associated with the event. By way of the evidence, this emotionally driven topic will reveal how all of those involved in that fateful November conflict felt threatened, were victimized, and have often been misinterpreted.

STORIES OF THE GREENSBORO MASSACRE

by

Tiffany George Butler Quaye

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To my parents and sister for their unending love and support. Also, to Malia, my love, my baby, thank you for reminding me what reigns as being most important. No doubt about it, you were sent from above. Lastly, to the people of Morningside Homes....you have not been forgotten and this work is my ode to you.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of  
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## ABBREVIATIONS

CWP	COMMUNIST WORKERS PARTY
KKK	KU KLUX KLAN
GPD	GREENSBORO POLICE DEPARTMENT
RWL	REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS LEAGUE
BCCPB	BLACK CITIZENS CONCERNED WITH POLICE BRUTALITY
GAPP	GREENSBORO ASSOCIATION FOR POOR PEOPLE

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 1980s proved to be a troubling period in many southern cities in America because of racial conflict, class inequities, and frayed politics. These tensions often overlapped and, at times, were fatal. One of the most tragic examples of extreme racial violence occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, on November 3, 1979, when the multi-racial Communist Workers Party (CWP) attended a demonstration to protest against the notorious Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The procession, referred to as a “Death to Klan” march, was scheduled to begin in a public housing, predominately black working-class community called Morningside Homes. As the marchers were gathering, a group of Nazis and Klansmen drove through the protest site in a nine-car caravan and unloaded eighty-eight seconds of gunfire.<sup>1</sup> As a result, five people were killed including one African American woman, three Caucasian men, and a Cuban American male, all of whom were a part of the CWP. This event, which was dubbed the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, has remained a contentious topic over the past thirty years. However, while the story appears to be straightforward, it will be demonstrated through this study that it is more complex than it appears.

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Southern Studies, “The Third of November,” *Southern Exposure* 9 (1981): 62.

This work will present this one event through the lens of the personal stories of those who were directly involved in the tragedy. There were four main groups: the Communist Workers Party, the Ku Klux Klan, the Greensboro Police Department, and the residents of Morningside Homes. They all have positions within the story of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, and when considering their interpretations, it is clear that there is no such thing as a single truth of this event. In fact, there are multiple truths. This work, however, is not relativistic on the issue of responsibility for the violence. Where possible, the perspectives of each group have been interwoven with the “facts” given in the criminal and civil trials as well as FBI files. What has become clear is that, with the exception of the residents, each party had a responsibility for the 1979 tragedy.

This study will discuss the realities of each group at the time the massacre happened, what they think now about the decisions that were made by those who were involved, and the way they continue to understand and recall this event. How the people who took part in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre “remember” is not only important for how one may view and understand the murders in years to come, but it is also important for putting to rest many of the misunderstandings and unsubstantiated claims that are often associated with the event. By way of the evidence, this emotionally driven topic will reveal how all of those involved in that fateful November conflict felt threatened, were victimized, and have often been misinterpreted.

Clearly, the calamity goes beyond the murder of five people of different ethnicities. Questions that linger include the following: What inspired the Communist Workers Party to plan such a march? Why did they choose Morningside? What was it

about the CWP that angered the Klan so? Why did the Klan make a decision to kill? Finally, where were the police and was their response adequate? These questions became even more pertinent when just over one year after this tragedy, on November 17, 1980, an all-white jury acquitted the six white men who were responsible for the murders.

Only those who had a significant role in this tragedy can provide answers to and insight into these lingering questions. Of course, there will always be a dispute concerning the facts of what happened. It is still important, however, to examine the stories of those involved in order to understand why the 1979 Greensboro Massacre continues to linger emotionally in the racial memory of the city and its residents. This work does not assert that it will end any further debate surrounding November 3, 1979. In fact, this work will hopefully encourage more dialogue about the event. This research does, however, seek to bring about a better collective and unbiased portrayal of these events that may lead the local citizens, as well as those involved, towards a realistic path of reconciliation.

In the years following November 3, 1979, at least four main interpretations have emerged regarding how and why the 1979 Greensboro Massacre occurred. The first originated with the local and surrounding area mainstream media. Several news stations captured the actual confrontation on tape because news crews were already in place to cover what they thought was only going to be a protest march. Little did they know that a mere march would escalate into a blood bath. At the time of the event itself, their coverage suggested that the lack of police protection set the stage for this tragedy. However, over time, and based on the same footage, the media focus changed from the

CWP being victims to the CWP “reaping what they sowed,” since it, like the Klan, were considered by many to be an “extremist” group.<sup>2</sup>

A second interpretation of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre comes from surviving members of the CWP. In various forums they have argued that they were targeted by the FBI, Klan, and local police department primarily as a warning against challenging white supremacy. Ultimately, the members of the CWP have written the most about the event itself, a total of at least four books since 1979.<sup>3</sup> Based on the personal nature of the writings, these works are approached best as memoirs rather than scholarship. These memoirs, however, are invaluable and will be consulted for this work. They provide insight on and bring clarity to some of the most intimate plans, strategies, and decisions of the CWP, including its choice to use Morningside Homes as the starting location for its “Death to the Klan” march.

The KKK provided yet a third interpretation. It focused on the language of the CWP’s rally entitled “Death to the Klan.” Members of the Klan took this wording literally and they told the media and the jury at their criminal trial that their shooting was in self-defense. To them, “Death to the Klan” meant the communists were out to kill members of the KKK.<sup>4</sup> This explanation provides some insight into why this organization acted with such force. Their perspective of the racial and political conflict

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<sup>2</sup>Jack Scism, “Shootout Aftermath: Search For Reasons,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 5, 1979, Sec. A.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Bermanohn & Sally Bermanzohn, *The True Story of the Greensboro Massacre* (New York: César Cauce Publishers and Distributors, 1980); Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Inc., 2002); Sally Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors’ Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Brent Hackney, “Klansmen, Nazis May Be Accusing One Another,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 9, 1979, Sec. A.

of November 3rd demands that this work seeks a deeper understanding of the worldviews of the KKK and why communism was considered such a threat to their way of life.

Fourth is the argument of Elizabeth Wheaton, a trained historian from the University of Georgia who worked at the Institute of Southern Studies and associated with members of the CWP in the years leading up to the shooting. Wheaton is one of the first and only authors to address The Greensboro Massacre in a scholarly fashion. In the past, she has been verbally attacked for offering criticism of those involved, including a critique of the CWP. It is Wheaton's criticism, though, that makes her work so groundbreaking because it rightfully recognizes that the blame lies not only with the Klan, but also with the Greensboro Police Department and the CWP. Wheaton also concentrates on the two criminal trials and one civil suit surrounding the murders. Her work does an effective job of holding the justice system accountable for never convicting anyone for the crime. Wheaton's study, however, is less useful for understanding the important dynamics of the racial, class, and political climates of Greensboro.<sup>5</sup> That is precisely where this scholarship will begin, by using the local story of the Greensboro Massacre to illustrate how the elements of race, class, and politics affected ordinary Americans.

This story is a layered description of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. In it are acts of activism, terrorism, marginalization, victimization, and stories of survival. This work will further investigate how one event affected an entire city, how the key parties involved in the shooting have been adversely affected, and how they decided to respond

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Wheaton, *Codename Greenkil: The 1979 Greensboro Killings* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

to this tragedy both then and now. The approach taken towards this project has been inspired and influenced by several scholars. James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro* provided a useful blueprint of how to take one charged event and provide several sides of the story in an effort to understand why and how each perspective serves as truth.<sup>6</sup> Christina Greene's work on Durham, North Carolina, and her approach of using local history as a tool for understanding the larger picture of race, class, and politics have also served as a guide. Equally important models for this research were Rhonda Williams' study of Baltimore women and public housing and Annelise Orleck's study of black women and their fight against the war on poverty in Las Vegas.<sup>7</sup> The works of Williams and Orleck are paramount for this study because they successfully captured the stories and voices of their subjects through personal interviews. This work does much of the same.

In an attempt to "fill in some of the gaps" of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, the majority of the interviews conducted were with those who have not been able to tell their own stories in the past. Since the residents of Morningside Homes have publicly spoken the least concerning the event, their interviews outnumber any other group in this work. The willingness of the residents to talk with the author allowed for their perspectives to be juxtaposed with the already recorded interpretations of the CWP, the Klan, and the police.

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<sup>6</sup> James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Rhonda Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

The story of the Greensboro Massacre and those who were involved in it will be told in four substantial chapters following chapter one, the introduction. Chapter two, entitled “We Shall Not, We Shall Not Be Moved: The Communist Workers Party (CWP) and the Fight Against White Supremacy,” will answer the questions of who the individuals of the Communist Workers Party were, what their worldviews were, as well as their objectives. The discussion of leftist politics and ideologies of the CWP help illuminate why it understood the Klan as not only a racial hate group, but also a threat to the working class. Equally important in the telling of the CWP’s story is the manner in which it was victimized on November 3, 1979, when they were unprotected by the police and, as a result, five of their members were gunned down.

Chapter three, entitled “I Don’t See the Difference between Killing Communists in Vietnam and Killing Them Here: The North Carolina Klan and Their Strategies of Defense Against Leftist Politics,” examines the worldview of the KKK and why it understood the CWP as such a threat to freedom and the American way of life. This chapter deals with how the local Ku Klux Klan arose in Cone Mills as a way of stopping black working class activism. The presence of the Klan was also a response to the reinvigoration of the CWP and its challenge of local white supremacy. Within this chapter, the discussion of the Ku Klux Klan’s views will explain why the members of this organization felt they had no other choice but to attack the protestors on November 3, 1979.

Chapter four, entitled “The Local Police and Their Response to Extremism: Our Planning and Preparation for the Anti-Klan March Was Adequate and Proper,” focuses



on the Greensboro Police Department's explanation for why they were not present sooner at the scene of the march. According to the authorities, the lack of cooperation of the protestors hindered officers from quelling such a violent clash between two extremist groups. This chapter will explain why the reputation of the police has been tarnished by this event and how it complicated even further their relationship with the local African American community.

Chapter five, simply entitled "The Dirt Is Still Bloody: Morningside Homes and the Lasting Effects of a Tragedy," discusses the economic, labor, and geographic marginalization of much of the black community in Greensboro in comparison to local, predominately white communities during the 1960s and 1970s. More specifically, this chapter delves into the marginalization of the African American area encompassed by the public housing community of Morningside Homes in comparison to both local white and middle-class black neighborhoods. These comparisons illuminate the varying degrees of isolation of Morningside from much of the rest of Greensboro, but also the poverty, under-education, and discrimination in this particular area of the city. These disadvantages led the CWP to the Morningside area to provide political leadership and guidance. Instead of the "Death to the Klan" march empowering the people, the party devastated the community by implanting fear and distrust among the residents. This chapter will illustrate how the former residents of Morningside still struggle with paralyzing fear as a result of the massacre, over thirty years after the event.

Sources for this project are composed of a conglomerate of primary materials. As mentioned earlier, memoirs written by CWP survivors, 1979 national and local

newspaper accounts, and local news and media video footage of the event were used. In addition, Workers' Viewpoint Organization newsletters and memos, police reports, FBI documents, personal letters, trial transcripts, census and city council records, along with interviews conducted by the author have been used.

Secondary sources were equally important to this work. The previously mentioned research by Elizabeth Wheaton was indispensable to this study. Other secondary material that was also useful was William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*. Chafe offers excellent insight into the racial and political struggles of Greensboro leading into the 1970s and why those specific topics remained so contentious as late as 1979.

This study will reveal how authorities, organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and Communist Workers Party, as well as local communities chose their fights, defined their freedoms, and decided their alliances as the country entered a new conservative era. Finally, this work will provide a fresh perspective of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre and the strides that have been made to bring closure to a topic that has remained so extremely controversial.

Before entering into the stories and interpretations of the key players of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, it is imperative to, first, address why this event occurring in the city of Greensboro is so significant. For many, it is baffling how a tragedy so racially and politically charged could happen in this city. Greensboro boasts of historically having great race relations, and during the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, Greensboro was considered to be the most liberal southern city in America. It

brags about having not a single recorded lynching. More important, Greensboro is home to North Carolina A&T State University's (NCA&TSU) "Greensboro Four."<sup>8</sup>

The Greensboro Four were NCA&TSU college students who on February 1, 1960, led a sit-in movement at the local Woolworth Counter. The leaders of Greensboro chose to concentrate more on the fact that they had brave souls who were both willing and able to tackle racism and discrimination head on than the fact that there was a need for a sit-in in the city. Although the Greensboro Four did not conduct the very first sit-in, their action sparked the spread of the movement across the entire South. Therefore, Greensboro was the poster child for racial and political tolerance while also serving as a leader in the movement for equality. The occurrence of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, however, suggested something different.

Placing this local event into the national context of the social and political climates of the time could help explain why even the most liberal city in the South could sorely fall victim to such racial and political intolerance. The 1970s were just twenty years removed from the McCarthy Era of the 1950s. McCarthyism, named after the anti-communist Senator Joseph McCarthy, endorsed among Americans harsh treatment of anyone who may have exhibited any signs of political opposition to American patriotism. Fueled by what was known as the "Second Red Scare," McCarthyism fostered the practice of unsubstantiated accusations of treason, espionage, and disloyalty to one's country. This charge was especially a problem for those who lived in America and were associated with or suspected of being linked with communism. It was believed by some

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<sup>8</sup> William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 56-99.

in the United States government and many other Americans that the Soviet Union's communist influence was spilling over onto American soil, particularly among union organizers and those in favor of civil rights legislation.

During the 1960s when the fight for civil and human rights was at its peak, accusations of having an association with communism was the primary way used to discredit political activists, particularly African American activists. This red-baiting was used against civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Robert Williams, among others. These allegations of communism led the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to infiltrate the lives and organizations of movement leaders. The actions of the FBI towards specific activists oftentimes stifled community politics and often led to the condoning of violence against them and anyone else the FBI and other authorities understood as a threat to the United States government. This national attitude towards alternative politics trickled down to local spaces helping to explain why even in "liberal" Greensboro the presence of communism in 1979 caused such an uproar. There is evidence that will be shown of a collaboration between the FBI, the Greensboro Police Department, and the Ku Klux Klan to repress leftist organizations. For example, there were at least two provocateurs that worked for the federal government that were instructed to promote violence. The banding together of these authoritative forces and their attitudes of hatred explains why local officers were not compelled to intercept such an extreme attack on a group of communists gathering in a working-class, predominately African American public housing community. Nonetheless, what remains most important is how national stances that translated into local tragedies, such as the 1979

Greensboro Massacre, impacted every day people and changed their lives forever. This story deserves to be told from the perspective of all who were involved, and it is in those stories that the true hazards and deep misfortunes of hate, discrimination, and intolerance will be revealed.

## CHAPTER II

### “WE SHALL NOT, WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED”: THE COMMUNIST WORKERS PARTY (CWP) AND THE FIGHT AGAINST WHITE SUPREMACY

The origin of the CWP has its roots in founding members whose life experiences bred them to become social activists concerned about the plight of the oppressed. Led by Jerry Tung, the CWP was headquartered in New York City from 1975-1984. Tung was an Asian American that joined forces with people across racial lines to challenge the capitalistic nature of American society. Originally named the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO), the CWP was guided by the teachings of Marx, Lenin and Mao Tse Tung.<sup>1</sup> The group based their revolutionary vanguard party within the working class and advocated for the overthrow of the United States government by any means possible, including the use of violence. This worldview was supported by the North Carolina chapter of the CWP when local member Paul Bermanzohn described them as a “political party standing for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism, which we think would be best for the vast majority of the people.”<sup>2</sup> The above self-description helps explain why the members of the CWP have often been perceived as troublemakers who brought violence upon themselves due to their attempt to disrupt America’s economic and political foundations. This chapter reveals that despite the protestors’ affiliations with communism, the violence committed against them during the 1979

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<sup>1</sup> “Paul Bermanzohn,” Box 5, Folder 4, *FBI Files*, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina, pg 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Moss, “Communists Challenge KKK to Come to Rally,” *Salisbury Evening Post*, October 11, 1979, 8.

Greensboro Massacre was unwarranted and largely left the CWP mischaracterized, violated and victimized. A closer examination of the CWP illuminates how members of the organization were common, everyday people with an intense passion for confronting discrimination, particularly in the arenas of race and class.

Before the members of the North Carolina CWP knew each other, politics had been a part of their individual fabric. In fact, some form of radicalism had already been present in most of their lives as early as childhood. Their family experiences also helped to shape their decisions to challenge injustices head-on. Their collective understanding of being discriminated against based on race, ethnicity, and class eventually led them to the road of communism by the late 1970s. An explanation of their backgrounds is necessary for humanizing this group of people who spent years of their lives being ostracized because of their association with what was perceived as “monstrous” politics.

One of the most prominent CWP members in North Carolina was a local African American local activist, Nelson Johnson. Johnson, the great-grandchild of slaves, was born in 1943 in Arlie, North Carolina. Because he grew up two miles away from a white family who had owned his great grandparents, his entire understanding as a child was shaped by race. There was constant talk in his household about whites and blacks, and Johnson recalls the love-hate relationship that seemed to exist between the two groups. “You can’t trust the white man; he will cheat you, beat you, and kill you. Yet, on the other hand, there was this whole thing about ‘we need to learn to act decent like white folk,’” stated Johnson. His mother shared much about their family history while his father made a conscious effort to be active in civic activities and even registered to vote well

before the 1960s. Nelson Johnson's father, along with a few other African Americans also formed a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which promoted self-esteem, brotherhood, and sisterhood for the people of Arlie. Very soon, Johnson made a decision to confront oppression like his father.<sup>1</sup>

When he came of age in the early 1960s, Johnson enlisted in the United States Air Force and eventually volunteered for the Vietnam War hoping that his service would bring about some sort of equality for himself and other African American soldiers and citizens. He said, "At the time when I volunteered for Vietnam, I had not even thought about the fact that I would be killing innocent people. I had only thought of the extra \$80.00 a month I would be making for serving as a combat soldier." It was not until his aunt asked him how the Vietnamese people threaten the United States of America and what they had done to him that he fully began to understand the implications of his actions and the contradictions of the American government and military. Johnson ultimately ended up not going to Vietnam, but rather returned to his home state and attended North Carolina A&T State University (NCA&TSU) in Greensboro, North Carolina.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as Johnson arrived in Greensboro in 1965, he became politically active on campus. He was drawn to the social ills of the city and became extremely active in neighborhood communities. He got involved with groups like Students Organized for Black Unity (SOBU) and the Greensboro Association of Poor People (GAPP) which

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<sup>3</sup> Sally Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 12-20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



represented six different public housing neighborhood groups. SOBU was a student-based organization on the campus of NCATSU, and GAPP was a grassroots organization that was mostly composed of the very people that it represented, the black working class. Both SOBU and GAPP focused on issues of housing, food, voting and education for impoverished African Americans. Their members aided tenants with filling out housing applications, held food and voter registration drives, and conducted after-school programs for the purposes of educating and tutoring the youth. Johnson also served as the president of both SOBU and GAPP; as a result of his activity, there was a strong bond that existed between himself and the local African American community.<sup>3</sup>

By the beginning of the 1970s, local activism in Greensboro began to wane. This decline was directly connected to many of the civil rights victories that had been obtained by the end of the 1960s, a change in local political leadership and ideology, and the recession of the nation's economy. By the early 1970s, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, had been passed. Also, by 1973, local schools were officially desegregated. Therefore, for many in the city, their demand for equality had been satisfied. For others, it had not. However, the 1970s was a trying time for maintaining grassroots activism. Because the country was in a recession, the economy did not allow many to be able to continue to financially fund groups such as GAPP. These factors influenced some local leaders to broaden their attention from just local social problems to international struggles for justice. Johnson, for example, still understood the power and necessity of community mobilization, but became equally

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<sup>3</sup> "GAPP Fact Sheet," Box 3, Folder 1, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

interested in the inequalities of people of African descent in other places. His new movement of choice was Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism called for the coming together of people of African descent from across the Diaspora to aid each other in securing social, economic, and political freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson was first introduced to Pan-Africanism in 1966 by a powerful, insightful, and articulate leader from Durham, North Carolina, Howard Fuller. Fuller had directed the Community Action Program in Durham and went on to form the Foundation for Community Development in 1967. These organizations promoted community organizing around the state. Fuller was a proponent of Black Power and by 1968 had changed his name to Owusu Sadaukai. Johnson became a disciple of Sadaukai by connecting him to the broad Black Power movement.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1970s, Johnson adopted the principles of Pan-Africanism, but to his dismay, several people from the Greensboro community that he had worked for and alongside for years began to criticize his new politics. Johnson recalled hearing some of them say that Pan-Africanists were nothing but talk and that waiting for an African revolution was no solution for everyday folks. Ironically, criticism also came from African revolutionaries from Mozambique and Guinea Bissau, and they, like the locals, urged leaders like Johnson and Sadaukai to be more concerned with the fight against United States imperialism rather than the liberation of Africa. Amilcar Cabral, an African nationalist who was one of Johnson's heroes, stated that people like Johnson

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bermanzohn, *Through Survivor's Eyes*, 121.

needed to unite with other peoples in the United States--like white workers--against the United States government.<sup>6</sup>

That conversation forced Johnson to consider political avenues like Marxism. Cabral's challenge translated into focusing political concentration towards the overthrowing of capitalism and classism rather than racism. Johnson also realized that he and his fellow Pan-Africanists needed to build a movement that encompassed all people, including whites. Former negative racial experiences of Johnson and other black leaders initially made the idea of working politically alongside whites unfathomable. He soon, with much difficulty, rose above his prejudiced notions of whites, and by 1973, had officially classified himself as a communist.<sup>7</sup>

Although the idea of accepting and working with whites was difficult, Johnson became a Marxist because he saw the need for social transformation, which required the majority of working people to unite for fundamental change. Marxism, from his view, described a rational basis and a method for uniting people of different ethnic and racial groups. In the words of Johnson, "I embraced Marxism based on struggling with my own prejudice against whites." Up until this point, Johnson had categorized all whites as being racist individuals who had the intent to hinder the progress and success of all African Americans. Cabral challenged Johnson to not see all whites as the enemy, but rather see the system of capitalism as the foe that had been responsible for keeping all people, both black and white, oppressed for so long.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson Johnson, conversation with author, August 2010.

Johnson and Sadaukai were able to find some support among college students located primarily in the Greensboro and Raleigh-Durham areas. College campuses, then, became their targeted audience for the purposes of recruitment. Among the supporters in Greensboro was Sandi Neely, who attended Bennett College and served as Bennett's student body president. She was ferociously in support of politically joining people together along class lines, thus supporting the idea of communism. Neely's dedication, like Johnson's, stemmed back to her childhood. The daughter of a mill worker, Neely witnessed the poor conditions of working-class people, the low pay, and the ways in which workers were divided along the lines of race. As a result, she believed in the power of union organizing and was committed to this work until her death on November 3, 1979. She was one of the victims of the shooting that day.<sup>9</sup>

In 1974, Nelson Johnson, Owusu Sadaukai, Sandi (Neely) Smith and others built a new organization, the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL). The RWL was based on communist politics, but its members still battled with the idea of accepting whites. As a result of this struggle, membership in the RWL was restricted to African Americans. Members of the RWL came out of the black liberation struggle of the 1960s, which was marked by staging sit-ins, fighting against job discrimination, advocating for better housing, and pushing for quality education for African American children. The RWL denounced capitalism because it was understood to be a system that exploited working-class people. Long-term interests of the RWL included socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, which meant workers would have complete control over labor, industry,

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<sup>9</sup> Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes*, 111.

education and government. The group also stood for the socialist revolution in which the interests of the working class and the masses of people would be directed by the working class.<sup>10</sup>

Members of the RWL saw unions as vehicles for sharing and spreading the revolutionary politics of communism. Thus, those inside the organization got jobs in factories and hospitals in order to form and orchestrate unions. Sandi Neely Smith, although trained as a nurse, got a job working at Cone Mills in Greensboro and later Cannon Mills in Kannapolis, North Carolina. Similarly, Johnson was hired at Proximity Plant in Greensboro, while Owusu Sadaukai began working at Duke University as the leader of the campus service-workers' union. Sadaukai had hopes of expanding the union into the Duke Medical Center.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically, it was Sadaukai's work at Duke that got the attention of a group of white radicals who were in the Durham area. Sadaukai and the white activists were willing to build an alliance based on their shared desire for working-class unity and equality. Among the Durham activists were Paul Bermanzohn, Jim Waller, and César Cauce. Bermanzohn and Waller were at Duke Medical School, Bermanzohn as a student and Waller as a new doctor. César Cauce, who was Cuban-American, had also been a student at Duke. He turned down graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley to work as a data terminal operator at Duke. Remaining local allowed Cauce to

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<sup>10</sup> "Revolutionary Workers League (M-L): Genuine Fighters for the Working Class," Box 3, Folder 1, Police Documents/Nelson Johnson FBI Files, Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

continue to build workers' alliances. He and others helped to organize custodial workers at Duke Medical Center to advocate for better pay.<sup>12</sup>

Cauce's commitment to working-class people was also shaped by his family experience. Born in pre-revolutionary Cuba into the political elite, Cauce's father was the minister of education under Batista, the dictator that Castro overthrew in 1959. His family fled to Miami when he was five years old. Even after his family relocated to the United States, his father became active in exiles' anti-Castro movement. However, as a result of his experience with workers at Duke, Cauce rejected the ideology of his father by becoming a leftist. His activism caused bitter political arguments with his parents. However, he remained committed to activism that involved working class people until he was killed at the age of twenty five on November 3, 1979. Like Sandi Smith, he was shot and killed during the Greensboro Massacre.<sup>13</sup>

Nearly all of these radicals at Duke University belonged to the Communist Workers Committee (CWC), a predominately white group. Paul Bermanzohn captured the reasoning behind the rise in activism among these predominately white activists when he described his personal experience as a medical student:

In medical school at Duke University, I became more radical. You are supposed to get conservative in medical school; I became more radical as I saw how poor people were treated. How no expense was spared in taking care of upper class people and how if you were poor, and especially if you were poor and black you were treated as a lesser creature. I was shocked to hear poor black people routinely called teaching material in the clinics. It was no surprise that the black community called Duke Hospital the Plantation. By the time I graduated

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<sup>12</sup> "Labor and Union Organizing in North Carolina," in *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Box 11, Folder 1.a, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>13</sup> Bermanzohn, *Through Survivor's Eyes*, 161.

from medical school in 1974, I was on my way to becoming a revolutionary.<sup>14</sup>

Bermanzohn's journey to being a revolutionary was understandable considering his own oppressed history. His parents were Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. His mother was the sole survivor of her family, and his father had one surviving brother. Leib Bermanzohn, Paul father, was a slave laborer for the Nazis during World War II. He had been a well-respected tailor in his town and used his money to bribe guards to help improve the conditions for family and friends who were in concentration camps. Bermanzohn's parents came to America when he was six months old, and they lived a rough immigrant's life. His father got a job as a custom tailor in a fancy men's clothing store where they paid him only forty dollars a week. "My father told me one thing over and over again when I was grown up: 'Whatever you do, don't be a worker. A workers' life is a slave's life.'" Bermanzohn's father knew that because he had a miserable job earning low wages. More than anything else, Paul grew up with his mother's stories about the Holocaust. She talked constantly about being pursued by Nazis, hiding, and her intense fear of being caught. According to Bermanzohn, it was an immense trauma that his mother never got over. In his words, "The constant theme in my childhood was the danger in the world from the Nazis and the need to be on constant guard. That was the only conclusion from my mother's unending stories. You had to be careful. You had to

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<sup>14</sup> "Statement of Paul Bermanzohn to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," July 15, 2005, Box 3, Folder 2.a, Transcripts of Statements and Related Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

be prepared. You always had to be ready to get out of town. And, I decided later in life, you had to fight them.”<sup>15</sup>

By 1975, Owusu Sadaukai brought together the small group of predominately white radicals from Raleigh and Durham with the black activists in Greensboro. Collectively, they began to flirt with the idea of merging, first with each other and, second, with other groups that held the same ideas as their own. They all were still deeply interested in forming a new party. The Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO), based in Chinatown, New York City, seemed to be the organization of choice to join. The WVO emphasized the need to develop revolutionary theory against imperialism and expressed most clearly how to form a new, solid party. Further attraction to the WVO included the fact that it had been formed by Chinese-American and African-American comrades. This represented exactly what the North Carolina activists were interested in: cross cultural and racial alliances for the purpose of overthrowing the imperialist government.<sup>16</sup>

Sadaukai, who still remained skeptical of biracial politics, challenged the merging of the WVO with the RWL. Sadaukai had concerns over the WVO possibly overshadowing the power and control of the RWL. He still had fears about whites attempting to take over leadership roles of organizations that largely aided African American communities. His challenge of the merger eventually led to a bitter split between him and the activists located in both the Raleigh-Durham and Greensboro areas.

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<sup>15</sup> Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes*, 35-38.

<sup>16</sup> “Interview of Jean Chapman by the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” May 14, 2005, Box 3, Folder 2.a, Transcripts of Statements and Related Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archive, Greensboro, North Carolina.



By 1976, the RWL had collapsed, and Sadaukai separated from his comrades, including his friend and mentee of ten years, Nelson Johnson. The remaining activists decided to move forward with their decision to join with the WVO, and this merger was described by Paul Bermanzohn as an “electric event.”<sup>17</sup> Their new commitment to the WVO was an indication that they had succeeded in strengthening the progressive movement by forming a multiracial core of experienced leaders. Several people who came to form part of the North Carolina WVO went through what one local leader called “a Communist conversion experience.” This prompted many to leave the professions they had spent years preparing for, including medicine, to work in the mills and dedicate themselves full-time to organizing.<sup>18</sup>

Support for the WVO began in grassroots activity in the Durham, North Carolina, area in the fall of 1976. Another office opened soon after in Greensboro.<sup>19</sup> The North Carolina Chapters of the WVO evolved from the WVO to the CWP. These left-wing activists turned their attention to communist flavored union organizing in the South following the end of the Vietnam War. During the spring and summer of 1977, several members of the CWP were active in the Greensboro, North Carolina, textile mills. Activity in the form of picketing and passing out leaflets in support of union organizing continued throughout 1978 and early 1979. Despite their high levels of education, members of the CWP took these low-paying jobs so that they could get positions in organized labor. They worked in trade unions to win and train workers one by one. This

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<sup>17</sup> “Statement of Paul Bermanzohn to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” Truth and Reconciliation Collection, July 15, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> “Labor and Union Organizing in North Carolina,” in *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 82.

<sup>19</sup> “Paul Bermanzohn,” FBI Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 2-5.

effort, as well as building factory nuclei, was thought to be the key to building the trade unions into fighting organizations. There was a belief among the members of the CWP that workers were angry and wanted to fight. The CWP understood its role as one that included challenging the struggles of workers, giving them leadership and scope, and building an organization with a concrete purpose for workers. The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union was present in Cone Mills, but the CWP opposed dual unionism and sought to establish an independent union. While communism was not a principle of unity for the union, the members of the CWP did not disguise their identity to the rest of the workers.<sup>20</sup>

The destiny for the WVO in North Carolina came down from the headquarters in New York by late fall of 1977 in the form of an internal memo. Titled “Plans for the Textile Industry,” the memo told comrades about a program which would be carried out by 1979. The orders were for the WVO to fight against laws that legally prevented employers from penalizing workers for being part of a union. Workers being a part of the union was necessary for the WVO because they needed the support in the mills to “prepare for a strike over contracts.”<sup>21</sup> By 1979, the WVO planned to be able to claim a visible presence in four mills in North Carolina, all belonging to the Cone Corporation: White Oak and Proximity in Greensboro, Granite Finishing in Haw River, and Edna in Reidsville. The situation was ripe for the Party to assume leadership and build an

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<sup>20</sup> “Sketch of Tactical Plan for an Independent Union,” Box 1, Folder 1.c, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>21</sup> Elibazeth Wheaton, *Codename GreenKil: The 1979 Greensboro Killings* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987) 67.

Independent Union (IU) at Cone and throughout the textile industry because of its poor working conditions, low pay, and discrimination practices.<sup>22</sup>

Cone was attractive to the organizers because of the mills' recent desegregation practices. The recent hiring of African Americans for production jobs in the 1960s brought about repeated resistance from white mill workers. Much of this white resistance was being fueled by the rejection of social integration and the fear of economic competition. At Cone Mills in Greensboro, one union representative reported that, "friction here has much to do with what jobs are white and what are colored. . . . in several cases where Negroes attempted to obtain a better job or even to a different job which they had not previously held, the white workers' reaction was so harsh that the company oftentimes did not award blacks the job." Those African Americans who were hired for production jobs in the 1960s and 1970s recount that white workers refused to train or cooperate with them in the workplace. Several were also forced to endure verbal abuse, threats, and isolation.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to racial tensions hindering unionizing efforts at Cone, intimidation practices by administrators made it difficult for organizing among workers to take place. For example, Cone's security chiefs repeatedly called on the police to investigate suspected union organizers. Authorities were also frequently asked to be present when mill managers suspended workers or dealt with protests in front of the mills. WVO members were not exempt from the harassment. For example, Mack Fulp, Cone's

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<sup>22</sup> "Sketch of Tactical Plan for an Independent Union," Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Minchin, " "Color Means Something": Black Pioneers, White Resistance, and Interracial Unionism in the Southern Textile Industry, 1957-1980," *Labor History*. 39, 2, (1998): 112-115.

security chief at the White Oak plant, provided the organized crime division with the names of three associates of Nelson Johnson who were all employees of the Revolution Plant, including Sandi Smith. When confronted by a local newspaper photographer about why they were taking pictures of WVO member Sandi Smith, the plain clothes police responded that the pictures were being taken “to be studied for future efforts at crowd control.” The majority of ordinary workers, white or black, were largely uninterested in this type of harassment, fear, or any other type of repercussions that came along with associating with the unions. Despite the intimidation tactics, however, the WVO was not deterred. Its commitment to empowering the working class was larger than the fear tactics imposed by the Cone administration.<sup>24</sup>

Nelson Johnson had been employed at the Proximity Print Works Plant as early as 1974. Initially employed as a clerk, by 1976 Johnson requested to be reclassified as a trucker. Despite the \$25 bi-weekly cut in pay, his new position put him in closer ranks with the workers who were most interested in organizing. He joined a union which at that time had approximately seven active members. Johnson advised that because of the work he and other members of the WVO did promoting the union, attendance at union meetings increased to approximately thirty attending members in the year of 1976.<sup>25</sup>

Johnson’s presence in the mills caused much controversy, and as a result, there was an attempt on behalf of the management to discredit his reputation and character. In 1976, the United States Labor Party (USLP), the political arm of the National Caucus of

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<sup>24</sup> “Investigator’s Report, Re: Associates of Nelson N. Johnson at Cone Mills Company,” May 3, 1976, Box 3, Folder 1.mmm, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>25</sup> “Revolutionary Workers League,” May 11, 1976, Box 3, Folder 1.mmm, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Labor Committees which was directly connected to Cone Mills, alleged that Johnson was being controlled by an FBI agent. More specifically, the United States Labor Party alleged that Johnson's previous affiliated group, the RWL, was being placed in Cone Mills by Johnson as an attempt to destroy the working class. The claims brought against Johnson were false; however, Cone Mills still was very concerned with the pressure that was coming against Johnson. He could not be fired, though, because he had been considered a "satisfactory and efficient" employee.<sup>26</sup>

While Johnson was at Proximity, WVO member Jim Waller got a job at Cone's Haw River plant in Haw River, North Carolina. Waller had worked at Cone's Haw River Plant for nearly two years by mid-1978, serving in the dye house, the poorest paid and least organized department in the plant. Because of his efforts to "agitate against the bourgeois capitalists and recruit workers to the revolutionary struggle," it did not take Cone long to find a reason to fire Waller. Because he neglected to disclose his credentials as a medical doctor, Cone saw fit to terminate him.<sup>27</sup>

Nelson Johnson of Greensboro and Paul Bermanzohn of Durham accused the wealthy, elite companies of indirectly promoting the KKK in order to intimidate and divide workers and prevent organizing. Dale Sampson, a CWP member who worked at White Oak Plant, shared these sentiments. From her personal efforts in union organizing at the White Oak Plant during the Spring of 1979, Sampson knew the KKK was against WVO's efforts to unionize the employees of that firm. She was certain that the KKK attempted to disrupt their union organizing efforts and that Klan leaflets had been passed

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Wheaton, *Codename Greenkil: The 1979 Greensboro Killings*, 61.

out in the plant.<sup>28</sup> This position was supported by Nettie Coad, African American community activist, who vividly remembers phone messages being sent to Cone Mill workers about the presence of the Klan in the union and the dangerous consequences that could come to blacks if they chose to become involved in the union. Coad stated, “We don’t know how they got our phone numbers,” stated and we don’t know if the claims were true, but the tactic worked.”<sup>29</sup>

The strategies of administrators and the KKK were precisely what the organizers wanted to fight against. They wanted to empower workers to also challenge these groups. Nelson Johnson said the WVO wanted to educate and urge people to fight the Klan. According to Paul Bermanzohn, there was only one way to do that. He said to a crowd in front of the media at a local press conference, “They must be physically beaten back, eradicated, exterminated, and wiped off the face of the earth.”<sup>30</sup> These sentiments were corroborated again later in an interview Bermanzohn did with the FBI. He stated that the WVO was against non-violence and pacificism and people must protect themselves through self-defense.<sup>31</sup>

A local opportunity came for the WVO to demonstrate against the KKK in July of 1979, just four months before the November 3<sup>rd</sup> shooting. That June, Signe Waller, WVO organizer, read an announcement in the Greensboro newspaper about the KKK’s

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<sup>28</sup> “FBI Interview with Dale Sampson,” September 23, 1981 & December 16, 1981, Box 3, Folder 1.mmm, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>29</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Testimony of Nettie Coad to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Public Hearing # 1, July 15, 2005. (Greensboro: Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Bill Moss, “Communists Challenge KKK to come to rally,” *Salisbury Evening Post*, October 11, 1979, 8.

<sup>31</sup> “Paul Bermanzohn,” FBI Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 10.

screening of *Birth of a Nation* in China Grove, North Carolina, and brought it to the attention of her WVO comrades. This event occurred shortly after a march in Decatur, Alabama, where some of the WVO had been in attendance, where the Klan had attacked civil rights and union workers. WVO's participation against hatred in Alabama fueled the organization to confront the Klan straight forward in North Carolina.<sup>32</sup>

The Federated Knights of the Ku Klux Klan from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, planned the showing of the film in China Grove. *Birth of a Nation* was to be used as part of a recruiting drive in the area. Klan leaders, Joe Grady and Gorrell Pierce applied for and received a permit from the town council to use the community center at China Grove for the movie showing. There were attempts by some local black leadership to stop the issuing of a permit, but the city council had no legal reason to deny the Klan access to the community center.<sup>33</sup>

Living in the local China Grove community and working at Cannon Mills in Kannapolis, North Carolina, were three members of the WVO, including Sandi Smith, Ed Butler, and Claire Butler. Willena Cannon, CWP member, stated that Smith was approached by residents of China Grove to ask the WVO to help organize a counter demonstration. When the Klan's intentions became publicly known, other members of the WVO began coming to the black community of Westside in China Grove and promoting a counter-demonstration against the showing of the film. However, the

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<sup>32</sup> Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes*, 181-183.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Westside community had also met several times to organize protests before WVO members came to meet with the community for the first time.<sup>34</sup>

On the day of the march in China Grove thirty minutes before screening was to begin, some fifty to one hundred counter demonstrators marched from the Westside Community Center along the sidewalk chanting with bullhorns “Decease, decease, decease the rotten beast,” “Death to the Klan,” and “the only solution is a socialist revolution.” Many of the demonstrators were armed with sticks and pipes and wore hardhats of some kind. Based on the photos taken, the crowd was led up the street by members of the WVO.<sup>35</sup>

The Klan members who were at the Community Center proceeded to grab weapons and arm themselves with semi-automatic rifles, shotguns, and hand-guns. As the two groups met at the porch, each group angrily shouted at each other. The protestors began waving their clubs and sticks at the KKK while the KKK pointed weapons towards the crowd and made threatening gestures with their weapons. After this fierce near clash of violence, the police was able to intervene and calm the crowds. The protestors had won; They prevented the film from being shown and the Klan meeting was thwarted. Out of fear for retaliation, weapons were passed out among the residents by members of the WVO while others used their personal weapons for protection. They collectively set up security posts around the community.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Greensboro Police Department Interview with Willena Cannon,” November 3, 1979, Box 13, Folder 1.a, Transcripts of Statements and Related Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archive, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



In the days that followed the confrontation in China Grove, the members of the WVO were feeling extremely positive about their ability to derail the Klan. They were so fueled by what happened in China Grove that they wanted to bring their movement back home. The organization began planning for an anti-Klan rally to be sponsored in Greensboro, North Carolina. Even though this march would attract people from all over, the WVO chose Greensboro as the place to have the “Death to the Klan” march and rally because it was still a place where a very strong chapter of the WVO was.<sup>37</sup> In regard to the slogan “Death to the Klan,” Dale Sampson advised that it was her understanding that this was a strong statement denouncing the KKK’s racism and anti-Semitic beliefs. She understood “Death to the Klan” to mean a destruction of the KKK as an organization. Her rationale was the demise of the KKK would come through the people knowing what the Klan was really about, and through this knowledge and public pressure, the KKK as an organization would cease to exist.<sup>38</sup>

In October of 1979, Marty Nathan and other CWP members were involved in passing out leaflets that called for the support of the WVO’s efforts to do educational work in exposing the nature of the Klan and its links with the government and corporations. Through this education and the demonstration, it was hoped that the Klan as an organization would not be able to organize in the state of North Carolina and elsewhere. It was also at this time that the WVO went throughout the Morningside Neighborhood and adjacent neighborhoods and discussed with the residents of those

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<sup>37</sup> Signe Waller, conversation with author, March 2005.

<sup>38</sup> “FBI Interview with Marty Nathan,” November 18, 1981, Box 3, Folder 1.mmm, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

communities the forthcoming rally and march to be held in Greensboro on November 3, 1979. These discussions with the residents emphasized the purpose of the march, and it was made clear that the KKK was a racist organization that was anti-black and anti-Semitic. Further, the WVO stressed that the KKK was an organization that was increasing in its activity not only in North Carolina but also throughout the United States.<sup>39</sup>

WVO member Marty Nathan noted that in these efforts she talked to both black and white members of the community and that the purpose of selecting Morningside and other predominately black public housing communities was that these individuals and communities had historically been attacked by the Klan. Also, Nathan maintained that these particular communities were important because they represented the working class people in various industries around Greensboro, North Carolina. Equally important, as suggested by WVO member Dale Sampson was the fact that Morningside Homes, Hampton Homes, and Smith Homes had been sites of previous anti-racist organizing for the WVO. Sampson estimated that in talking with the people in these neighborhoods, she talked with approximately seventy five to one hundred people. In addition to talking about the reason for the march, she also consulted with people in the neighborhoods to not only secure their participation but also ensure that security would be provided for them.<sup>40</sup>

African American activist and WVO member, Willena Cannon, also did grassroots political organizing in Morningside for many years. She worked in

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<sup>39</sup> "FBI Interview with Dale Sampson," Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Neighborhood Youth Corps and went into Morningside to deal with children who dropped out of school and had babies. She was in the Drug Action Council and worked with them to get housing, made deals with landlords, and resolved any other kind of issue they had. Cannon's children, especially her eldest, Kwami, knew nearly everyone in Morningside because he had passed out leaflets. His mother said, "To keep from getting a babysitter, he'd go with me and pass out leaflets, talk with people, so he learned a lot people in there."<sup>41</sup> In short, the CWP boasted of having a political alliance with residents in Morningside against race and class discrimination. For the protestors, the "Death to the Klan" demonstration was designed to be yet another example of the camaraderie that existed between them and the very people they were representing: the black working class. Having the "Death to the Klan" march in the community of Morningside, however, would unknowingly bring about all kinds of questions about the relationship the CWP in fact had with the community. Nonetheless, the protestors were focused on carrying out this event with the purposes of helping to end oppression while educating and empowering the black working class community.<sup>42</sup>

Members of the CWP, including Signe Waller and Joyce Johnson, remember November 3, 1979, beginning as a very beautiful day. In addition to confronting the Klan, the march was also important because on this day that the members of the WVO officially were going to publicly announce the change of the organization's name to the CWP. When gathering at Morningside Homes, they acutely noticed the absence of

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<sup>41</sup> "Greensboro Police Department Interview with Willena Cannon," Transcripts of Statements and Related Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 8.

<sup>42</sup> "Statement of Nelson Johnson to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," August 26, 2005, Box 13, Folder 1.d., GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

police in the area. The absence of local authorities was quite odd because in every other march they had been involved law enforcement swarmed the perimeters. What was equally noticeable was the amount of media that was present. Reporters seemed to have never been interested in covering them before when they were organizing in the mills and fighting for economic justice on behalf of poor communities. This march was different because it secured the attention of the media, due to its direct challenge of white supremacy and racist actions. The WVO was convinced that since its rhetoric involved the Klan on this occasion, the press found it necessary to be present in large numbers.<sup>43</sup>

Dale Sampson and other members of the WVO were not necessarily concerned or fearful that their rally would be disrupted by the KKK, or Nazis. Rather, they were more concerned about harassment by the police based on their past experiences with local authorities. It was their understanding, however, that police protection would be afforded for this march and would start at approximately 11:00 a.m. The time was appropriate since plans called for the people to assemble and start their march at approximately 11:30 a.m. In addition to just relying on the protection of the police, several members of the WVO had been selected to be marshals to help with the security in the parade and keep it orderly. Dale Sampson identified her husband, Bill Sampson, as being one of the individuals selected to be a parade marshal. Each of them wore blue or white construction type helmets so that they may be easily identified.<sup>44</sup>

The demonstrators arrived on the scene and were busy unloading their placards and demonstration signs, which bore the slogan “Death to the Klan.” Children, many of

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<sup>43</sup> Joyce Johnson, conversation with author, March 2005.

<sup>44</sup> “FBI Interview with Marty Nathan,” Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 5-6.

whom were offspring of the protestors, were dressed in uniforms with red beret hats chanting and singing songs. The most memorable melody the children chanted along with the crowd was led by Tom Clark as he strummed his guitar. The people sang, “We shall not, we shall not be moved.” Shortly after, some Morningside residents wandered over to join in the singing and the festivities. Those who prepared to march were not limited to those who lived in Greensboro. Participants came from all over North Carolina, including Durham, Raleigh, and Charlotte, to participate in what many of them saw and still see as a powerful movement towards ending racial hatred and discrimination, as well as destroying the organizations that fostered this abominable mentality.<sup>45</sup>

In a matter of minutes, several Klan vehicles arrived at the march meeting site. What was not known at the time, but came out later, was that the KKK and the police were radioing back and forth about the location of the march and the specific route the caravan of Klansmen should take to get there.<sup>46</sup> Once the KKK and Nazis arrived at the location of the demonstration, they screamed words like “Nigger lovers” and “Kikes,” along with phrases such as, “You asked for the Klan, you got ‘em!” One signal gunshot was fired in the air by the Klan. Very calmly and with no emotion, the rest of the members of the Klan popped their trunks, took out their guns, and began strategically gunning down, one by one, leaders of the CWP. The women protestors began to make sure the children were out of harms way, and that was exactly how Sandra Neely Smith was murdered. She was looking around the building in order to ensure that all the youth

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<sup>45</sup> Joyce Johnson, conversation with author.

<sup>46</sup> “Supplemental information to incident occurring on November 3, 1979, at Everitt Street and Carver Drive: Interview of Detective J.H. Cooper by Captain D.C. Williams,” November 20, 1979, Box 8, Folder 6.b, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

were out of the open when she was shot directly between the eyes. Residents began to give the women and children shelter by allowing them to come into their homes.<sup>47</sup>

In the interim, the male leaders of the CWP, including Nelson Johnson, Jim Waller, Michael Nathan, César Cauce, Paul Bermanzohn, and Bill Sampson, remained on the front lines. The traditional narrative usually speaks of how the CWP was left defenseless against that Klan due to the restrictions that had been placed on them by the local police department to not carry weapons either openly or concealed.<sup>48</sup> However, the CWP did have weapons. There were a couple of members who had been designated to protect marchers in the event of any violence. They reasoned that it was the KKK who had a historical record of not only carrying guns, but using them. Therefore, the CWP thought it wise to be prepared. CWP member Dorie Blitz admitted firing her weapon only after the Klan and Nazis had been shooting into the crowd. Dorie's husband, Alan Blitz, acknowledged that he had also shot once toward the KKK and Nazis. He fired only one shot because his weapon jammed and could not fire again.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of eighty eight seconds, Jim Waller, César Cauce, Bill Sampson, and Sandy Smith had been murdered. Two days later, Michael Nathan also died as a result of the Klan's ambush. The loss of these five lives was detrimental not only for the organization itself, but also for the personal lives of the loved ones who had survived. Four of the five murdered left widows behind. Three of the victims, Waller, Sampson, and Nathan, also had small children who were left with only stories and vague memories

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<sup>47</sup> Signe Waller, conversation with author.

<sup>48</sup> "Official Parade Permit," October 19, 1979, Box 1, Folder 1.a, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>49</sup> "FBI Interview with Marty Nathan," Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 9.

of their fathers. The symbolism and reality of this event to the community and nation was that it signaled to African Americans and believers of leftist politics that if they fought against racist actions and hatred, death was a high probability.

What made the loss even more tragic were the state and federal trials that acquitted the shooters. The fact that the CWP did have weapons and used them not only helped to lead to an acquittal of the KKK and Nazis, but it also caused people, especially in the media, to dismiss this event as a “shootout,” instead of cold-blooded murder. In the state trial on November 17, 1980, the all white jury stated that the Klan and Nazis acted in “self-defense.” On April 15, 1984, during the federal trial they were pronounced innocent once again.<sup>50</sup>

The verdicts were detrimental to the CWP not only because the Klansmen and Nazis did not serve for the crime. It was also devastating for the CWP because they were convinced that the violence that occurred was a result of a strategically planned plot among the KKK, Greensboro Police Department (GPD), and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). It was this belief that made the CWP unapologetic for also having weapons. To them, more of their members may have been dead had they not had them. The suspicion of authorities had been there since the beginning of the planning for the march. For example, it was odd to the members of the CWP the manner in which the parade permit for the “Death to the Klan” march was granted. Nelson Johnson applied for the permit that October 19 but did not receive approval until October 31. Most police permits are normally granted within five to seven days. More irregularities that

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

surrounded the permit were two restrictions that were indicated on it. First, Captain Gibson emphasized that the CWP did not have the right to carry arms, open or concealed. Second, the organization could carry placard sticks; however, the sticks could be no larger than 2x2. Those types of restrictions had never been required before of anyone who applied for a parade permit in the city of Greensboro.<sup>51</sup>

It was learned during the federal trial that once the permit was finally ready and Nelson Johnson was picking it up from Captain Gibson, KKK member and FBI informant Eddie Dawson was upstairs in the police station being briefed about the starting location of the march by Detective J.H. Cooper. Dawson was also given a copy of the parade permit at this time. He used the information to plan the attack with his fellow Klansmen. Evidence showed that police informant Dawson had also been a longtime FBI agent provocateur in the Klan and had encouraged other acts of violence by his longtime trusted associate, Grand Dragon Virgin Griffin, with whom he planned the November 3 attack. The grand jury testimony of Dawson illustrated that not only had he been acting with the knowledge of the Greensboro police in planning the attack, but he had also informed his FBI contact that violence was likely on November 3. He also confirmed that Greensboro police had been informed that the Klan was coming to Greensboro with a machine gun “to shoot up the place.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Summary of Planning Activities for Anti-Klan March Scheduled November 3, 1979,” December 7, 1979, Box 8, Folder 1.d-1, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>52</sup> “*Testimony of Edward Dawson During the 1982 Federal Trial*,” *United States v. Virgil Griffin et al.*, June 22, 1982, Box 7, Folder 7.f, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection at Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.



The CWP's intuition was also right about the involvement of the FBI on November 3, 1979. In addition to the work of Eddie Dawson as an informant was the infiltration of the Nazi Party by Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) agent, Bernard Butkovich.<sup>53</sup> Butkovich was sent by the BATF to encourage the merging of the Nazi Party with the KKK for the purposes of joining them for the "Death to the Klan" march. The role of the Nazis was to join forces with the local Klan to confront the CWP. He was also responsible for encouraging members of the organization to bring weapons to the march. Butkovich informed his superiors in the federal government of the Nazis' plan for violence and of their possession of several high-powered weapons specifically to be used on that day. His testimony further showed that his encouragement of violence was pursuant to BATF policy and done with his superior's advice and consent. The collaboration among the KKK, the GPD, and FBI and their ability to not be held accountable by the justice system was quite discouraging because the suggestion was that there was no recourse for racist, extremist groups who inflict violence on others. Still, the CWP pressed forward and set out to bring attention to the public about their injustice.<sup>54</sup>

The members of the CWP still stood firm in their political positions and fought back after the failure of the first criminal trial, establishing of the Greensboro Justice Fund. Their outrage at the murder of their comrades fueled their commitment to helping

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<sup>53</sup> "Government Involvement in the Murders of Anti-Klan Demonstrators on November 3, 1979," Box 9, Folder 7.c, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>54</sup> "Testimony of Bernard Butkovich During the 1985 Civil Suit Trial," *Waller et al. v. Butkovich et al.*, May 9, 1985, Box 8, Folder 4.b, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

victims stand firm against injustices of the legal system. The Greensboro Justice Fund (GJF) was formed by a coalition of local Greensboro citizens, led by survivors of the CWP. They came together around the demand for federal prosecution of the Klan and Nazis. Members of the GJF included Quakers from Guilford College, Charlie Davis, and Joe Grove. Also, long time local activists Lewis Brandon, A.S. Well, who was the director of American Federal Savings and Loan Bank, and B.J. Battle, who was a leader in the local chapter of the NAACP, became GJF members. After the Klan and Nazis were acquitted again in the second trial in 1984, the GJF used federal civil rights and state wrongful-death and assault laws to sue for damages in the United States District court. By this time all of the criminal-court remedies were exhausted, and there could only be a civil suit brought against the KKK, the City of Greensboro, BATF, FBI, and Greensboro Police Department. It was in this trial that the most information was revealed about the collaboration between all of these groups to work against the protestors. The jury found Lieutenant P.W. Spoon, the commanding officer in charge of overseeing the November 3, 1979, march; Greensboro Police Detective Jerry Cooper, who had followed the Klan-Nazi caravan to Carver and Everitt Streets; Eddie Dawson; and seven Klansmen and Nazis liable for the wrongful death of Michael Nathan. Michael Nathan was the only acknowledged murdered victim of the civil suit because he was the only one who was not officially a member of the CWP when he was shot; however, he was initiated into the CWP while on his death bed immediately before he died.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> G. Flint Taylor, "Waller v. Butkovich: Lessons in Strategy and Tenacity for Civil Rights Litigators," *Police Misconduct and Civil Rights Law Report* 1, 13, (Jan/Feb 1986): 148.

The verdict in the civil suit was somewhat of a victory but served as a blow to the rest of the widows who were suffering as a result of their loss. The Klan still did not spend time in jail as a result of the verdict or pay any money to the victims. However, on November 6, 1985, the City of Greensboro paid a \$351,500 settlement to the estate of Michael Nathan. It was paid because of failure of the police to protect the protestors. Marty Nathan, the widow of Michael Nathan, decided to split the money among the widows, the wounded, and those who had been unjustly arrested. The survivors told people they could keep the money or donate it back to the GJF. Seventy five thousand dollars of the money came back to the organization, allowing for the CWP survivors to continue a legacy of fighting for justice.<sup>56</sup>

Over the next nineteen years, the GJF gave away over \$500,000 to groups throughout the South working for racial and economic justice, civil liberties, peace, and protection from homophobic violence. It has also provided funding for the organizing of the Kmart workers, the families of Gil Barbara and Daryl Howerton, who were killed by local enforcement officials, and for Kwame Cannon, who was sent to prison with a sentence of two life terms for non-violent burglary. The GJF still carries on and functions to serve those who still have a need for support.<sup>57</sup>

Marty Nathan summed up the work of the GJF by stating, “A good friend of mine labeled the Greensboro Justice Fund a work of ‘constructive revenge.’ It is also our form of reconciliation, to be combined with yours, creating meaning out of the horror.”

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<sup>56</sup> “Testimony of Marty Nathan to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” September 30, 2005, Box 9, Folder 2.b, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

Creating meaning for themselves out of the horror is particularly important since those who were responsible for perpetrating violence on the demonstrators have still not been held accountable for the CWP's loss over thirty years later.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

### CHAPTER III

#### “I DON’T SEE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KILLING COMMUNISTS IN VIETNAM AND KILLING THEM HERE”: THE NORTH CAROLINA KLAN AND THEIR STRATEGIES OF DEFENSE AGAINST LEFTIST POLITICS

The KKK believed their actions towards the CWP were justified, and the group had little remorse for the murder victims. As categorized by social psychologist, Raphael Ezekial, Klansmen are typically joined by the belief in the centrality of race, the superiority of whites, and the thrill of violence. Since the KKK’s initial inception in the 1800s, the organization has died and been reborn throughout history. At these points of rebirth, the Klan was composed of different kinds of people in various locations which complicated the idea of its members having uniform identities in terms of goals, strategies, and the types of people attracted group. However, one of the ideologies that remained consistent is their hatred for racial minorities, alternative politics and lifestyles, as well as non-Christian religions. Despite their reputation of intolerance, however, many of the Klansmen present at the march on November 3, 1979, claimed that there was no intent for the CWP-led march in the primarily black public housing area of Morningside Homes to escalate to violence. They argue that they were lured to the march by CWP instigators and FBI/police infiltrators who were interested in “fireworks” between the KKK and the Communists. This betrayal and the division it caused within

the organization that largely led the caravan of Klansmen and Nazis into what several of them understood as a blindsided occurrence that forced them to act in self defense.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, the Klansmen associated with the killings have collectively been left questionably misunderstood as a heartless group of people who had every intention to kill. A closer examination of the KKK, however, reveals that many of its members, like the CWP, also felt set-up, mischaracterized, and wrongly persecuted as a result of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. Examining this perspective is important because it illuminates that even historical victimizers who have taken part in the most despicable crimes can also be exploited. While the members of the KKK may always struggle with the murders of the CWP and what happened on that day, the reasoning behind their actions is more complex than commonly understood and, for them, their actions were justified.

The First KKK was founded in the mid-1800s shortly after the end of slavery for the purposes of implanting terror and paralyzing fear throughout African American communities. It used several types of intimidation tactics, including lynching, scorching bodies, burning crosses, night riding, and other forms of horror and humiliation. The strength and activity of the KKK has ebbed and flowed throughout American history. Historically, the KKK and organizations like it typically gain momentum whenever there is a perception of social, political, or economic progression being made in the African American community. For example, the Klan's boost in activity during the 1960s had been directly connected to the recently won civil rights legislations that were primarily

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<sup>1</sup> David Chalmers, *Backfire: How the Ku Klux Klan Helped the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 145.

structured to benefit African Americans. As a result, much of the decade of the 1960s served as one of the most active periods for the organization. However, the six-year period from 1967 to 1973 was devastating for the KKK. During the post-World War II era, peak in membership had been around fifty-five thousand, but by 1967, the national numbers had dropped seventy-five percent. This decline had much to do with the FBI infiltrating the KKK in efforts to dismantle the organization. Breaking them down was orchestrated by the FBI in efforts to demonstrate, in the midst of the Cold War, intolerance for white extremism. Fighting against extremist groups such as the KKK at this time was important because America was attempting to guard its reputation against communist countries that were critical of capitalistic nations and the terror their own citizens suffered. Therefore, it was imperative for the United States government to try to regulate such organizations and their violent acts.<sup>2</sup>

During the late 1970s, however, the KKK seemed to be headed for a revival across the South. Klan membership jumped from six thousand and five hundred to ten thousand between 1975 and 1979 with an estimated seventy-five thousand active sympathizers who read Klan literature or attended rallies. This upswing in membership and empathy was directly linked to the triumph of conservatism during this period and the United States' unsuccessful efforts in Vietnam to combat communism. Communism has historically presented a scare in America for decades not only because it threatened an overthrow capitalism by the working class and minorities, but because communists advocated for equal placement among classes. Therefore, the KKK was and still is

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<sup>2</sup> John George and Laird Wilcox, *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), 399.

staunchly against communists as they are African Americans. The sensitivity, embarrassment and anger of American citizens surrounding the United State's defeat in Vietnam fostered a reinvigoration of tolerance, even in the American government, for the KKK. The implications of the support for the KKK was that there was a belief among thousands of white citizens that the organization could thwart any home-bred communists who may attempt to interrupt and destroy the United States. Confronting communism also would help to prevent any further civil and human rights legislation. As a result, the Klan's approximate seventy-five thousand supporters turned a blind eye to the barbaric, violent, and intimidating tactics of the KKK and supported their efforts.<sup>3</sup>

North Carolina was not exempt from this resurgence. The secrecy that typically surrounds the KKK has made it difficult to be sure of the specific membership numbers in the state by the mid-1970s. However, it was clear that the KKK was alive and appeared to thrive. There were over one hundred documented incidents of racially and politically motivated violence by the KKK throughout North Carolina between 1979 and 1983, including their involvement in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. The large number of incidents spoke directly to the surge of the organization at the time.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1970s, several different factions of the KKK existed in the state. There were the United Klan of America (UKA), the Federated Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (FKKK), and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKKK). The faction responsible

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<sup>3</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, "Con Men and Thugs: The 'New' Klan of the 1970s," in *Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence* (Montgomery: The Southern Poverty Law Center, 1982), 46-52, Box 4, Folder 1, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>4</sup> "Incidents of KKK Activity and Racially-Motivated Violence (1979-1983)," Box 4, Folder 1, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.



for the murders of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre was the KKKK. This particular sect, who considered themselves new age and cutting edge Klansmen, was under the national direction of David Duke. Founded in Louisiana during 1975, the KKKK brought a new façade to the organization. Duke, the Knight's self-appointed leader, argued that in order for the KKKK to survive during the mid-1970s and beyond, it needed to camouflage its racist ideology. For example, he preferred the title "National Director" to "Imperial Wizard" and began calling cross burnings "illuminations." Duke told his followers, "We've got to get out of the cow pasture and into the hotel meeting rooms."<sup>5</sup>

Duke was one of the first Klan leaders to discontinue the use of KKK regalia and ritual, as well as other traditional displays of Klan race hatred. Duke's new approach was one of the reasons, for example, that the members of North Carolina KKKK who were involved in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre were not disguised with robes and hoods. They were in plain clothing when they shot their victims. There was no reason to conceal themselves because Duke's teachings had helped to make it more socially acceptable for their members to be seen as "normal, everyday" men. This approach made this group even more dangerous.<sup>6</sup>

Duke was college-educated, well-dressed, and savvy enough to cultivate media attention. The same year the KKKK was formed, he traveled the country soliciting radio and television appearances. Duke attempted to even translate the newfound attention into political power by running for the Louisiana Senate in 1975; he received a third of the

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<sup>5</sup> William Moore, *The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race*, Edited by Douglas Rose (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

vote. He tried and failed again in 1979. Nonetheless, he was articulate and well dressed, and this enabled him to conceal his extreme racism. While Duke represented “the New Klan,” his views, however, remained traditionally racist. He stated, “You must understand that the white people today are becoming a second-class citizens’ group in our own country... We are losing our rights all the way across the board. White people face massive discrimination in employment opportunities, in scholarship opportunities in school, in promotions in industry, and in college entrance admittance.”<sup>7</sup>

The principles and philosophies that supported David Duke’s arguments were best described in a local newsletter written by Virgil Griffin, Grand Dragon of the North Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (NC-KKKK), from Mt. Holly, North Carolina. Griffin stated that the national chapter of the KKKK declared war against alternative politics and the advancement of minorities that threatened America in 1980 and the future. This “war,” which was classified as a holy one, was to be fought with the Bible, prayer, and Christian involvement. With God as their father, Christ as their criterion, the Bible as their guide, the cross as their inspiration, and the flag as their protection, they planned to march on to a triumphant victory for the “principles of right.” For them, the cross was a symbol of sacrifice and service, and a sign of the Christian religion. It stood in every Klavern of the NC-KKKK as a constant reminder that Christ and His teachings were their rule of life-blood bought, holy, sanctified and sublime. As a result, they

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<sup>7</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 379.

fought against the evils that sought to engulf America, including legalized abortion, pornography, homosexuality, socialism, “Niggerism,” and communism.<sup>8</sup>

Because the KKKK promoted a belief in God and the tenets of the Christian religion, there was no allegiance to a foreign government, emperor, king, pope, or any other religious power. They also believed in the upholding of the Constitution of the United States which included freedom of speech and free press uncontrolled by political parties and religious sects. White supremacy was also a part of their order and while the KKKK did not advocate mob violence, they did believe that laws should be enacted to prevent the cause of it. Even with these explanations why they believed what they did, Klansmen remained concerned that people misunderstood their organization.<sup>9</sup>

According to the members in North Carolina, the KKKK was a fraternal order promulgating fraternal conduct and not merely a “social association.” It was a duly incorporated, legally recognized institution, honest in purpose, noble in sentiment, and practical in results that commanded the hearty respect of all “real Americans” throughout the nation. It was an association of supposedly “Real Men” who believed in all things one hundred percent pure American. They stood for America first in terms of the organization’s thoughts, affections, and their belief that the United States was first among other nations. Also, benevolence was proclaimed to be practiced by the KKKK in

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<sup>8</sup> “Declaration of War,” Box 4, Folder 4.g, Greensboro Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

thought, word, and deed based upon justice. Their motto “*Non Silba Sed Anthar*--not for self but for others” supported their claims of sacrificing themselves to serve others.<sup>10</sup>

Virgil Griffin was the leader of the North Carolina KKKK at the time of the shooting on November 3, 1979. From Mt. Holly, North Carolina, Griffin joined the KKKK back in the 1960s when he was eighteen years old. He joined with the KKKK because of what the organization stood for, a disdain for Communism, drugs, and integration. He also said that “another reason was because the blacks has the NAACP, speaking out for their rights, have Louis Farrakhan’s organization speaking out for their rights, Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition, and Al Sharpton and others. The white people need someone to speak out for their civil rights.” Nonetheless, there was an understanding among the KKKK that African Americans should also be proud of their race. Griffin insisted, however, that he did not hate anyone but respected everyone and did not condone violence.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, however, violence has almost always been a part of every faction of the KKK, including the KKKK. The physically aggressive methods of the organization since its inception, including the vicious murdering of people and other forms of violence are eerily legendary for the fear they instilled in African Americans. The threats of these violent tactics certainly were a reality by the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Klansmen and Nazis began seeing the value of cooperating with each other. The Nazi influence

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<sup>10</sup> “What the Klan Stands For, What the Klan is, Why We Burn the Cross, Why We Wear the Hood,” Box 4, Folder 4.g, Greensboro Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>11</sup> “Statement of Virgil Griffin to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Committee,” July 16, 2005, Box 13, Folder 10.b, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

radicalized and heightened the violent tendencies of traditional Klansmen even more. In secret camps across the country, white supremacists of all descriptions began training in the use of assault weapons, grenades, rocket launchers and explosives--all in preparation for what they believed would be a nationwide race war. Although they had roots in different traditions, the Klan in the post-Civil War South and the neo-Nazis in Hitler's Germany, they shared the same enemies and the same fanatic obsession with white supremacy and racial violence. Some Klan leaders, like David Duke for example, started out as Nazis. The combination of the Klan, with its historical foothold in American society, and the Nazis, with a modern militancy that appealed to many younger ideologues, resulted in a racist front whose potential for danger was evident by the early 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

In North Carolina during 1979 alone there had been several instances of Klan/Nazi violence that preceded November 3. The previous February, they got into a scuffle with local black and white activists and the police when marchers came to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to protest a Klan exhibit that was on display in a local library. The exhibit was eventually taken down and the library temporarily closed until the confrontation was over and tempers surrounding it cooled. Next, in July of 1979 the China Grove, North Carolina, conflict occurred between the Klan/Nazis and local demonstrators, which included the same CWP members that would be in Greensboro. Roland Wood, Milano Caudle, and Jerry Paul Smith, all Nazis, were present both in China Grove that July and in Greensboro that November. During September of the same

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<sup>12</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center, "Con Men and Thugs: The 'New' Klan of the 1970s," in *Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence*, 46.

year in Forsyth County, Harold Covington, the Nazi leader of North Carolina, sent a threatening letter to Revolutionary Communist Party members saying that the Nazis were presented with an “opportunity to kill some home grown commies.” In October of 1979, in Durham County, there was a cross burning at the home of an African American woman, and three juveniles were arrested for the crime. All of these events were a clear indication that the Klan and Nazi collaboration was in effect, and both groups had a propensity for violence.<sup>13</sup>

America’s involvement in the Vietnam War also instigated intimidation tactics by the Klan/Nazis, particularly in the workplace. One of the arenas this kind of action was most evident was in textile mill unions throughout North Carolina. Klan members who worked there claimed to be staunch supporters of the unions but opposed communist infiltration and the joining of forces with African Americans. Gorrell Pierce, former employee of J.P. Stevens and former Grand Dragon of the Federated Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, was frank about the links between trade unionism, communism and matters of race during the 1970s in the documentary film “Resurgence.” Dripping with racist sentiments, he said:

Times are getting bad. What are we going to do when Ford Folds when GM folds when GM folds? How we going to bail them out? We’re not. How are we going to bail out the textile worker in this state, the furniture worker? There IS no way. We’re all going to be unemployed one of these days, people. When you’re unemployed, what are you doing to do then? I’ll tell you what I’m gonna do. You’re going to see me going down the street—After the son-of-a-gun that caused it: Africans, blacks, colored, niggers, negroes, or whatever you call ‘em. I call them black...that’s OK, porch monkeys is OK. You can find ‘em in

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<sup>13</sup> “Incidents of KKK Activity and Racially-Motivated Violence (1979-1983),” Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 2.

almost any union. And probably some of you here belong to a union. And unions have been a good organization at one time. But they've done gotten so big and powerful they're plumb out of hand. Even the union employees. Now the Teamsters is trying to do away with shop stewards-they gonna appoint 'em, you don't elect 'em no more. And I know why they wanna do that. They are going to elect you the finest little communist, get in there and work in your union, he's gonna get you and your black brother all hugged up, and you're gonna talk about equality and fair pay and you're going to be going up and down the street marching together. And the next thing you know you're a communist. And that's where they start. And they mean to physically overthrow this country! The Ku Klux Klan has never overthrown the government. We overthrew the Reconstruction government and replaced it with what it was supposed to be. And that's what we are here today to do.<sup>14</sup>

The intensity of this racial hatred is reminiscent of the days of lynching and murders of innocent African Americans, and it was clear that this Christian extremist group took pride in their hatred and violence.

Virgil Griffin echoed Pierce's sentiments when he spoke about his own experience in the union. Griffin worked at J.P. Stevens and he belonged to a union at one time. Even though he and other white supremacists argued that the union was a positive thing, Griffin was adamant that Communists were not welcomed. Milano Caudle, the Nazi who owned the vehicle carrying the guns used to kill the five CWP members, boasted that the actions of the Klan/Nazis on November 3 helped to destroy the communist-infested union. He also thanked God that the communists would never again get a foothold in the union since five of their members had been killed.<sup>15</sup>

November 3, 1979, though, was about more than the union. It was also about the Klan and Nazis defending their name and reputation for not backing down from any

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<sup>14</sup> Pamela Yates, "Resurgence: The Movement for Equality Vs. The Ku Klux Klan," (Documentary, 1981), videocassette.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

challenges. Because CWP member Paul Bermanzohn had written a letter daring the “scum of the earth,” the KKK, to show up at the march, many of them saw it necessary to be present at the march for the purposes of showing the CWP that they were not cowards who run away from any threats against them. Although the Klan’s participation in the march was allegedly planned to be peaceful, it became a bold statement of their power and their willingness to obliterate others who stood against them. The Klan/Nazi approach began nonviolently, but it soon all went awry.<sup>16</sup>

The KKK’s role in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre started way before the actual shooting took place. On the early morning of November 3, 1979, the KKK and Nazis assembled at the Guilford County residence of Klan sympathizer, Brent Fletcher. Fletcher had worked alongside Klansmen in the 1960s and continued to associate with them in the 1970s. Roughly sixty men showed up at his residence. These members of the Klan and Nazis that identified themselves as family-oriented individuals who wished to speak out against communism had decided to meet at Fletcher’s and travel together to the march. Allegedly unknown to Klan members, they would be led down a dead-end street where members of the “violent, anti-Christian” CWP would be waiting for them.<sup>17</sup>

At approximately 10:45 a.m., a caravan of thirty-nine occupants departed Fletcher’s home and traveled to the vicinity of the WVO demonstration. Virgil Griffin said,

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<sup>16</sup> “AN OPEN LETTER TO JOE GRADY, GORRELL PIERCE, AND ALL KKK MEMBERS AND SYMPATHIZERS,” October 22, 1979, Box 1, Folder 1.a, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>17</sup> “Trial Testimony of Virgil Griffin,” *James Waller, et al., vs. Bernard Butkovich*, April 10, 1985, Box 9, Folder 2, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.



Somebody that morning came in with a map. We started over there, we went where they was gathering, and Eddie Dawson, the head of the caravan, said 'let's go through and see how many's there and go on up to where we're supposed to go.'

The Klan and Nazi caravan then proceeded west on Everitt Street shortly after 11:00 a.m. Following Klan policy, no members were openly carrying any type of weapon. Any member who normally carried a weapon for self-defense placed it securely and safely in the trunk of the last car of the caravan. The cars moved slowly down the street, and soon they came to a complete stop. Unknown at the time to the passengers of the vehicles towards the end of the caravan, they would not be able to proceed in the procession because they would be confronted by what seemed like "hundreds of screaming communists."<sup>18</sup>

Protestors came pouring down the street throwing rocks and bottles at the Klan caravan, and the CWP carried anti-Klan signs conveniently attached to baseball bats. The conflict happened so quickly; Klansmen and Klanswomen were caught off guard and it took a few minutes for the last cars to realize they were being attacked. As they came closer to the protestors, some of the vehicles in the caravan were struck by sticks carried by the WVO. Griffin explained,

They started trying to turn 'em (the cars) over. Taxpayers paid for that street so we have every right to drive down that street without anybody touchin' the car, period. You do, I do, anybody. We were just drivin' through there, didn't say nothin' to nobody, didn't do nothing, and they started to attack the cars and beat them.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Had not they been attacked, the KKK/Nazis argued, the caravan would have driven right on through the crowd without incident.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of the crowd attacking the cars, the last two vehicles in the caravan were separated from the first eight vehicles. The first eight vehicles departed the scene. Klansmen Gorrell Pierce recalled that there was a man in one of the last two cars left behind who was seventy nine years of age. The crowd of demonstrators opened the door and proceeded to pull the elderly man out of the vehicle. It was at that time, according to Pierce, that a fist fight started and then was followed by gunfire. The convoy of occupants in the last two vehicles retreated to their vehicles, obtained weapons, including handguns and shoulder weapons, and commenced a barrage of fire toward the WVO. From the perspective of the members of the KKK and Nazis, they had no other choice than to defend themselves.<sup>20</sup>

At the time the Klansmen and Nazi's retrieved their weapons, they were not just defending themselves against a physical attack from the protestors. What was also happening was bullets were piercing through the sides of the cars of the Klansmen. Contrary to what is typically revealed when discussing the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, Klansmen wanted to make it clearly known that members of the CWP also had guns. CWP leader Nelson Johnson designated three people to carry concealed weapons and protect the protestors if necessary and, according to the Klan, it was the CWP who had started the gunfight. The Klansmen remember running several hundred feet down the

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<sup>19</sup> "Statement of Virgil Griffin to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Committee," July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>20</sup> "Statement of Gorrell Pierce to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," July 16, 2005, Box 13, Folder 10.h, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

street right through a crowd of what they described as “bat busting commies” who were shooting at them.<sup>21</sup>

One of the appointed defenders of the CWP was James Waller, who would become one of the fatalities, who came face-to-face with former Nazi and Klansman Roland Wood. Concerning that confrontation, Wood stated:

When James Waller pulled that shotgun up, I could see my mother...and see my little boy. I could see my little boy as me full of that same kind of hate that I was full of because they had killed his father...I screamed inside of me. I don't know 'til this day if James Waller was thinking, “I'm going to kill you,” or if he was, saying “don't hurt me.” Here comes this 230 pound, 6 foot man running at you. I am 6'2 exactly barefoot and I wore my army boots that day. I don't know really how tall James Waller was. He must have been pretty doggone scared himself. I don't know because it happened so fast!<sup>22</sup>

The fact that James Waller and other members of the CWP indeed had weapons has potentially complicated how the KKK and Nazis should be situated in this tragedy. Based on the evidence revealed in the criminal courts, the first shot was fired in front of the caravan by a Klansman in the air. Then, the communists fired nineteen shots and the Klan fired twenty.<sup>23</sup> They seemed to have as many guns as the Klan had and for that reason, the Klan/Nazis argued that their shooting was in self-defense and they had every right to protect themselves. Nonetheless, fourteen Klansmen ranging from ages sixteen to sixty-one from Piedmont and Western counties were arrested. Twelve were arrested

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Statement of Roland Wood to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” July 16, 2005, Box 13, Folder 1.r, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>23</sup> “Statement of Judge James Long to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” August 26, 2005, Box 13, Folder 10.i, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

near the scene of the shootings, and two others were taken into custody the following day in Winston Salem. Those arrested were from Greensboro, Lincolnton, Hickory, Winston Salem, and Charlotte.<sup>24</sup>

Immediately following the shooting, the Klansmen and Nazis began trying to make sense of what happened. Their explanations as to why they came to Morningside varied from being “set up” to being forced to defend their manhood. Klansman Virgil Griffin told the *Greensboro Daily News* that the Klan would have never come to Greensboro if it had not been for Edward (Eddie) Dawson berating them. Griffin, who was in the caravan the day of the shootings, claimed that the Klan had been framed. He insisted, “We were set up! The plan was to go to the rally and fly the Christian flag, fly the American flag, and to just heckle the Communist party. We did not expect a fight. If we had, we wouldn’t have had our guns in the trunk.”<sup>25</sup>

The truth was that Edward (Eddie) Dawson had indeed been instrumental in the Klan’s involvement in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. Even though Dawson has already been introduced in this study concerning his relationship with the Greensboro Police Department, the fact is that his role penetrated even deeper. He also had a significant role functioning as a Klansmen in the North Carolina area. Dawson was a New Jersey native who moved to Greensboro during the early 1960s. He worked as a carpenter, and, in 1967, became a part of the United Klan of America (UKA). By 1969, he became suspicious of the UKA and accused its members of embezzlement when they could not

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Troxler and David McKinnon, “5<sup>th</sup> shootout victim dies; 14 defendants denied bail,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, November 16, 1979, Front page.

<sup>25</sup> Brent Hackney, “Klan Leader Believes He’s Marked For Death,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 13, 1979, B1.

provide the money that had been donated for his defense in a shooting case in which he was involved. Dawson was found guilty and served nine months in prison. As a result of his dispute with the UKA, he was banished from the group. Subsequently, he left that faction of the KKK and partnered with Virgil Griffin in the formation of the NC-KKKK. Eddie Dawson was voted into the position of Grand Dragon from 1971 to 1976.<sup>26</sup>

By 1976, Dawson had officially left the KKK because, in his own words, he knew that the Klan was declining and had become a waste of time and money. He was so disgruntled with the organization due to his suspicions of the mishandling of money and the organization's decision to banish him that he offered to work with legal authorities and work as an informant. Before working for the GPD, Dawson had been an informant for the FBI from 1970-1977. He gladly took on the position of informant because he wanted to get even with the officials of the UKA, but, as he stated, "I never got a chance to get back at them; I never got a chance."<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, he left both the Klan and FBI in 1977 and by September of 1979 was working as an informant for the GPD. There was still evidence, however, that Dawson continued to relay information to both the police and the FBI. He had been in contact with the FBI shortly before November 3, 1979. For example, Thomas Brereton, a resident FBI agent in Greensboro, admitted during

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<sup>26</sup> "Trial Testimony of Edward Dawson," *United States v Virgil Griffin et al.*, June 22, 1982, Box 8, Folder 7.f, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

testimony in the 1980 Klan trial that he had personal financial dealings with Eddie Dawson in relation to serving as an informant.<sup>28</sup>

Concerning the planning and organizing of the November 3 attacks, Dawson participated in nearly every aspect of it. Virgil Griffin, the Grand Dragon of the North Carolina Invisible Empire of the KKK, invited him to a rally and meeting in Lincoln County on October 20, 1979. Dawson was a featured speaker at the meeting where he tried to recruit people to confront the November 3<sup>rd</sup> “Death to the Klan” march. Dawson gave a “very emotional” thirty minute speech where he boasted that he had challenged the Klan to attend the November 3 march, and produced CWP literature referring to Klan leaders as “scum” and “cowards.” By insisting that it was the hooded order’s civic duty to confront the leftists in Greensboro, he held responsibility for instigating a violent confrontation that Klansmen claimed they had otherwise been uninterested in. Furthermore, it was Eddie Dawson who also met at Brent Fletcher’s house the day of November 3, 1979, and led the caravan to the marching site. As the shooting transpired, Dawson left the scene of the crime and, despite his role in the event, he was never arrested. In the end, Eddie Dawson was not called as a witness in the state trial in 1980, but was later indicted for conspiring to interfere with a federal investigation and, later, acquitted. In the 1985 civil trial he did admit that he worked as an informant and instigator and was found liable for the deaths of CWP members. He was not, however, required to pay any restitution to the shooting victims. In this light, Grand Dragon Virgil

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<sup>28</sup> “Trial Testimony of Thomas Brereton,” *Waller et al. v. Butkovich et al.*, May 2, 1985, Box 8, Folder 2, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Griffin was right that Dawson was largely responsible for the presence of the Klan being there during the “Death to the Klan” march. Dawson did not act alone in his incitement, however.<sup>29</sup>

Bernard Butkovich, an agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), infiltrated the Nazi Party in Winston Salem in July 1979 and worked with them until November 3 with the knowledge, approval, and supervision of the Washington ATF headquarters. Although Butkovich, like Dawson, has been formerly introduced in the manuscript, it is appropriate to explain further just how deeply involved he was in the carrying out of violence. Just like with the KKK, the FBI was allegedly interested in penetrating the Nazi Party for the purposes of monitoring them making sure they do not grow too powerful. However, through the FBI’s use of Butkovich, it appears authorities took advantage of opportunities to instigate Nazi aggression towards leftist politics, particularly communism.<sup>30</sup>

On September 22, 1979, Butkovich and other members of the Nazis, along with some other Klansmen, met in Louisburg, North Carolina, to form a coalition for their attacks on communists and black people. At this meeting, Klansmen Virgil Griffin, Gorrell Pierce, and Roland Wood, along with North Carolina Nazi leader, Harold Covington, announced the formation of the United Racist Front. Prior to November 3, Butkovich encouraged this group to get involved with a number of illegal activities, including offering to teach a course on how to make bombs, urging party members to

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<sup>29</sup> “Trial Testimony of Edward Dawson,” *United States v. Virgil Griffin et al.*, June 22, 1982, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>30</sup> “Testimony of Bernard Butkovich,” *Waller et al. v. Butkovich et al.*, May 9, 1985, Box 8, Folder 4.b, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives.

obtain illegal military weapons from him, offering to procure explosives, and attempting to interest party members and Klansmen in illegal equipment to make semi-automatic guns fully automatic. Butkovich worked diligently to form an alliance between scattered Klan and Nazi groups and urged members to stockpile weapons and buy equipment that converted semiautomatic rifles into fully automatic weapons. He offered to procure illegal explosives, including hand grenades. He attended planning sessions of Klansmen and Nazis prior to the November 3 rally and urged Klansmen to attack the communists.<sup>31</sup>

In preparation for November 3, Butkovich attended a key planning meeting for the Greensboro motorcade that would be present at the march. He checked to see whether the then-Klan party leader of Winston-Salem, Roland Wood, still intended to participate and urged him to take a pistol to the anti-Klan rally. Butkovich's arousal of mayhem was not surprising since he was "the most violent talking person in the group," according to the testimony of former Nazi Roger Shannon. Butkovich was also designated to bring guns to Brent Fletcher's house as well as the names of the CWP who were to be shot. He, however, planned to not actually attend the march.<sup>32</sup>

After November 3, Klansmen and Nazis discovered Butkovich was working undercover after he visited Klansman Roland Wood in a police interrogation room shortly after Wood's arrest and questioned him about the murders. What caused even more confusion, however, was that despite his position with the BATF, Butkovich still offered to burn down Roland Wood's house and make it appear that it was done by the

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<sup>31</sup> "Statement of Roland Wood to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



CWP in retaliation for the November 3 killings. Furthermore, he urged former Nazi Shannon to harbor several caravan participants being sought by the police after the shootings. Butkovich later came to Nazi Raeford Caudle's house where a number of those involved in the shooting were hiding hours after the murders. He did not arrest them, but was interested in the whereabouts and safety of Nazi Jack Fowler, who had fired the fatal shots that killed James Waller. According to Nazi Raeford Caudle, Butkovich came to Caudle's house, where Caudle and a number of others were hiding, hours after the killings. He did not arrest them. He was interested in the whereabouts of Nazi Jack Fowler and his safety.<sup>33</sup>

Although Butkovich's role in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre was intricate, his fate was much like Eddie Dawson's. Butkovich was not required to testify at the Klan/Nazi criminal trial, and ATF officials subsequently cleared Butkovich of any wrongdoing, finding "nothing improper" in his role of undercover agent. The decision of the court to clear Butkovich of any charges spoke to the collaboration between the FBI and the legal justice system to condone the carrying out of racist terror without any consequences. This kind of blatant disregard by authorities is what fostered fear and distrust of the law in African American communities. Ironically, however, is that the Klansmen equally had an issue with the outcome of Butkovich's fate. He, like Dawson, had come in and agitated the Klan and helped encourage them to become violent, but he did not have to deal with the consequences of having killed five people. The Klansmen

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<sup>33</sup> "Government Involvement in the Murders of Anti-Klan Demonstrators on November 3, 1979," Box 9, Folder 7.c, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

were the ones left behind, arrested, and tried in court, and because of that, several members of the KKK were bitter.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, those who were in the caravan still wanted to keep the attention on the fact that despite the infiltration, the KKK and Nazis had been attacked and they acted in self defense. Harold Covington, leader of the North Carolina Nazis stated, “If it was our plan to gun down the Communists, we wouldn’t do so in front of three TV cameras.”<sup>35</sup> In short, he maintained that the violence erupted from the KKK and Nazis because the WVO attacked their cars and there was no other choice but to defend themselves. However, Harold Covington, like Eddie Dawson and Bernard Butkovich, was not who he appeared to be. He had also been identified after the shooting by Klansmen and Nazis as being an instigator and infiltrator of the Nazi Party. In fact, Roland Wood believed that Bernard Butkovich was sent to the Nazis by Harold Covington. Wood was always suspicious of Covington because when the organization tried to investigate Butkovich, Covington ordered them to stop. What also caused suspicion was Butkovich’s insistence that Wood and others go to the rally and bring explosives. Against Butkovich’s wishes, Wood decided not to bring bombs of any kind. He said, “Thank God I didn’t. I do have sense of some kind.”<sup>36</sup>

Harold Covington called special meetings where he all but demanded the United Racist Front to meet in Greensboro. When Roland Wood told Covington that he was uncomfortable with coming to Greensboro, Covington responded by calling him and the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> “Nazis, Klansmen Suspected in Raid,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, November 5, 1979, 7.

<sup>36</sup> “Statement of Roland Wood to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

others cowards. Wood was not a coward, but he knew what could happen when two passionate groups come into contact when weapons are involved. After all, Wood was one of the people that had been present both in Greensboro and China Grove. His experience in China Grove made it clear for him that events could turn violent and potentially deadly extremely fast.<sup>37</sup>

What was also later revealed was that Harold Covington worked for the federal government in the capacity of a spy. He was a protected witness and had worked as an instigator of violence within the Nazi Party.<sup>38</sup> In response to the roles of Bernard Butkovich and Harold Covington, Roland Wood said,

I don't care if someone works for the police as long as they don't use that position to get me or my friends to do something illegal. I don't believe in working for anyone to get someone else into trouble and that is what a provocateur is. Someone who gets paid to cause something to happen and they'll sit back and let another person go to jail and they will go on the way with money in their pockets. And that is what Eddie Dawson was and what Hal Covington was.

In hindsight, Klansmen such as Wood now see how they were being used to carry out something that had been ordained by the United States government.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the betrayal, the Klan and Nazis were able to garner support both locally and nationally. For example, David Duke in his newspaper, *The Crusader*, called for the freeing of the "Greensboro 14" the Klan and neo-Nazi members charged with gunning down the five Communist Workers Party members. He pledged to raise money for their

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Trial Testimony of Bernard Butkovich," *Waller et al. v. Butkovich et al.*, May 9, 1985, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>39</sup> "Statement of Roland Wood to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

lawyers. Ultimately, an all-white, all-Christian jury acquitted all the defendants. Every charge against every Klansmen and Nazi were dropped.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, the infiltration of the Klan and Nazis caused distress and suffering for those who argued that they had been pressured into attending the march in Greensboro. They were left behind to deal with the consequences. Roland Wood stated, “I’ve been tried for murder. I’ve been tried for conspiracy to violate civil rights and everything else. I feel like Harold Covington and Bernard Butkovich should have been tried and weren’t tried. Bernard Buktovich....but I think he went to heaven with a plane that crashed. If he went to heaven, I hope and pray that he did.”<sup>41</sup>

Wood was not only left with the repercussions of those who infiltrated, but he also felt betrayed by the people that he knew who were a part of the United Racist Front, particularly Virgil Griffin. Griffin was the Grand Dragon and continued to promote himself through the wizard. While in that position he had a Klan Tribunal in which Eddie Dawson was tried for being a Klan provocateur due to him being planted in the Klan by the Federal Government. Eddie Dawson finally admitted to it and was banished. Wood said, “Virgil Griffin signed the banishment papers on Eddie Dawson. Therefore, Virgil Griffin knew that Eddie Dawson was working for the Federal Government before the date of November 3, 1979.” Wood did not understand why Griffin would knowingly allow such infiltration and danger. In response to Wood’s accusations, Virgil Griffin

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<sup>40</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 372.

<sup>41</sup> “Statement of Roland Wood to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

admitted knowing Eddie Dawson since the '60s, but maintained that he did not know that Dawson was a police informant until after it was stated on television.<sup>42</sup>

Wood was still convinced, however, that people like Bernard Butkovich, Harold Covington and Virgil Griffin had selfish motives and wanted the Communists and KKK/Nazis to kill each other. The argument, in short, was that martyrs were needed to gain power, authority, and money. It was believed by former Klansmen like Wood that Harold Covington and Virgil Griffin needed martyrs to gain more membership and donations. His logic further convinced him that the ATF wanted money for support for their field agents and needed something to investigate in order to establish a reason to continue infiltration and agitation. All of these goals could have been accomplished if the Klan/Nazis and CWP members would have shot and killed each other. While there were deaths on the side of the Klansmen and Nazis, they argue that they still suffered as a result of the shooting.<sup>43</sup>

Wood said, "I've got 26 years of hurt and pain. I want to say to these people (former CWP members)—Please let's sit down and talk. I didn't know this was going to happen. It's been about 12 years of serving God and trying to put down hate. I regret it with all my heart."<sup>44</sup> Wood was acquitted of murder in the 1980 criminal trial but was found liable in the 1985 civil trial for the deaths of CWP members. For Virgil Griffin, the 1979 Greensboro Massacre also had lingering consequences. He was sent to jail for sixteen days and held without bond. The time in jail coupled with the numerous trials

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

that lasted for months at time, he spent a great deal of time from his family. Griffin was not allowed to leave Gaston County, the county in which he lived, and was only allowed to travel to visit his mother. For one year, he could not see his siblings or associate with anyone who was affiliated with the KKK except for his wife. Griffin lamented, “For one year they destroyed my life and when I’s was tried I’s found not guilty. But, if I had done any of those things they had told me not to, I would have automatically gone to prison for five years for violating a Federal Executive Order.”<sup>45</sup> Griffin was also acquitted in the 1980 state trial and was not found liable in the 1985 civil suit.

Before his death in 2009, Virgil Griffin remained as fiery and opinionated about the shootings as he had when they first happened, and he was still persuaded that he was a victim of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. He told a similar story in 2005 to the one he told in 1979. He continued to blame Eddie Dawson for instigating, but he also pointed the finger at CWP members Nelson Johnson and Paul Bermanzohn for verbally threatening and provoking the KKK. He stood firm in his position that had not the CWP referred to the KKK as “scum” that “hide under rocks,” the KKK and Nazis would have never showed up. Griffin stated, “I don’t hide under a rock from nobody. I’m not scum, I’m not ashamed to say I’m Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and I’m not afraid of no man. And I don’t hide.”<sup>46</sup>

Griffin also continued to justify his actions on November 3, 1979. He went on to make statements indicating he still felt justified in his actions: “We don’t believe

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<sup>45</sup> “Statement of Virgil Griffin to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Committee,” July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

communists have a right to be on the streets of Greensboro or anywhere else. If they believe in communism, why don't they go across to a communist country. Love this country or leave it. I don't see the difference between killing communists in Vietnam and killing them over here.”<sup>47</sup> Griffin's perspective is especially interesting since he never served in the military. It was as if he understood himself and the Klan as the protectors of United States on American soil. His interpretation, however, does not reflect how others associated with the KKK understood their role in the shooting then and now. Former Klansmen, like Gorrel Pierce have come forward with the current position that the blame is on everybody's shoulders that were there that day. He said, “We're all individually guilty that it came to that, the hatred of one group to another. You know, it (the violence) was inevitable.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite any expressions of remorse, the KKK involved in the November 3, 1979, shooting continue to be remembered in historical memory as aggressive men who unapologetically carried out “God's work” and “America's fight” by ending the lives of five CWP members. What best encapsulates this was a letter written to the local newspaper, *The Greensboro News and Record*, in 2004 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of November 3, still hailing the Klansmen as heroes and referring to the “Greensboro Massacre” as the “Greensboro Miracle.” The Klan supporter, Rachael Pendergraft, stated that during all of the violence, not one of the Klansmen were killed or even injured. Her interpretation of the Klansmen's lives being spared was that, “God delivered these brave

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<sup>47</sup> Brent Hackney, “Klan Leader Believes He's Marked For Death,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 13, 1979, B1.

<sup>48</sup> “Statement of Gorrell Pierce to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” July 16, 2005, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

men and the rest of the members of the caravan from otherwise certain death. Yet at the end, five Commies lay dead.” The letter summed up by saying, “These Klansmen had the hand of God upon their actions and their very lives. Let this day serve as an eternal memorial that God will never turn his back on us or our precious cause.”<sup>49</sup>

Sentiments like those expressed by Rachel Pendergraft have two main implications. First, her nostalgic understanding of the KKK and its involvement in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre suggests she is sorely misinformed about the rigid complexities of the Klan’s role concerning this event. The Klansmen’s perspectives largely, not completely, reflect that they were led reluctantly to Greensboro by agitators and not by divine guidance from God as Pendergraft implies. Second, her twenty-first century interpretation of the Klan implies that their violent and racist ideologies still have more significance than the actual terror and death that the Klan historically inflict on certain communities. It is this perception and treatment of the Klan that has hindered the real ways in which Klansmen view their own actions, specifically their role in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. After examining the Klan members’ perspectives in their own words, it becomes clearer why they also identify themselves as misunderstood victims in this tragedy.

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<sup>49</sup> Rachel Pendergraft, “The Greensboro Miracle,” Letter to Op-ed Editor of *Greensboro News and Record*, October 27, 2004, Box 4, Folder 4.g, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett Archives, Greensboro North Carolina.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE LOCAL POLICE AND THEIR RESPONSE TO EXTREMISM: “OUR PLANNING AND PREPARATION FOR THE ANTI-KLAN MARCH WAS ADEQUATE AND PROPER”

The Greensboro Police Department (GPD) has rightfully been established as complicit in the Klan and Nazi shooting that left five CWP members dead. Although members of the GPD were not criminally charged during the 1980 state and 1982 federal trials, the department was held accountable during the 1984 civil trial. The verdict deemed the GPD negligent during the march and, as a result, the City of Greensboro was required to pay one of the CWP widows in the amount of \$350,000. A closer examination of the role of the authorities, however, reveals that despite the culpability of the GPD, the officers’ interpretation of the shooting is as complicated as the other players in the event. Even so, the department was still held responsible in this tragedy, and it did collaborate with the FBI and KKK. This chapter will illustrate how convoluted this event remains for local authorities who had their oath “to protect and serve” questioned by the CWP and members of the African American community.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the police officers involved in this event have fairly or unfairly been mischaracterized as politically insensitive racists who could have prevented these murders and did not. In their own defense, the GPD argues that it was hindered by

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Wheaton, *Codename Greenkil: The 1979 Greensboro Killings* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 281.

numerous factors in the process of protecting the demonstrators and residents. First, there were only a few select members of the department who were aware of the intelligence that revealed weeks prior to the protest that the Ku Klux Klan would be present on November 3. The officers working the march were not made privy to that information until minutes before the actual shooting. Second, the tension-filled relationship that existed between the GPD and CWP members prior to November 3 kept authorities from acting in accordance with their normal procedures. For example, protestors were aggressive and belligerent toward officers, demanding they stay away. For these reasons, the officers believed they were justified in exercising caution, but in heeding to that caution, their actions or the lack thereof ignited more backlash and negative opinions from many in the city. The people of Morningside Homes view the GPD's actions as a failure, another act of racism and disregard for the neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

Although the GPD has received a bad rap from some of the community, the authorities insist that it was not their own actions but the lack of cooperation on behalf of the CWP that led to the protestors' fate concerning November 3, 1979, and the acquittal of the shooters. Nonetheless, the public is hardly exposed to that particular perspective of the police and, as a result, this is one of the reasons authorities still face a strained relationship of distrust between themselves and the African American community. The 1979 Greensboro Massacre left the police appearing as enemies not only to those who had directly survived the shooting, but also to the residents in the neighborhood that should have been protected on that day.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

Each of these factors works together to explain why a cloud of suspicion has followed the GPD concerning the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. These elements also illuminate how the general population of police officers has been mischaracterized by what only a few officers knew and could have possibly prevented. Nonetheless, local city officials and legal authorities have consistently supported and continue to stand beside the GPD in its actions concerning the shooting. The decisions of the police and the support they have received from city leaders, however, have served to broaden the great divide among the local police, the protestors, and the residents of Morningside Homes.

When examining the GPD's interpretation of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, it is appropriate to start with what the police department knew before the event, how they planned for the march, and how they understood and responded to the shootings. The GPD first became aware of the anti-Klan march on or about October 8, 1979, as a result of a broadcast that Major E. R. Wynn saw on the local news. Approximately a week later on October 19, 1979, Nelson Johnson contacted Lieutenant W. L. Henderson and made an application for a parade permit. The information gathered by Henderson from the permit confirmed that the parade was to be a "Death to the Klan" march sponsored by the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO), which was a branch of the CWP. It was also indicated that Johnson's march would start out small in the community of Morningside Homes and, hopefully, gather a larger crowd from four housing projects included along

the route. This information immediately alarmed the police because this event was going to include two extremist groups that both had reputations for being aggressive.<sup>2</sup>

There was concern about the crowd that the protestors would attract becoming uncontrollable. Therefore, in just a matter of days after the permit had been applied for on October 22, Captain Larry Gibson and Major Wynn discussed the limitations that should be placed on the permit if it was indeed issued. The restrictions stipulated no arms could be carried either openly or concealed, and the sticks used to carry banners could be no larger than two inches by two inches. It is important to mention that this was the first time such restrictions had been placed on a parade permit in the city of Greensboro.<sup>3</sup>

There was so much discomfort surrounding the permit and the parade itself that Captain Gibson approached GPD Attorney, Maurice Cawn, and inquired if the permit had to be issued at all. He informed Captain Gibson that there was no justified reason not to issue the permit. While there was clearly a bias against the CWP as demonstrated through the restrictions that were being placed on them, Attorney Cawn made it clear that the police would have to maintain neutrality. Remaining nonpartisan should have been a realistic task since Morningside Homes was an area located in the patrol district of African American Patrol Captain Trevor Hampton. The logic was that neutrality and peace would be maintained in the march because of Hampton's race. It was hoped that he would be better able to communicate with and handle Nelson Johnson and the

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<sup>2</sup> "Summary of Planning Activities for Anti-Klan March Scheduled November 3, 1979," December 7, 1979, Box 6, Folder 1.d-1, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>3</sup> "Trial Testimony of Larry Stephen Gibson," *United States v. Virgil Griffin et al.*, August 23, 1982, Box 9, Folder 1, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

predominately African American protestors that would be joining the march. A decision was made by the police that since Captain Hampton was responsible for the area covered by Morningside Homes, his officers would be on the scene of the protest.<sup>4</sup>

Captain Hampton recalled first receiving the parade permit just a couple of days prior to the march, on November 1. At that time, he was made aware of the specifics of the parade and learned about what had occurred in China Grove just months prior. It is unclear why Hampton was first presented with the information concerning the march and China Grove this late when Major Wynn and Captain Gibson had already seen and made decisions concerning the permit approximately two weeks before. Wynn and Gibson's choice not to include Hampton in the decision-making concerning the parade was suspect since they all knew Captain Hampton would be in charge of the march. Ironically, on the same date of November 1, 1979, when Hampton learned of the permit, CWP leader, Nelson Johnson, came to pick up the parade permit. Captain Hampton happened to see him in the building and took the opportunity to advise Johnson that there would be a supervisor and two officers assigned to the parade route scheduled for November 3, 1979.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that Captain Hampton had only assigned a small amount of officers to the parade was an indication that even he was not aware of the potential for dangers that some key colleagues knew in the days leading up to the march. In addition to Major Wynn and Captain Gibson having already had information about the parade permit,

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<sup>4</sup> "Summary Report-Incident at Everitt and Carver Street, November 3, 1979," November 6, 1979, Box 6, Folder 1.d-1, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Detective J.H. Cooper had intelligence that had been provided by police informant Edward Dawson, indicating that the Klan would be present on November 3. Not only was the existence of this information controversial because Captain Hampton was not informed of this intelligence, but it was also troublesome because Detective Cooper had knowledge of Eddie Dawson's violent nature and his past history both as a Klansman and an FBI informant. Additionally, Cooper's contact with Dawson made him privy at least ten days prior to the march that the Klan would be present at the march.<sup>6</sup>

The connection between Detective Cooper and Dawson all started on or about October 11, 1979, while Cooper was walking past a colleague's office. He saw a man whom he recognized as Eddie Dawson. He explained to his colleague Sergeant Colvard that Dawson was a known participant in Klan activities. Cooper also shared that Dawson had served as an informant for Lieutenant Ford and the FBI, providing information on the KKK. Instead of shying away from Dawson as a result of his history, Cooper saw this encounter as a perfect opportunity to gain intelligence on Klan activities, specifically any plans they may have had to disrupt the "Death to the Klan" rally approaching in a few weeks. Cooper stopped and spoke with Dawson, and the communication between the two continued regularly, at least until the day of the march.<sup>7</sup>

On October 24, 1979, Detective Cooper received a phone call from Dawson in which he discussed a Klan meeting he had attended at the fairgrounds in Lincolnton, North Carolina. According to Dawson, there were approximately four hundred people

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<sup>6</sup> "Supplemental information to incident occurring on November 3, 1979, at Everitt Street and Carver Drive," November 20, 1979, Box 8, Folder 6.b, Emily Mann Documents, Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

present with approximately eighty of those persons in Klan robes. The remaining three hundred plus people were Klan sympathizers. Dawson stated to Cooper that when the crowd was asked how many of them would be attending the “Death to the Klan” rally in Greensboro, approximately eighty five of the attendees raised their hands. Dawson further said that he was asked by those present at the Klan meeting if they would be allowed to carry weapons. According to Cooper, Dawson told the group he could not tell them whether or not to carry guns; however, if they did carry concealed weapons, guns, they would certainly be arrested by the GPD. Dawson further informed the group that he felt sure the GPD and the FBI would be present at the march route. At the conclusion of the conversation, Dawson indicated that help was also being solicited from the Grand Dragons in South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.<sup>8</sup>

On October 26, 1979, Dawson contacted Detective Cooper by telephone again and informed him that he had been contacted by the North Carolina Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon, Virgil Griffin, to attend a Klan meeting on Saturday, October 27, 1979. Virgil Griffin told Dawson that the purpose of the meeting was to get the Ku Klux Klan, Nazi party, and Rights of White People party together. It was in Dawson’s correspondence with Grand Dragon Griffin that Dawson was informed that approximately eighty individuals of the Nazi party were tentatively planning to attend the anti-Klan march in Greensboro on November 3, 1979. On October 31, 1979, Cooper received yet another call from Dawson in which he stated that Griffin had told him that Leroy Gibson, head of

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<sup>8</sup> “Chief of Police’s Conversation With Edward Dawson,” February 25, 1980, Box 4, Folder 1.d-1, GPD-Internal Affairs Memos and Interviews, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

the Rights of White People, based in Wilmington, North Carolina, had indicated that members of that group would attend the anti-Klan march in Greensboro on November 3, 1979. Additionally, Dawson stated that Harold Covington, head of the Nazi party based in Raleigh, North Carolina, expected that members of that group would also be in attendance at the anti-Klan march and rally in Greensboro on November 3, 1979.<sup>9</sup>

Cooper was also made aware by Dawson that members of the Klan, Nazis, and the Rights of White People group would be meeting at the home of Brent Fletcher. Virgil Griffin planned to arrive in Greensboro at approximately 2:00 a.m. on November 3, 1979, to survey the parade route in an effort to determine where a confrontation might take place between the Workers Viewpoint Organization and members of the Klan. Dawson informed Detective Cooper that the plans were to confront WVO marchers along the parade route. At this time Detective Cooper assumed that the confrontation would be in the form of heckling, as again he did not specifically ask what Griffin meant by the term “confrontation.” Dawson further stated that the specific number of Klan members that might show up was not known, and Dawson would probably not know until Saturday, November 3, 1979. Detective Cooper later claimed that he did not hire Dawson to be an informant; rather, Dawson volunteered his services, and Dawson was paid fifty dollars for the information that he provided.<sup>10</sup>

Captain Hampton, who was African American, knew none of this information and had no knowledge of Eddie Dawson. Ironically, on the same day that Captain Hampton received the parade permit for the first time on November 1, Dawson came to the Office

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



of the Criminal Investigation Division and confirmed with Lieutenant R.L. Talbott and Detective Cooper that Virgil Griffin would definitely be in Greensboro during the early morning hours of November 3 to check out the parade route. However, Dawson's primary reason for being in the office on November 1 was to obtain a parade permit himself. Cooper instructed Dawson that the parade permit could be obtained at the City Clerk's office.<sup>11</sup> Not only did it appear that Cooper was encouraging Dawson to obtain a permit for the purposes of passing it on to the Klan, but Cooper also missed another opportunity to inform Captain Hampton and the officers who were going to be directly involved in the march about the presence of the Klan and the potential danger their presence could add to the situation. Because Captain Hampton was uninformed, he continued to plan for the march as he would any usual march. His only concern at the time was the possibility of hostility between the police and the protestors. In order to reduce the possibility of a confrontation between his officers and any other group, he reasoned that it would be a good idea for the police to be present yet keep their distance from the group. He said, "I felt that it would be best to use minimum manpower on the scene to lead the parade, to bring up the rear of the parade, and also to provide supervision. So it was initially decided to use very few officers on the parade itself. However, we would have officers available in close proximity to the parade if there were any problems."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Supplemental information to incident occurring on November 3, 1979, at Everitt Street and Carver Drive," November 20, 1979, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>12</sup> "Trial Testimony of Trevor Hampton," *United States v. Virgil Griffin et al.*, August 23, 1982, Box 9, Folder 3, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Captain Hampton's caution was largely fueled by the reputation of CWP leader Nelson Johnson, who seemed to almost always be a part of the city's most contentious clashes that involved law enforcement. In May of 1969, for example, a violent confrontation that was led by Nelson Johnson took place between local students at North Carolina A&T State University (NCA&TSU) and local police officers that resulted in the death of NCA&TSU student, Willie Grimes. Before the conflict ended, the National Guard was summoned into Greensboro for the purposes of restoring peace in the city. Also, a contribution to Captain Hampton's hesitancy in dealing with the CWP was the incident in China Grove, North Carolina, where Nelson Johnson was central in the march that thwarted a Klan gathering at a local community center. Not only was the aggression of the marchers directed toward the Klansmen, but also in the direction of the police who were working to keep the protestors and Klan separate. More recently, Nelson Johnson had held a press conference on November 1 concerning the November 3 march in which he stated that the CWP wanted the police, "to stay out of the protestors' way and not interfere with their march and conference."<sup>13</sup> Even though Nelson Johnson later claimed that his statement did not suggest that he did not expect the police to be present and protect them, his statement was very much interpreted as a potential threat to the police officers that were going to be working the event. More generally, the concern about the WVO had more to do with their "revolutionary" rhetoric, which was not only intensely anti-establishment, but also particularly anti-police. Sgt. Furman Melton said in his

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<sup>13</sup> "Death to the Klan' March and Conference Calls Out Klan's Secret Supporters," November 1, 1979, Box 3, Folder 1.sss, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

deposition to the court that he believed the WVO was a threat not because of the specific activities or rhetoric, but because “I thought all communist groups were trying to overthrow the U.S. government. I had been told and read about it as long as I can remember. I think any communist organization would be a threat to this country in some form or fashion.” These reasons were precisely why Captain Hampton was worried about a confrontation possibly taking place between the marchers and the authorities more than a confrontation between the CWP and the KKK. His concerns, though, were not major enough for Captain Hampton to change his plans which were going to keep him from personally being at the march. He had another previous work-related engagement in downtown Greensboro on November 3, 1979. As a result, Captain Hampton assigned Lieutenant P.W. Spoon overall coordination of the parade who then assigned Sergeant W.D. Comer to coordinate activities and assignments along the parade route.<sup>14</sup>

On October 31, 1979, it was concluded that a planning meeting was necessary on November 3 to be held hours before the march. That morning, Comer was advised by Spoon that the parade was to leave the area of Everitt and Carver Drive at approximately noon. He was further instructed to meet with Nelson Johnson at 11:30 a.m. for the purposes of discussing the parade route. Clarification was needed because even though the parade permit stated that the starting point was at Everitt and Carver, the printed material placed in circulation by the CWP advertised that the march would assemble at

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<sup>14</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “Chapter 5: Greensboro Police Department and the “Communist Problem” in *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report* (Greensboro: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006), 123-124.

11:00 a.m. in the parking lot of Windsor Community Center. What was clear was that the conference associated with the march would be held at the All Nation Pentecostal Holiness Church and was listed to start at 2:00 p.m. The authorities working the parade were made aware of that. At approximately 10:00 a.m., Lieutenant Spoon checked the exterior of both locations of the Windsor Community Center and All Nation Pentecostal Church. There were no protestors at either site. Spoon then proceeded to a police briefing concerning the march.<sup>15</sup>

At the briefing, Detective J.H. Cooper casually revealed to the officers present that there was an alleged group of Klansmen who might possibly be en route to Greensboro. Because Captain Hampton would be absent from the march, it was decided in the meeting that Sergeant Comer and his officers would have primary responsibility for the parade. Tactical officers would also be available to serve as backup and support if necessary. Comer decided that there would be 29 officers in total and only four of them were assigned to the parade. Those who remained were divided into tactical squads. One tactical squad would be formed at Dudley High School no later than 11:40 a.m. and the other formed at Gillespie Junior High School no later than 11:30 a.m. The briefing concluded at approximately 10:40 a.m. and officers were given permission to get a cup of coffee and sandwich as long as it did not interfere with being on their assigned post at 11:30 a.m. When everyone left, there was no confusion as to whether the parade was to start at Everitt and Carver. A copy of the application detailing the route, the starting point, and the termination location was provided to them. According to Captain Gibson,

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<sup>15</sup> "Summary of Planning Activities for Anti-Klan March Scheduled November 3, 1979," December 7, 1979, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 10-11.

everyone had a clear understanding of where it was going to start. He continued, “The last thing Detective Cooper said before the meeting disbanded was ‘we’re not sure if any Klan members are coming at all and if they do there will be very few of them.’ That statement left the impression that there would be no Klan moving into the Morningside area.”<sup>16</sup>

Sergeant Comer was to lead the parade while simultaneously riding parallel to the route. Officer J.T. Williams and Officer T.R. Johnson were to follow the parade. Before the march started, Sergeant Comer went to Windsor Community Center and saw that some forty to fifty people had gathered in the parking lot. At the time of Sergeant Comer’s observation, the people were milling around and already chanting. He called for Officer Williams to also come to the Windsor Community Center for the purposes of trying to locate and talk with Nelson Johnson to discuss the role of the police during the march. They assumed Johnson might possibly be among the group of people gathered at the community center. Instead of finding Johnson, Comer and Williams met hostility from the crowd, particularly from a black female they identified as Sheila Cannon, who was very belligerent and uncooperative. When Officer Williams attempted to talk with Cannon, she picked up a megaphone and started chanting, “Death to the Klan,” “Pigs Go Away,” and “Death to the Pigs.” At this time, Comer and Williams realized they were not going to locate Johnson and decided they should leave the parking lot of Windsor Community Center. Upon their departure, Sergeant Comer reported that the crowd cheered and clapped and seemed generally glad that they were exiting the area. Before

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

he left, however, he advised the protestors that the police were there to protect them and certainly not to intimidate them. Sergeant Comer further told the lady with the megaphone that there would be a police car in the front of the parade and a police car at the rear of the parade. Cannon indicated that the marchers did not want the assistance of the police because they argued that all the police would do would kill them.<sup>17</sup>

Sergeant Comer informed Lieutenant Spoon of the lack of cooperation on the part of the group; however, Lieutenant Spoon suggested that he and Officer Williams return for the purpose of trying to locate Nelson Johnson. Sergeant Comer estimated the time at or about 11:00 a.m. when he returned. At that time, approximately fifty to seventy five people were there, so Comer and Williams believed that the entire group of protestors was at Windsor Community Center. Comer and Williams still had been unable to locate Nelson Johnson because he was already at the corners of Carver and Everitt streets. What is unclear is why the police continued to search for Nelson Johnson at Windsor when he indicated on the parade permit that the march would begin at Morningside Homes. Nonetheless, in just a matter of minutes at 11:06 a.m., Detective Cooper advised Sergeant Burke by radio that there were approximately eight vehicles on Interstate 85 and Highway 220 containing about thirty to thirty-five people who were Klansmen. Cooper claimed to have accidentally located the Klan caravan and had not told Dawson that he had spotted them or was going to follow them. The idea that Cooper happened upon the caravan was not completely true, however, because Cooper had been in contact with

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<sup>17</sup> “Summary Report-Incident at Everitt and Carver Street, November 3, 1979,” November 6, 1979, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 3.

Dawson that morning and was told that the caravan would be present. Dawson telephoned Detective Cooper at home. By Cooper's own admission he was informed by Dawson at that time that Virgil Griffin had arrived in Greensboro with two other men. Dawson stated to Cooper that he had seen that the three men had a .32 caliber, .38 caliber, and .44 caliber Magnum pistols. Dawson further told Detective Cooper that the Klan was going to ride along the parade route and heckle the marchers, and if there was a face-to face confrontation, it would be at the finishing point of the parade. Again, Dawson did not explain and was neither asked what type of confrontation might occur.<sup>18</sup>

Not only was Detective Cooper aware that the Klan would indeed be there, but he also knew Eddie Dawson would be leading the caravan to the march. When examining the minute-by-minute communication of the police with each other leading up to the march, it is evident that the commanding officers knew the location and the route of the Klan/Nazi caravan for nearly fifteen minutes before conveying the information to the actual officers who would be working the parade. At 11:11 a.m., Cooper advised Comer that eight vehicles were parked on the ramp at I-85 and Highway 220 headed in his direction. At or about 11:13 a.m., Detective Cooper advised Sergeant Burke that the vehicles were now a total of nine. At 11:15 a.m., Sergeant Burke advised Lieutenant Daughtry of Detective Cooper's information pertaining to the nine vehicles. Sergeant Burke stated, "Jerry called; he's got nine vehicles headed in that direction from where we were a while ago. Said it's about thirty to thirty-five people and Sergeant Comer called you and said the group he's got is right boisterous and belligerent already before anybody

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<sup>18</sup> "Supplemental information to incident occurring on November 3, 1979, at Everitt Street and Carver Drive," November 20, 1979, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 4.

got there.” At 11:16 a.m., Detective Cooper advised Lieutenant Daughtry that the caravan was on Highway 29 approaching Florida street. At 11:16, Lieutenant Daughtry asked Sergeant Burke if his people were in position and received a negative reply stating that they were not because the officers were getting a sandwich. Lieutenant Daughtry then advised they only had fourteen minutes until 11:30 a.m. and Sergeant Burke should rush the men. At 11:18 a.m., Detective Cooper advised that the caravan was turning on Willow Road.<sup>19</sup>

At 11:19 a.m., Lieutenant Daughtry advised Sergeant Burke, “Let’s hustle on in and get in those positions because they are moving before we anticipated.” Lieutenant Daughtry said he was referring to the positions at Dudley High School and Lincoln Junior High School, not Carver and Everitt. At 11:20 a.m., Detective Cooper relayed to Lieutenant Daughtry “Their parking up on Everitt Street at Willow Road.” At 11:22 a.m., Detective Cooper advised Lieutenant Daughtry that the Klan was at their formation point and “it appears that they are ‘heckling’ at this time.” Detective Cooper mentioned that some of the parade members appeared to be scattering. There was then a break in the radio transmission by another vehicle with a non-related radio transmission.<sup>20</sup>

At 11:23 a.m., seven minutes before the march was scheduled to start and the tactical units were to be in place, Detective Cooper advised, “We’ve got a 10-10 (fight) down here, you better get some units in here.” Lieutenant Spoon asked Lieutenant Daughtry if his people were in position over there. Sergeant Comer advised that he and

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<sup>19</sup> “Summary Report-Incident at Everitt and Carver Street, November 3, 1979,” November 6, 1979, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 4-7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Officer Williams did not move from their location toward Everitt and Carver at this time because Sergeant Comer felt he and Officer Williams should protect the people in the lot at the Windsor Community Center. Furthermore, they thought that the Tactical Squad was moving in to handle the situation. Because Detective Cooper notified the group of heavy gunfire, Lieutenant Spoon advised that all available cars in the city come to the area of the Windsor Community Center, but not to Morningside Homes. Although Captain Hampton was not at the location, he kept his radio transmitter close by so that he could hear what was going on. Once he got word of the caravan and the fired shots, he made his way to Windsor Community Center. At 11:24 a.m., Captain Hampton advised that the shooting was not at Windsor and Detective Cooper confirmed that the gunfire was coming from Morningside.<sup>21</sup>

Tactical Officers A.A. League and S.A. Bryant, along with Tactical Officers T. F. Anderson and J.P. Dixon, were already at their assigned location at Dudley High School. Upon hearing Detective Cooper's radio transmission of a fight, Officer League and Officer Bryant started traveling north on Lincoln Street toward Everitt and Carver Drive. The officers estimated their time of arrival at thirty-five seconds after hearing the radio transmission of shots being fired. Officer League got out of his vehicle with a shotgun while Bryant remained in the vehicle. Upon seeing the yellow van approaching, Officer League shouted for the van to stop, and when it appeared the van was not going to stop, Officer Bryant pulled the police vehicle in front of the yellow van. The following officers were soon joined by Lieutenant Daughtry, who also parked his vehicle in front of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

the van: Lieutenant P.W. Spoon, Sergeant W.D. Comer, and Officers Williams and T. R. Johnson. Comer and Williams left Windsor immediately upon hearing Cooper's radio transmission of shots being fired.<sup>22</sup>

The occupants of the van were ordered out by the officers and were subsequently arrested and removed from the scene. Sergeant W.D. Comer paused only briefly at the van and, seeing that the situation was under control, ran to the intersection of Everitt and Carver, as the van had been stopped on Everitt Street near Gillespie Street. Sergeant Comer saw injured people on the ground and summoned for ambulances to be dispatched and started directing arriving officers to priority areas. Sergeant Comer estimated the ambulances arrived within five minutes of his call. After the arrival of additional supervisory personnel, the area of Everitt and Carver was cordoned off. Once the wounded were removed to various hospitals, officers went about initiating an investigation into what had transpired. Police Officer J.T. Williams was assigned oversight of the preliminary investigations and submitted the necessary reports. The officers acted promptly once the shooting had already ended. However, by that time, it was too late for the authorities to protect anyone. Most of the victims were already dead.<sup>23</sup>

In the days following the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, there were many questions that swirled around the police regarding whether or not they had indeed handled the march properly. Chief Swing produced an official police report in February of 1980 that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Summary of Planning Activities for Anti-Klan March Scheduled November 3, 1979," December 7, 1979, Greensboro Police Department Files, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 11.

was based on what he understood as to the facts of what occurred. This report explained the precautions that had been taken by authorities prior to the march, why the police responded in the manner they did, and why they believed their response was proper and in order. The same month that the official police statement was produced, Chief Swing presented it to the Citizen's Review Committee in downtown Greensboro.<sup>24</sup>

Chief Swing started his description with the contention that all the trouble began with the parade permit. Swing recalled that the CWP indicated they would be armed, and the police asked them to remain unarmed. However, what is known is that from his own previous admission, the permit would not be issued unless the CWP agreed to these restrictions. Swing still held the position that the restrictions were rightfully placed on the permit because of the aggressive nature of the CWP that had been shown in previous events. Also, the report made note of the confusion surrounding the parade permit. It called for the march to start on Carver and Everett Streets at noon and terminate at All Nations Church. However, the handouts given in relation to the march stated something different. The flier showed the rally was set to start at Windsor Community Center at 11:00 a.m. To the police, the conflict in times and locations was a tactic to confuse authorities. The discrepancy in time and location prohibited them from being placed properly on the march route. The CWP denied attempting to confuse local authorities.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the issue of the parade permit, Chief Swing also raised the topic of China Grove, North Carolina. In assigning manpower to the march on November 3, the

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<sup>24</sup> "Statement of Chief W.E. Swing to the Citizens Review Committee," February 19, 1980, Box 4, Folder 6.b, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

police were preoccupied with the confrontation that took place between the Klan and CWP. In China Grove there were insults, jeering, and verbal attacks, and from the information the GPD had obtained, it was believed that the same would occur in Greensboro. Thus, two units were stationed at Dudley High School and Gillespie High School for the purposes of staying out of sight, while being close enough to respond if necessary. This approach was necessary from the perspective of the police because of the rhetoric from the CWP stating that the authorities should stay away. Besides, the police believed that if the Klan did show up to the march, they would only have eggs to throw at the marchers.<sup>26</sup>

While an examination of the permit and the planning of the parade are important to understanding the actions of the police during the march, an even bigger question centers around the intelligence the police gathered prior to the shooting. According to Chief Swing, a surveillance car located Brent Fletcher's home, the residence in which the Klan gathered, about 9:30 a.m. the morning of the march. The officer in the observation vehicle explained how many cars were down there and that some of the Klansmen have guns. After the surveillance briefing, the unidentified officer assigned to the Fletcher home returned to the residence and followed the caravan to the march. When the surveillance officer actually saw the confrontation between the caravan and the marchers become physical, he sent a message over the radio that there was a fight in the area. Just a few seconds later, the same officer reported shots had been fired. Even though Chief

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Swing did not identify the surveillance officer in his testimony, all indications were that the person was Detective Cooper.<sup>27</sup>

Once shooting in the area was reported over the radio, the official police report stated that the first police car arrived about forty seconds after the first shot was fired; however, the unidentified officer inside the vehicle did not immediately get out of the car. The fact that he remained inside the vehicle served as further proof for the protestors that the intention of the police was not to protect the marchers. In response to the criticism, Chief Swing answered that the officer should not have exited the vehicle because he was in civilian clothes, he would have lost radio contact had he stepped out of the car, and had he gotten out he would have walked into the line of fire. Chief Swing said, “There was no forewarning to the shooting and if you look at the time between the fighting and keep in mind that we’re dealing in seconds, by the time the officer said there was fighting, they were already fighting and by the time he says they are shooting they were already shooting.”<sup>28</sup>

The Citizens Review Committee, the protestors, and residents of Morningside Homes seemed less than impressed with the response of Chief Swing, and they all remained curious as to why the surveillance officer did not stop the caravan prior to the Klansmen reaching the march site. This was a legitimate question especially considering the fact that the officers suspected the Klansmen were armed. In their own defense, Chief Swing stated that there was no legal reason to stop the caravan. He said, “You simply cannot stop cars at random. The information we had on the hand-guns was that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

the weapons were in the house. We had no way of knowing they would be in the vehicles. If we assumed, there's nine cars. Which car had them in there?" He concluded by simply stating that that this shooting was a terrible incident in which five people got killed: "Nowhere in the history of the United States has what happened here ever occurred before. We had no way of suspecting it here."<sup>29</sup>

When pressed about the relationship between police informant Eddie Dawson and Detective Cooper and how the Klan caravan knew the route of the march, Chief Swing denied having knowledge of either. He insisted that the Klan knew of the route because one of their members had picked up a copy of the permit and not because the police department was working in cahoots with the Klan. Swing's statement was not completely true because what had been determined through the interviews of Detective Cooper and Eddie Dawson by the courts that there was open communication between these two. It could have very well been true, however, that the relationship between Cooper and Dawson was not general knowledge among the rest of the authorities. In fact, the evidence suggests that the average cop and patrol divisions, including Patrol Captain Trevor Hampton, had no knowledge of Eddie Dawson. As Officer Ramon Bell put it, "We were day-to-day working investigative officers; we had nothing to do with Special Intelligence. That was left up to the Intelligence Officers and Internal Affairs."<sup>30</sup>

In an attempt to further the GPD's argument about the police not working with the Klan, Chief Swing made the argument that out of the six persons in charge of the tactical

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Statement of Ramon Bell to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," August 26, 2005, Box 6, Folder 10g, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

group, four of them were African American. “I don’t think that anybody would suggest that a black officer is a member of the Klan that would cooperate with them,” said Chief Swing. A cloud of suspicion still surrounded the officers and members of the Citizens Review Committee argued that Chief Swing was using Captain Hampton as a scapegoat. The committee found it strange that members of the GPD knew about the Klan coming to Greensboro at least two weeks before the shooting and did not share that information with Captain Hampton. That fact made it appear certain members of the department wanted to project that there was no way the police could have been involved because the person over the march was African American. Chief Swing denied using anyone or anything as a cover or scapegoat.<sup>31</sup>

Swing wanted to make sure to make his point to the Citizens Review Committee about not working with the Klan, but he was strangely silent on any collaboration between the police and the FBI. Authorities did not address in the official police report or in their testimony to the Citizens Review Committee the accusations of the GPD and FBI working together. However, during the 1984 civil trial, special officer Robert Di Grazia from Boston was called in to testify and offer some insight into the possibility of the local police department indeed working with the FBI. Although he was not from Greensboro, he knew through his own experience that police departments typically cannot and do not operate individually. According to Di Grazia, a network consisting of local agencies, state agencies, and federal agencies was necessary so that each group could know the action of the other and how each one was planning on handling the matter

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<sup>31</sup> “Statement of Chief W.E. Swing to the Citizens Review Committee,” February 19, 1980, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, 23.

at hand. Di Grazia spoke of his experience in the Boston Police Department working with the FBI during the time of desegregation of schools in Boston. He claimed that an event such as the desegregation of schools could not be handled by just the police, but it needed the manpower and expertise of the FBI as well. Di Grazia suspected the same was the case in Greensboro and did not think of it as odd. As it related to the GPD and their relationship with Eddie Dawson, it was Di Grazia's opinion that the GPD got it all wrong. The fact that they did not sit down with Dawson and delineate specifically what they required of him. Di Grazia pointed out:

For example, they did not lay down rules and regulations as to when crime could or could not be committed, they did not make it clear that he should not be an instigator, that he could not be a leader, and that he should not have been present on November 3, 1979. They also should have been checking his back history, if he was reliable as an informant, and if he was someone that could be depended on in a racial incident or would he over-react because it was a racial incident. They failed in the fact that they did not have a written directive on the use of informants that would specifically outline to police officers how they should deal with informants.<sup>32</sup>

In short, Di Grazia's testimony summed up a main reason why the Greensboro Police Department was held accountable during the 1984 civil trial in death of five CWP members.

It is clear that the Greensboro Police Department had several shortcomings as it related to the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. Nonetheless, the GPD still believe that it has also suffered as a result of the Greensboro Massacre. Their proclaimed suffering has

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<sup>32</sup> "Trial Testimony of Robert J. Di Grazia," *James Waller, et al. vs. Bernard Butkovich*, May 17, 1985, Box 8, Folder 8, Emily Mann Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.



been most evident in their relationship with the community of Morningside Homes. According to Robert Patterson, the City of Greensboro's Race Relations Specialist in 1979, the majority of the people in Morningside believed that the GPD was responsible for allowing the shooting to take place. The residents were disheartened that the officers did not offer any protection to the people of Morningside who were largely unrelated and disconnected from the event. This incident hurt race relations in the city tremendously. Patterson rated the general status of human and race relations prior to November 3 as stable and calm, fair to good, and gave it a seven on a ten point scale. When asked about race relation in the days after the shooting, Patterson stated, "I would like to say to you that everything is not alright now."<sup>33</sup>

The majority of the people in Morningside Homes interviewed by Patterson had very negative responses about police. In the immediate days following the shooting, several threats that were made by African Americans from the Morningside Homes area. There were several rumors of people retaliating by carrying guns. More specifically, the threat was that African Americans were going to randomly choose white people to shoot. Patterson said, "It got to the place that I was almost afraid to go down to that area myself and I'm a former police officer and I'm not really afraid of the average thing, but I wouldn't even think about going down there in the immediate days following the event."<sup>34</sup> Also following the incident, a number of people voiced to Patterson that they were frightened as a result of the shooting and a lack of protection by the police. When

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<sup>33</sup> "Statement of John Patterson to the Citizens Review Committee," February 17, 1980, Box 4, Folder 6.b, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina, 24-32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

discussing the plight of the people to the Citizens Review Committee, Pattern empathized with the residents of Morningside. He admitted that the police should have been more precautionous because with the Klan and CWP, the police knew they were dealing with two hostile groups. Patterson still defended the police, however, by making the point that despite who the officers dealt with, “the police cannot prevent every crime from happening. We all know that, but the police image has still been hurt, especially in the Morningside Homes area.”<sup>35</sup>

The perspectives of the people of Morningside Homes appeared to be a non-factor to city officials, such as then mayor in 1979, Jim Melvin. Melvin supported the GPD and nearly fifteen years after the event still did not see the 1979 Greensboro Massacre as a racial event, but rather, a political one. Melvin believed that no amount of law enforcement could have kept a violent clash from happening between two groups that sought to do bodily harm to each other. According to Melvin, if the city had legitimate racial problems, blood would have been covering every street in Greensboro.<sup>36</sup>

When asked specifically about the preparation and response of the GPD, Melvin’s response was, “Our people were there within I think, eighty-eight seconds, which is good time I’d say. We had forty-four police officers there. That’s ten percent of the Greensboro Police Department assigned to one transaction. And yeah, in hindsight we probably should have had two hundred and forty-four police there. This covered the whole neighborhood and we probably should have called the National Guard. That’s

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<sup>35</sup> Jim Melvin, *Interview with Bill Link*, April 5, 1993, Box 4, Folder 1.b, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

from hindsight.” From this statement, the suggestion is Melvin’s misunderstanding went even further than thought. He also was unclear about the role of the police. The police stated that they had roughly twenty-nine officers, not forty-four. Furthermore, only four were assigned to the actual march and all four were at Windsor Community Center, not Carver and Everitt, when the shooting started. In his interview, Melvin was more concerned about the harsh reputation the City of Greensboro and the GPD received as a result of the shooting more than how the people involved were affected. Melvin’s response was an indication that he had no understanding of how, in this case, race and politics were intertwined and the people of Morningside Homes had been sorely affected just as the shooting victims had. He still continued to not be able to see outside the realm of the CWP and the KKK. To Melvin, this unwarranted reputation of the city being a place of intolerance skewed Greensboro’s history of racial and political progression. He still believed, however, that Greensboro is probably the nicest place anybody could live, and even when the city is faced with racial problems, the city still responds promptly and properly. It is highly upsetting to Melvin that a few extremists brought in their politics and violated the community.<sup>37</sup>

Melvin insisted that the infiltration of the CWP was to blame for inciting violence. Melvin accused the CWP of making the shooting appear as a racial incident in order to recruit more minorities to the CWP. He continued, “This was nothing less than a publicity stunt. That’s why all of the newspapers and TV stations were called.”<sup>38</sup> For

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Melvin, it was not only the CWP's behavior leading up to November 3 that made them seem like troublemakers but also their actions in the courtroom during the 1980 state trial in which the Klansmen were acquitted. The CWP refused to testify, and that decision curtailed any chance to gain a criminal conviction against the shooters. Surviving members of the CWP declared before the trial that they would not testify because they believed the trial would be a sham leading to acquittals. This avowed position was affirmed when the prosecuting attorney called to the witness stand an injured demonstrator believed to be a member of the CWP. The demonstrator refused to testify, choosing instead to accept a contempt of court jail sentence.<sup>39</sup>

The police and the mayor took the position that the even though the CWP blamed the officers and the skewed justice system for the Klan being acquitted, it was their own actions during the trial, as during the actual march, that contributed to the hindrance of the legal process. Another example of the CWP's behavior happened during the first day of the actual trial proceedings after the jury was empanelled, when there were two continuous shouting disruptions in the courtroom. Judge James Long ordered the persons who were sympathetic to the CWP position to cease the disruption. When the outbursts continued, they were ordered to be brought forward, gagged, and placed in contempt. Those persons were charged with contempt and given the opportunity to respond in a reasonable manner, but did not do so. Therefore, the gags were reapplied, and they were sentenced to 30-day jail sentences permitted by law.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Statement of Judge James Long to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," August 26, 2005, Box 13, Folder 10.1, GTRC Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Remaining CWP empathizers detonated stink bombs in the courtroom, causing major discomfort to the spectators, including the jury. Judge Long, as a result, called a ten-minute recess until the courtroom was cleared of people and odor. Ironically, on the other side of the courtroom were neatly dressed Klansmen defendants sitting quietly behind their attorneys and participating in the trial by offering testimony and other evidence, which, if believed by the jurors, might exonerate them on the grounds of self-defense. There were no other reported disruptions in the remaining fourteen-week trial, but the behavior of the surviving members of the CWP made it more difficult for the authorities and the jury to have much empathy for them. Their uncooperative behavior in the courtroom also could have reflected to the jury how obstructive the CWP had probably been for the GPD as well. After the first day of the trial, there were similar disruptions.<sup>41</sup>

What also reflected unfavorably on the CWP was the evidence in court that also deemed them as aggressors during the shooting. Defense witnesses testified that as vehicles transporting Klansmen and Nazis began to pass the demonstrators at the intersection of Everitt and Carver, a loud chant of “Death to the Klan” came from the crowd. Defense testimony further indicated that when one of the Klansmen saw a car in which his wife was riding under attack, he and others got out of the vehicle without weapons and rushed toward the car. One of the defendants testified that during the stick fight, he saw a demonstrator with a shotgun trying to point it at a Klansman who was struggling to prevent it. Also, they saw two other persons coming with shotguns toward

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the intersection on the side of the street occupied by the demonstrators. Several other defendants testified they saw demonstrators pointing guns at them before they ran back to their vehicles to get their own.<sup>42</sup>

What solidified the testimony of the defense was the analysis of the gunshot location performed by FBI specialist Bruce Cohen. Cohen's professional experience was analyzing sound recordings, and he analyzed the videotapes that contained the sounds of gunshots and the various echoes from those shots. By magnifying the shot sounds and the various echoes, and timing the elapses of time between the shots and the several echoes, he could determine where the shots were fired from, based on the location of the TV cameras which recorded the sounds and the locations of any buildings, trees or other objects, which would cause an echo.<sup>43</sup>

A team of FBI specialists obtained a survey of the neighborhood showing the exact location of camera positions and all echo-causing buildings or objects. They spent more than one and a half years plotting possible sources of gunfire in a trial and error process until the location of gunshots and all of its echoes matched perfectly the sound recording on the videotape. By this process, FBI Agent Cohen was able to pinpoint the precise location from which all thirty-nine shots were fired. When called to testify by defense attorneys, he testified that eighteen of those thirty-nine shots were fired from the positions occupied by demonstrators, including three shots that occurred during the stick

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

fight between demonstrators and Klansmen, just before the videotape showed Klansmen abandoning the stick fight to get their guns.<sup>44</sup>

The conclusions drawn from the taped sound recordings coupled with CWP actions prior to the march and their disruption during court convinced the jurors that the defendants were truthful in claiming self-defense. The evidence also supported the position of the police that the both the Klan and CWP were too violent for authorities to aggressively intervene. From the perspective of law enforcement, more of a police presence could have very well caused more bloodshed. For this reason, Chief Swing's official police report, despite all the criticism it faced from the CWP and the African American community, concluded that the preparation of the GPD as it related to the 1979 Greensboro Massacre was "adequate and proper."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "An Administrative Report of the Anti-Klan Rally, Greensboro, North Carolina, November 3, 1979," November 17, 1979, Box 4, Folder 1.d-1, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina, 20.

## CHAPTER V

### “THE DIRT IS STILL BLOODY”: MORNINGSIDES HOMES AND THE LASTING EFFECTS OF A TRAGEDY

The most silenced interpretations of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre are those of the residents of Morningside Homes. They have been the least heard, largely due to the trauma and fear experienced in their community as a result of the violent shooting. Witnessing this event left the adults and children of Morningside Homes scared for their lives, which has caused them to remain cerebrally and verbally withdrawn from the damaging aftermath of the massacre. Residents feared the return of the KKK in their neighborhood and were also afraid that the CWP and other political radicals would come back and exploit their community, leaving it damaged yet again. Furthermore, the people of Morningside Homes were nervous that the GPD would fail to protect them again.

The victimization of the people in Morningside Homes is clear. Witness statements from the community given immediately following the shooting, statements provided by religious and neighborhood leaders of Morningside, and recent personal interviews conducted with the residents all reveal that the effects of the shooting were both immediate and long-lasting. While the community of Morningside Homes did not physically lose anyone in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, it suffered from post-traumatic stress, a breakdown in neighborhood relations, severely strained relationships between themselves and city officials, and the eventual literal bulldozing of their community.



This chapter will not only present the interpretation of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre from the perspective of the people of Morningside Homes but will also illustrate the victimization of community members at the hands of the KKK, the Greensboro Police Department, and the CWP. What is evident through the story of the residents is that their narrative is just as important as the other players, and their story must always be remembered when assessing the larger question of why the topic of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre remains such a racially sensitive and contentious topic for the city.

One of the biggest challenges that the residents of Morningside Homes have faced as a result of largely not having a voice in this matter is that their perspective is oftentimes collapsed with that of the CWP. There is an assumption, even throughout the larger community of Greensboro, that there had to be some sort of collaboration between Morningside residents and the CWP since Morningside was the chosen location for the march. This myth has also been perpetuated by the claims of the CWP that it did, indeed, have camaraderie with this community. However, what will be shown is that Morningside Homes did not welcome the CWP's march into their neighborhood, and the residents did not identify with the politics that attracted the protestors to their community.

Because the perspectives of the residents in Morningside Homes are often meshed with that of the CWP, it is important to include them in the narrative by examining the community based on its own struggles, culture, and way of life. Establishing the identity of the community is important for a number of reasons: it enables the residents to function as their own entity in this story; it provides a lens into why the CWP chose this

community for a march; it explains why the Klan had no hesitancy about coming into Morningside and inflicting violence; and it explains why the police were not present to protect the residents. More importantly, understanding the identity of the community prior to the 1979 Greensboro Massacre helps to illustrate just how this tragedy changed the quality of life for the people from the day of the shooting and onward.

Morningside Homes, in many ways, was at a disadvantage from its inception, due to its poor economic status. In 1951, the first two public housing communities in Greensboro were built. One was Henry Louis Smith Homes (Smith Homes) and the other Morningside Homes. Public housing, like most communities of any kind during the 70s, was segregated. Smith Homes was established to serve the white community while Morningside Homes was constructed for African Americans. When the Housing Act of 1968 finally went into effect in the early 1970s, the racial make-up of these communities began to change. The public housing community of Hampton Homes, which was predominately white at its inception, was now African American. Morningside Homes, on the other hand, solidly remained solidly a predominately black community.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to largely maintaining the same racial make-up in the 1970s, Morningside Homes also continued to suffer from economic, labor, educational, and political disparities. The inequities that African Americans in Morningside faced largely had to do with at least three main factors. First, racism and discrimination still remained prevalent despite the advances in civil rights that had been made during the 1960s. While the civil rights era was an instrumental period in changing several discriminatory legal

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<sup>1</sup> Greensboro Housing Authority “Expansion of Low Income Family Housing,” last modified January 2012, <http://www.gha-nc.org/about-us/our-history/expansion.aspx>.

structures, these advances were still unsuccessful at completely challenging racism and eliminating economic inequities. This fact was solidified with the triumph of conservatism and the broad sweep of the nation to the political far right during the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Second, the financial disparities between blacks and whites had a direct connection to the economic downturn that the nation experienced as a result of job outsourcing. Third, the oil crisis of the era further deepened the racial economic gap due to the fiscal instability it brought to the country. The national economic vulnerability that everyone suffered from was an indication of how those living in public housing during the 1970s were engaged in poverty and a fight for survival. Discriminatory practices, coupled with these national economic disasters predictably trickled down to local economies and had an effect on jobs and, of course, income. To be clear, these fiscal calamities affected the stability of all people, including white America. However, as demonstrated through prior economic devastations such as the Great Depression, “When white America has a cold, black America has the flu.” African Americans had historically suffered more than whites during times of economic crisis.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to also note that disparities existed between public housing communities like Morningside Homes and the African American middle-class. In fact, disparities between African American communities are similarly characteristic of any national economic downfall. Understanding the disparities between whites and blacks and among African Americans provides a better grasp of the degree in which

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<sup>2</sup> Meg Jacobs, “The Conservative Struggle and the Energy Crisis” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* eds. Bruce Schulman & Julian Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 93-94.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds Farley, “Trends in Racial Inequalities: Have the Gains of the 1960s Disappeared in the 1970s?” *American Sociological Review* 42, No. 2 (1977): 190.

Morningside Homes and communities like it were either marginalized by or isolated from others in terms of labor, finances, and education. This fact then suggests that the working class community of Morningside Homes and others like it had to struggle for respectability and consideration not only from whites, but in some instances, from other blacks. These disparities, however, did not have to do with only race or class. The economy at the time had much to do with the growing plight of poverty across the country.

In the 1970s, much of the American population was faced with a lack of jobs and increasing prices. The energy crisis marked the end of an era, halting America's post-World War II prosperity. It also led to the end of America's standing as an economic superpower. Conflict in the Middle East had led to restrictions on Western access to oil and to a tripling of oil prices. Additionally, several American businesses and jobs had begun to be outsourced to other countries such as Germany and China causing a significant hike in U.S. unemployment rates. By 1979, unemployment and inflation were in full effect nationally and locally. The federal government was unable to aid American citizens because the country was just out of the Vietnam War, and budgets were overextended.<sup>4</sup>

Not only was unemployment a serious problem, there was also a decline in real family income; declining support for civil rights legislation, and the dismantling of anti-poverty programs. Therefore, there were some legitimate concerns about how the economy and the decline of equality laws may affect the gains made by African

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, "The Conservative Struggle and the Energy Crisis" in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, 193.

Americans, particularly those obtained in the 1960s. This study will address how these plights specifically affected local African Americans in Greensboro, North Carolina, as it related to jobs, income, and community during the period of the Greensboro Massacre.

In 1978, twice as many black households in Greensboro were living below the poverty level than were white households in the same year: 26.8 percent compared to 12.5 percent. In response to Greensboro's wide gap between whites and blacks, Thomas Osborne, city manager of Greensboro in the 1970s, implemented programs to help level the economic gap. He stated that the city had adopted an affirmative action plan in 1976 that was "comprehensive, viable, and...achievable." Osborne described the city's training programs as ranging from basic education, such as teaching illiterate employees to read and write, to sophisticated in-house training of top management. He told a panel of the North Carolina Advisory Committee, which produced a report in 1980 on the status of race relations in Greensboro, that the city offered monetary inducements and work schedule arrangements to any employee who wished to take college, technical, or other training courses and seminars in their fields. Additionally, the city endeavored to be innovative with regard to minority recruitment. They sent teams of recruiters to predominantly black and female colleges, to armed forces' discharge centers, and to meet with influential members of the black community.<sup>5</sup>

On the surface, these recruitment and fairness practices appeared to be successful. Minority city employment increased from 22.3 percent in 1975 to 26.5 percent in 1979. However, a closer look reveals that out of eighty-nine people classified as officials or

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<sup>5</sup> North Carolina Advisory Committee, *Black White Perceptions: Race Relations in Greensboro* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1980), 2-6.

administrators, there were only three black men and no black women or other minorities. Serious discrepancies continued to exist at this time in the areas of race and gender employment, even after the supposed changes made by the city. Clearly, these changes had been ineffective and African Americans continued to struggle in many areas.<sup>6</sup>

George Simkins, local African American dentist and president of Greensboro's local NAACP chapter from 1959 to 1984, maintained that employment was not the only sector that suffered because of issues of race.<sup>7</sup> In the same report given by the North Carolina Advisory Committee, Simkins argued that Greensboro's political system served to keep political power in the hands of wealthy whites. Those particular whites tended to specifically reside in one part of the city—the Northwest quadrant which comprised only one third of Greensboro's population. Since 1968, at least three proposals had been put forth throughout the state of North Carolina to make each city's government more representative through various forms of district representation. While other major North Carolina cities adopted some form of ward representation, in Greensboro all such plans were defeated as late as 1980. Since 1961, ninety percent of the members of the City Council had always come from the northwest section of town. Simkins noted that a new referendum constructed to encourage more of a thorough representation was pending. While this proposal was supported by the Chamber of Commerce, it was opposed by a majority of the City Council.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Otis Hairston Jr., *Black American Series: Greensboro, North Carolina* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 17.

<sup>8</sup> North Carolina Advisory Committee, *Black White Perceptions: Race Relations in Greensboro*, 7.

Moreover, as also suggested by Simkins, less money had been spent for capital improvements and parks and recreation in the predominately black southeast area of the city than in any other section. This significant imbalance in spending certainly affected when and where jobs were created, to whom those jobs were made available, as well as how well communities were able to develop and expand. Since gaining jobs was a problem for even educated African Americans during this time, unemployment was certainly high for the black working class people who lived in places like Morningside Homes.<sup>9</sup>

Racism and discrimination clearly had paved the way for the high unemployment rates among African Americans and the lack of spending the city was willing to carry out in predominately black communities. These practices, however, were far from new, and long before the 1970s African Americans had learned how to independently survive and thrive in spite of the disadvantages placed on them by the city. The areas between East Market and East Washington Streets, which encompassed the Southeast section of the city, had been aligned with over eighty black-owned and operated businesses since the 1920s. Although this specific area was inhabited primarily by middle class blacks, the companies that dwelled there served the entire black community, including the students of North Carolina A&T and Bennett College, in terms of jobs and service. These specific franchises were particularly important since blacks were shut out by segregation practices in surrounding white neighborhoods. The black owned and operated establishments ranged from barbershops and hotels to movie theaters and funeral parlors. Also in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

area was the location of the L. Richardson Memorial Hospital, the segregated and designated place for blacks to receive medical treatment. These businesses were imperative for the survival of the black community because they provided jobs and income and also allowed for money to be circulated in their own neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup>

The positive impact of these businesses on the general black community in the city started to all change, however, once the city of Greensboro implemented a revitalization program, which started in the 1950s and continued into the 1970s and 1980s. After World War II, there was a national direction headed by the federal government to implement “urban renewal” in inner cities. Urban renewal was allegedly intended to rehabilitate certain areas that had a substantial amount of dilapidated and deteriorating buildings, unsafe streets, and inadequate lots, which all were considered counterproductive to the flourishing of the city. Ironically, this kind of revitalization almost always equated the displacing of minorities and their independent companies. By 1958, Greensboro was taking part in this effort, which was also referred to as “slum clearance.”<sup>11</sup>

For Greensboro, urban renewal included the acquisition of neighborhoods primarily located in southeast Greensboro. Under the auspices of urban renewal, thousands of people and over eighty minority enterprises were displaced. The majority of those companies were never reestablished. As could be easily predicted, the displacement of people, and especially businesses, negatively affected how and where the

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<sup>10</sup> Hairston, *Black American Series: Greensboro, North Carolina*, 59-62.

<sup>11</sup> City of Greensboro & Department of Housing and Community Development, “Redevelopment History in Greensboro,” last modified January 13, 2012, <http://www.greensboronc.gov/departments/hcd/planning/revitalization/>.



people of southeast Greensboro worked and what kind of income they did or did not receive. The lack of their own businesses forced them to spend money outside their communities, which added to the wealth of those who were around them. These changes played a significant role in southeast Greensboro's economic marginality in comparison to some of the white areas of town during the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

One of the best demonstrations of the contrast between some of the black and white sectors of the city can be seen by comparing one of the white quadrants to the area that encompassed Morningside Homes. According to the 1970 U.S. Census Bureau, the majority of families living in the traditionally white Starmount community located in the northwest section of Greensboro were making between \$15,000 and \$25,000 a year. The majority of families living in the area in which Morningside Homes was located was only making between \$3,000 and \$3,999 a year. The types of jobs and the number of people working them were also very telling. At this time, Starmount had approximately 2,128 out of its 4,862 population who were employed. Thirty-three percent of those workers, were considered professionals while only .8 percent of them were blue collar employees. Out of the 2,200 who resided in and around Morningside Homes, under 1,000 of them were employed. The majority of those employees, which was 27 percent, fell into the category of blue collar workers. Only 5 percent of them were classified as professionals. Statistics from the 1980 U.S. Census Bureau demonstrated an even huger gap between these communities. During the 1970s, the majority of the families in Starmount were

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<sup>12</sup> City of Greensboro & Department of Housing and Community Development, "Revitalization Projects: East Market Street," last modified January 13, 2012, <http://www.greensboronc.gov/departments/hcd/planning/revitalization/eastmarket.htm>.

bringing home \$50,000 or more in income while the majority of families in and around Morningside brought a mere \$5,000 or less.<sup>13</sup>

These statistics are important because they demonstrate the economic challenges of the area of Morningside, which remained isolated from certain areas and jobs in the city. As awful as these disparities were, Morningside was not only economically separated from local whites, but it was also economically divided from the black middle class. Despite the close proximity of the black owned and operated businesses to the public housing area of Morningside Homes, the 1970 U.S. Census Bureau illustrated a divide between these primarily African American middle and working class areas based on economic and education lines. For example, the majority of families living in the area of the black business district located on Market, Washington and Benbow Streets in the 1960s made \$10,000 or less a year. On the other hand, the majority of families living in the area that included Morningside during the same time period were only making between \$3,000 and \$3,999 a year.<sup>14</sup>

The statistics gathered from the 1980 census concerning these same African American communities were, in some ways, even more sobering. During the 1970s, the majority of the families living in the community that inhabited the black business district were making between \$10,000 and \$14,999 a year while majority of families just a few streets over were earning less than \$5,000.<sup>15</sup> The income of both groups was higher than what the majority of them were making in the sixties; however, there was still a huge

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1970, *Economic Characteristics of the Negro Population: North Carolina*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), P-81.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1980, *Income and Poverty Status in 1979: North Carolina*. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), P-152.

disparity between the two areas. Furthermore, there had been a decrease in nearly every other measure, including professional jobs worked and the number receiving college degrees. At this time, only twenty-three percent out of 1,680 black workers were professionals. In the lower-class black community of Morningside, out of 1,988 of their workers, only twelve percent of them worked in the professional sector.<sup>16</sup>

The educational differences between these two black areas were also sobering during the decades of the 1960s and 70s. For middle class blacks in the 1960s, 34 percent out of the 1,525 adults age twenty-five and older had obtained college degrees. Comparatively, out of the 2,200 working class adults above the age twenty-five, only 4 percent of them had college degrees.<sup>17</sup> Education for African Americans also suffered during the 1970s. For those living in the middle class, only 22 percent out of 2,032 people twenty-five years and older obtained college degrees. For those living in and around Morningside, the statistics were worse. Only 8 percent of persons out of 2,594 people finished college. On the other hand, in the 1960s, 58 percent of the adults living in the white community of Starmount graduated from college. During the 1970s, 51 percent of them had completed their undergraduate education.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps, the fact that black neighborhoods had residents with lower levels of education compared to that of Starmount, in addition to the fewer resources black schools had, can explain the discrepancy between who was able to obtain professional jobs and

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1980, *Occupation, Income in 1979, and Poverty Status in 1979 of Black Persons*: North Carolina, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), P-202.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1980, *General and Social Characteristics of the Negro Population*: North Carolina, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), P-75.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1980, *Social Characteristics of Persons*., North Carolina, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), P-96.

who was not. However, there are other suggestions that may explain these rigid differences. For example, the education disparity between blacks and whites points at a potential disinterest of the city of Greensboro in the education systems that served the African American communities. Also, the economic realities of poverty for the black community that was oftentimes brought on by racism logically forced residents into the labor force rather than college in order to create some sort of an income.

Despite the disparities that existed between blacks and whites and among different black neighborhoods, African American communities attempted to control their own identities. When discussing Morningside Homes specifically, the disadvantages of the people certainly had no bearing on how they perceived themselves or their way of life. What the negative numbers suggested was completely opposite of the character of the people and who they were. The quality of Morningside Homes was measured by its inhabitants according to the neighborhood's strength, particularly in communalism, education, athleticism and civic duties. Morningside, affectionately referred to as "The Grove" by those who lived there, is still currently recalled by former residents of the 1960s and 1970s as being a village that has still managed to maintain the camaraderie among its people, regardless of where life has taken them.

Morningside Homes Project was a public housing area that in the 1970s was ninety-eight percent African American and consisted of approximately two thousand housing units that had a median occupancy in each unit of 2.36 people. Former residents had few qualms with Morningside Homes being a public housing space. The majority of them, in fact, understood Morningside not as a "project," but as a location used as a

starting place for new families or families in transition. The children of the 60s and 70s were raised to have pride in their living space. For example, in the community headquarters where tenants paid their monthly rent, referred to as “the office,” there were lawn mowers along with buffers available to keep the grass neat and the floors sparkling clean. Community leaders even designated certain individuals to conduct monthly inspections on apartments. These same leaders also reported to Greensboro Housing Authority any repairs or maintenance that needed to be carried out. The physical appearance of the units was just one element of the community pride. The other components revolved around the personal relationships between and among the people.<sup>19</sup>

While those in Morningside believed in self-respect, integrity, and honor in their community, they faced some challenging realities. One of the negative aspects of this particular neighborhood was that several of the women who lived there were single parents. In 1979, fifty percent of 1,239 families living in the census tract that encompassed Morningside were headed by females.<sup>20</sup> These women did not, however, allow their circumstances to affect how they raised their families. In recent interviews of former tenants, their foremost memory is of the accountability that the community had to and for each other. The matriarchs, in particular, as remembered by brothers George and Sam Pass, had a connectedness and regularly met and discussed the needs of the community. More powerful, though, was that their bonds of accountability even crossed into helping to raise each other’s children. These mothers are still respectfully

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<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Population, 1980, *Occupancy, Utilization, and Financial Characteristics of Housing Units*: North Carolina, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), H-14.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Population, *Income and Poverty Status in 1979*, P-152.

remembered by the recipients of such rearing. Sam Pass recalled, “Our mother worked two and sometimes three jobs, but one thing she did not have to worry about was the mischief we were getting into while she was away. The other matriarchs in the community would check us when we got into trouble and also let our mother know what we had or hadn’t been doing. Therefore, we were on our best behavior all the time.”<sup>21</sup> The economic situation for several families was oftentimes a difficult one, but as stated poignantly by Dr. Thurman Guy, also a former resident, “As it relates to wealth as far as financial, I think people did what they had to do. Wealth was better defined in the love that was shared and the unity that was in, ‘I’ll watch your child and you watch mine.’”<sup>22</sup>

For those who grew up in Morningside, pride and wealth was also found in the ability to simply be a child, adolescent, and young adult. Gwen Robinson, who lived in Morningside with her mother and sisters after her parents got a divorce, recalls walking to the neighborhood laundry mats, churches, and local grocery stores interacting with her friends and neighbors. By night, the youth of the neighborhood would remain outside and transform the community boiler into a stage. “That’s where we did all of our concerts! And you know who everybody wanted to be....the Supremes!” Gwen Robinson chuckled. “We would stay out sometimes till two and three o’ clock in the morning, then go back to our homes, and make us a palate in front of the screen doors to catch those nice night breezes in the summer,” Robinson continued. As implied by the act of residents sleeping in front of the screen doors, the community was so intertwined with

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<sup>21</sup> Sammy Pass, in conversation with author, March 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Thurman Guy, in conversation with author, April 2009.

one another that there were no extreme fears of crime and blatant wrongdoing towards each other.<sup>23</sup>

The children's athleticism also instilled pride, discipline, and morals in the neighborhood children. Boys of six to twelve were led by a few of the community men in sports such as baseball, basketball, and football, in addition to other activities including recreation at the nearby skating rink and playground. Sports were very effective in instilling the concepts of leadership and collaboration. While interviewees made it clear that they learned those same concepts in their own homes and through sports, the involvement of neighborhood men largely steered them away from crime. "We learned to treat each other with like and respect," remembers Dr. Thurman Guy. "Mr. John Wright was his name. That's the man I remembered coming in and getting us involved like that. I am so thankful to Mr. Wright that when I completed my doctorate, I put his name in my acknowledgement page," Guy continued.<sup>24</sup>

Former residents Dr. Claude Barnes and Sam Pass, who were both heavily involved in neighborhood sports, recall that these activities were used as opportunities to aid in the transition from boyhood to manhood. Barnes and Pass both stated that at these practices and meetings, the men took the time to teach them about the "right" kind of lady to pursue and the proper way to dress to make impressions on both people and jobs. Therefore, even in leisure activities, the offspring at Morningside were inadvertently

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<sup>23</sup> Gwen Robinson, in conversation with author, June 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Thurman Guy, in conversation with author.

saturated with the principles required to maintain a responsible and accountable community and personal lifestyle.<sup>25</sup>

Responsibility also stretched into the realm of education. Morningside was diverse with people who were less educated as well as those who had proudly obtained their high school diplomas and even some who ventured out into college. Gaining an education was beyond a formality and was yet another investment made by the entire community. While only twenty-one percent of persons twenty-five years and older out of 2,200 people had received a high school diploma during the 1960s, these adults were determined that their own children would graduate from high school.<sup>26</sup> One of the best examples was when Ms. Pass, the mother of both George and Sam Pass, organized one of the largest tutoring and mentoring sessions in the neighborhood. Ms. Pass had worked for years as an employee at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and thought it a useful idea to have some students come to her home to tutor her own children. She eventually invited more UNCG students to come in and tutor other community kids. “Pretty soon that tutoring thing got so big for community children that we started to use certain homes to cater to certain grades. If you were in the fourth grade, you reported to Ms. Jones’ house after school, and sixth graders went to Ms. Smith’s, etc. Before we knew it, those tutors were needing and using buses to come into the neighborhood,” remembers Sam Pass.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Claude Barnes, in conversation with the author, February 2009.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Census of Housing and Population, 1970, *Economic Characteristics of the Population*, P-75.

<sup>27</sup> Sam Pass, in conversation with the author.



Gloria Scales, who was also raised in Morningside during the 1960s, not only echoed the educational memories of the others, but also recalled babysitting children for mothers and fathers who were interested in going to college. Scales remembers that, “once I got of age, I babysat several neighborhood kids whose parents were taking classes at North Carolina A&T. Educational fervor was true for both men and women; all households were not single-parent homes.” These recollections suggest several things, but above all it was clear that the importance of education was not just limited to the children but extended to the grown-ups as well, despite what the census bureau statistics suggested. Further, the negative stereotypes many whites and middle-class Americans have of “the projects” as being dirty, gang-infested and filled with criminals and lazy people were not true. These were impoverished people who had a rich culture and strong support for each other.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to also note that the commitment to the community was not just inside the borders of Morningside. The people of Morningside Homes in the 1960s and 1970s also extended pride immediately outside of their dwelling places to local nearby black businesses and institutions. Despite their separation along economic lines, the locations of Morningside and the black business district were geographically close enough for each one of these communities to patronize the same businesses. Being surrounded by such establishments allowed the community of Morningside to be what they described as self-sufficient.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gloria Scales, in conversation with the author.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Gwen Robinson stated, “The black community, including Morningside, were a part of Greensboro, but we weren’t a part of Greensboro. We had our own city, and we had our own mechanisms for getting things done and taking care of our day to day business.” Even though those living in this community had been kept from patronizing white businesses in the past due to segregation, in essence, there was no need for blacks to go to white parts of town looking for service. They were able to provide for themselves. Some former residents of Morningside Homes were certain that was precisely why the city of Greensboro was so interested in carrying out urban renewal in the African American parts of town, especially by the 1970s. The city had to do away with these black operations in order for white businesses to prosper.<sup>30</sup>

Just as African American communities had issues with the city respecting their economic and political spaces, these neighborhoods also experienced troubled relationship with local authorities. Examples of police brutality were endless. There had been the incident in 1969 of police assaulting and arresting Dudley High School students who were peacefully protesting outside of the school, and in 1969 the police had murdered Willie Grimes on the campus of North Carolina A&T and shot and wounded Clarence Smith. In 1971 the police beat Michael Riggins, striking him across his chest three times, which resulted in his death. During this time there was also the shooting in the back of James Lindsay. In 1972 Roland McCoy and James McNair were attempting to jumpstart a car when some police officers accused them of blocking the street and proceeded to spray their faces with mace. One of the most significant cases of police

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<sup>30</sup> Gwen Robinson, in conversation with author.

brutality occurred in 1972, when Mrs. Elizabeth Rhodes was dragged from her house to a police car. As police put handcuffs on her, Mrs. Rhodes suffered abrasions to her feet and injuries to her arms, one of which was permanently deformed.<sup>31</sup>

Just as these African American communities responded with integrity in other precarious situations they oftentimes involuntarily found themselves in, their reaction to police brutality was done in the same manner. The Black Citizens Concerned with Police Brutality (BCCPB) was formed in the city of Greensboro and in March of 1972 and they conducted a public community trial to listen to both sides of the questions surrounding the abuse and cruelty of local authorities. The hearing also included indictments against the Greensboro City Council. As it related to the City Council, the BCCPB held them responsible for the aftermath following the stated incidents of 1969. The National Guard was summoned to assist the GPD in assaulting A&T college students after the arrest of the Dudley High School students and the death of Willie Grimes. The City Council had refused to adopt a police review board for discipline of the police officers or acts of violence committed against the people of the community. Furthermore, they were charged by the BCCPB with appropriating tax money to buy riot guns, mace and other equipment to intimidate and brutalize black people. It was believed that the city council did not attempt to stand against police violence and failed to take a leadership role in eliminating police brutality.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Police Brutality Trial of the Greensboro Black Community,” *People’s Court vs. The Greensboro Police Department, The Greensboro City Council, The Greensboro Human Relations Commission, The Guilford County Solicitor, Douglass Albright*, March 15, 1972, Box 2, Folder 1.jj-8, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

The indictments were brought forth after a series of well-publicized meetings and community hearings, which found evidence to substantiate the charges that individuals of the black community had been brutalized by the police and that other agencies had contributed to the perpetration of such acts of police misconduct. Nearly four hundred people turned out for the public trial, representing a cross-section of young and old who wanted the charges of police brutality to be sustained in an atmosphere of calm objectivity. The quality of the evidence was irrefutable and included extensive documents, affidavits, official reports, death certificates, witnesses and the testimony of victims of police brutality and malpractice by public officials. The facts brought out in the cases proved conclusively that serious injustice had been wrought upon the black residents of Greensboro. The agencies of the Greensboro city government cited for police brutality were found guilty on all charges.<sup>33</sup>

The people of Morningside Homes were not satisfied with their economic, labor, and education situations, and they were clearly displeased with their relationship with the GPD. Their lower economic status and poor relationships with local authorities during the early 1970s set the stage for the rest of the decade and their disenchantment with the system by 1979. The conditions of Morningside Homes are what got the attention of CWP leader Nelson Johnson, and it appeared this area was ripe for a blatant challenge of white supremacy and injustice. Further, the poor economic, labor, and education situations of the community suggested to Johnson a lack of political leadership in the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

community. As observed by Reverend Frank Williams, former Pastor of New Light Baptist Church located in the heart of Morningside,

The people had enough problems trying to keep enough money together to buy food to take care of their children, and keep a clean house, keep clean clothes on the children, keep them in school. They weren't members of the Starmount Country Club (an upper-middle class white community of Greensboro); they weren't members of sororities. The most important man that they knew wasn't the mayor or governor or any politicians. Many of them didn't have close relationship with doctors and lawyers and school teachers. The most influential men they knew in the community were the preachers. As great as the people of Morningside Homes are, they had the problem of trying to keep body and soul together and that was a very difficult thing based on the economic status we live in.<sup>34</sup>

These problems were precisely why Nelson Johnson saw a need and sought to fill in the political gap to combat the community's ills by bringing in the CWP and fighting against the KKK. He knew the KKK would be a hot button for African Americans in any community, but especially in Morningside, which had faced so much adversity at the hands of white supremacy. Thus, Morningside Homes was chosen by the CWP for the march.<sup>35</sup>

For the residents of Morningside Homes, November 3, 1979, began as normal as any other weekend morning. Some of the children that lived in the community were outside playing, oblivious, just as their parents and other adult residents, to the danger that was to come just minutes later. The people of Morningside heard through the news and other media outlets about the march that the CWP was supposed to have on that day.

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<sup>34</sup> "Statement of Frank Williams to the Citizens Review Committee," February 11, 1980, Box 4, Folder 6.b, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>35</sup> Nelson Johnson, in conversation with author, August 2010.

However, it appeared that the majority of residents were totally unaware that the march was to begin in their neighborhood. Kathleen Greenlee had gone from her home and was going to the mailbox to mail a birthday card to her son. She had also planned to go to the church located just across the street where they were having a bake sale.<sup>36</sup> When she got to the Carver Drive and Everitt Street intersection, she heard the music and saw a small crowd gathering there with some small children singing “We Shall Overcome.” Not knowing it was the CWP holding a “Death to the Klan” march, she joined in the singing too. Elizabeth Parker was at the residence of Frankie Lee Drummond who lived about two to three blocks east of the shooting. Parker and Drummond were leaving their residence to go to Burger King to get a hamburger. As they were pulling out onto Everitt Street, they observed a crowd near Carver and Everitt and went to see what was going on.<sup>37</sup>

The marchers were gathering and busy working. Some members of the CWP set up loud-speakers and microphones while others unloaded their protest signs and picket sticks. Evelyn Taylor, a former Morningside Homes resident, wondered why the CWP was in their neighborhood and why they had not asked for permission from any of the residents to be there. Meanwhile, the demonstrators were singing songs and “even had children outside partaking in this madness.” The children were dressed up in alike outfits banging on mini drums as they yelled, “Death to the Klan, Death to the Klan” over and

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<sup>36</sup> “Statement of Kathleen Greenlee,” in *Greensboro Police Department Supplementary Report*, November 15, 1979, Box 4, Folder 1.a-5, Greensboro Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>37</sup> “Statement of Elizabeth Parker Slade,” in *Greensboro Police Department Supplementary Report*, March 12, 1980, Box 4, Folder 1.a-5, Police Documents, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

over. It was unclear to some of the residents why the CWP had children involved in this event, shouting the rhetoric of hatred.<sup>38</sup>

At approximately 11:25 a.m., the terror at Morningside Homes began. The antics of children at play were interrupted by the piercing sound of gunfire. Most of them ran inside their homes terrified, crying, and gasping for breath telling their parents that “everybody’s getting shot!”<sup>39</sup> It had been a miracle that none of the children had been hit. The adults of Morningside were equally vulnerable and became suddenly and unknowingly in harm’s way. A young mother was hanging out the family’s wash when the first shots were fired. Another lady was caught on tape lugging groceries from her parked car to an apartment after finding Everitt Street blocked by a tangle of vehicles. Even those adults who were seemingly secure inside their homes were not shielded from the violence. In the carnage, one of the demonstrators died near the front door of an elderly woman’s apartment. She saw him fall and later was hospitalized, herself, with an aggravated heart condition as a result of what she had witnessed. Minutes later, a string of cars full of Klansmen arrived screaming out, “You asked for the Klan, you got ‘em!” That is when the people in the crowd started hitting the cars. The Klan proceeded to get out of their cars, retrieve their weapons, and shoot. Ms. Greenlee ran as hard as she could down Carver Drive back to her apartment. She was so startled and scared that she ran right passed her apartment. Ms. Greenlee realized that she had dropped a \$20 bill out her pocket but was too afraid to go back and try to find it. Lois Liscomb reported running into her pantry because she thought that was the safest place to hide. Many of the

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<sup>38</sup> Evelyn Taylor, in discussion with the author, February 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Chip Pearsall, “Echoes of Bloody Saturday linger on,” *The News and Observer*, November 11, 1979, 9.

demonstrators, accompanied by children, began to run to the doorsteps of the residents for cover. They let the demonstrators in to provide some sort of protection from the flying bullets. At the end of the gunfire, several protestors lay dead and wounded and some of the bodies were strewn on the doorsteps of Morningside Homes and the lives of those living there were changed forever.<sup>40</sup>

The days following the event were just as intense as the event itself. Morningside resident Barry Ross described the area as being like a time bomb, as the community attempted to sort out to whom to blame, how to respond to the violence, and determine exactly what happened. One thing was certain: the residents had witnessed a massacre. “It’s a hard blow,” Ross exclaimed “when somebody comes in your neighborhood and blows stuff up!”<sup>41</sup> For a group of black men gathered in the parking lot of the Paradise Drive Inn on McConnell Road, they shared Ross’ sentiments. For them, it was time for revenge. The Klansmen had so maliciously invaded their territory. Jimmy Rogers said, “This is my home. I got kids. That didn’t make sense. We’re not animals, we’re human beings just like anybody else! What happened this weekend is going to cause a lot of conflict and they haven’t heard the last of this.”<sup>42</sup> These men did more than talk. Some of them had guns and people in the community were convinced that they were ready to use them. “People are going to get shells,” warned another man

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<sup>40</sup> “Statement of Lois Lipscomb,” in *Greensboro Police Department Supplementary Report*, November 15, 1979, Box 4, Folder 1.a-5, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>41</sup> Mae Israel, “Some Hearts Are Swollen With Anger...Others Fill With Prayer,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 5, 1979, Section A7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



who would not give his name. “Everybody’s tense and tight and ready if the Klan comes back.”<sup>43</sup>

Just down the street, another group of residents led by Reverend Frank Williams had New Jerusalem Baptist Church throbbing with prayer. About seventy-five people clasped hands and mourned the deaths that occurred earlier in the day during the confrontation between the CWP and the Ku Klux Klan. Those gathered at the church pleaded for peace. They sang, “Jesus have mercy on us.” “The Lord is the answer,” one woman wept. The Saturday night church service, originally planned as the ending of a week-long revival, was changed into a religious appeal for peace following the morning shoot-out. Williams called on people to turn from their anger to God. He said, “We must not take up arms, we must link arms: Today is a dark day in Greensboro. The problem is sin and its subsidiaries –racism and corruption. They have come alive in our streets.” Williams continued, “If there is a time man needs to turn back to God, its now. There are many people crying out for a revolution. It’s not a revolution we need, we need a revival. We need a spiritual happening.”<sup>44</sup>

Whether residents sided with using violence to retaliate or taking a peaceful response approach to the violence, there was a unified agreement that they no longer wanted their community to be used as grounds for protest movements and violent hate groups. Members of several of Greensboro’s black community renewed pleas to radical groups on the Tuesday following the incident to avoid their neighborhoods in any future marches or rallies. The Greensboro Residence Council released an official statement and

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

it read as follows: groups should “hold your marches and demonstrations away from our homes and our families!” To be clear, the black residence council members who released this statement were not limited to those living in Morningside. All of them realized that if this could happen in Morningside, it could also happen in their own primarily black communities. The shooting also caused residents to even question any future protest movements that may have happened from *inside* their own neighborhoods. The residents thought they could and would be gunned down as well if they too attempted a march. This belief was especially prevalent since the black community did not initially quite understand the circumstances surrounding why the violence happened.<sup>45</sup>

Almost immediately, the residents of the community of Morningside Homes turned their attention to the CWP because the protestors were the ones who attracted both the Klan and the police to the area. In an effort to explain and justify the use of Morningside as a march site, Nelson Johnson claimed association with Morningside. “I know Mrs. Beasley,” he said of the president of Morningside Residence Council, “and she knows me.”<sup>46</sup> Johnson claims to have assisted her with personal concerns on several occasions on which she sought his help. At a different press conference, Mrs. Ruth Beasley responded. She did not deny knowing Nelson Johnson, but she did affirm that neither she nor other residents of the community had contact with Johnson or anyone else associated with the WVO at any time in reference to the march. In support of Beasley’s position, the *Carolina Peacemaker*, which is a Greensboro-based, black-owned and

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<sup>45</sup> Dwight Cunningham, “Residents Pleading Keep Radicals Out” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 7, 1979, Section A16.

<sup>46</sup> Nelson Johnson, in conversation with author.

operated newspaper, reported that other residents who had been randomly interviewed days after the event also denied having contact with Johnson or the WVO.<sup>47</sup>

Residents interviewed voiced anger when recalling the uninvited presence of the CWP. They believed the CWP infringed on the neighborhood because, first, the CWP did not give the residents of Morningside Homes the courtesy of asking for consent to begin a march in their neighborhood. There are no claims or evidence from the residents or demonstrators that the CWP ever sought the permission to come into Morningside. Second, the residents claimed that they were not even notified through fliers or “word of mouth” about the event occurring in their community, much less directly in their places of residence. The third complaint had to do with the China Grove, North Carolina incident that happened a few months prior.<sup>48</sup>

From the viewpoint of those in Morningside, the communists *had* to be anticipating retaliation of some magnitude. Therefore, Morningside Homes residents, who had absolutely no involvement in the China Grove incident, ultimately wanted and still want to know, why the communists did not begin the march from their own neighborhoods instead of endangering the people of Morningside Homes and their families. Through the lens of the residents, it was unclear why the CWP would even take the risk of exposing the residents to the potential danger the Klan could and did bring. For these reasons, former Morningside residents were and still are more disenchanted with the Communists than with the Klan.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cunningham, “Residents Pleading Keep Radicals Out,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 7, 1979.

<sup>48</sup> Angela Lawrence, in conversation with author.

<sup>49</sup> Evelyn Taylor in conversation with author; Anonymous Resident, in conversation with author.

As made clear through the words of Morningside Homes resident Evelyn Taylor, “Had not the CWP been in our neighborhood, the Klan would not have been in our neighborhood. They did not come to harm us; they got who they wanted.”<sup>50</sup> Echoing Ms. Taylor’s thoughts was Rev. Frank Williams, pastor of New Jerusalem Church located inside Morningside. He said, “If they wanted to battle it out, why didn’t they take their war to the Coliseum parking lot instead of here jeopardizing the lives of the elderly, women, and children?!” To many of those who lived there, the protests were not about black-white issues, but red-white issues. Regardless of the fact that there were a few blacks among the demonstrators and protestors, the CWP was not protesting for the civil or human rights that blacks have often been denied. Rather, through the eyes of several black community respondents, the CWP was seemingly only interested in unifying people in efforts to overthrow the government and political system. That ambition simply was not a fight wished to be fought by the people of Morningside.<sup>51</sup>

Nelson Johnson, who led the CWP into Morningside, solidified this feeling of deception. While the CWP members may have been strangers to the community, Nelson Johnson was not. As previously noted, Johnson had consistently been a leader in local activism throughout the 1960s and early 1970s in several black communities in Greensboro. People, both black and white, were familiar with him. However, when his philosophies began to shift towards nationalism and then Communism in the mid to late 70s, his relationship with much of the black community shifted also. Many of his former

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Evelyn Taylor, in conversation with author.

<sup>51</sup> Dwight Cunningham, “Residents Pleading Keep Radicals Out,” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 7, 1979, A16.

supporters did not support his Communist beliefs and, therefore, decided to no longer work alongside him. On November 3, 1979, when he came into the community of Morningside, he brought along with him ideology that was shunned and rejected by black residents. Furthermore, he knew that the philosophy of the CWP was capable of inviting violence from other organizations such as the Klan. Many could not understand how and why Johnson would take such a huge risk and endanger the same people he had worked so close by with at one time. As a result, the community not only felt violated but also betrayed, especially since Johnson was aware how the community felt about his new politics. Although Johnson meant well and, perhaps, saw the “Death to the Klan” march as an opportunity to mend ties with those in the neighborhood, he ultimately widened the gap between himself and several of the people in the black community.<sup>52</sup>

There was yet another underlying tragedy in Morningside that went along with the violation of the Klan and the betrayal of Nelson Johnson. It had to do with the relationship between the community of Morningside and local authorities. As previously illustrated, there had also been well documented cases of police brutality involving several members of the African American community throughout the years. Naturally, this brutality led to a clashing and, at best, troubling relationship between local authorities and primarily black communities. The event of November 3, 1979, made the relationship between the authorities and those living in Morningside Homes even worse. Because the police had assumed a connection between this “troublesome” community and the CWP, they seemed to use this incident as leverage to intensify their aggression

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<sup>52</sup> Rosie Stevens, “Johnson Poses an Enigma in the Struggle,” *Carolina Peacemaker*, November 24, 1979, Front page.

towards the community in the days following the shooting. Former residents recall that the police, for example, had implemented a curfew on the community, and people were arrested if the curfew was broken. It was as if the residents were being punished for an incident that they, in essence, had no part in creating.<sup>53</sup>

As it related specifically to the shooting, residents were convinced that the lack of protection provided for the community was directly linked to the troubled relationship between the GPD and the African American communities of Greensboro. It was clear that the authorities had not considered the danger the march could potentially bring to and for the people who lived in Morningside. Residents wanted to know that if the police could tail the KKK down Interstate 85 and down Highway 220, why could they not follow them to Everitt Street? Why did they not respond to calls from people in Morningside who telephoned when they saw what was about to happen? After all, everyone knew the Klan was prone to violence, and the police were aware that some members of the caravan had weapons.<sup>54</sup>

If the parade had taken place in the Starmount community, a traditionally white, upscale community in Greensboro, and nine carloads of Klansmen had come into the city to heckle marchers, there was no question that those Klansmen would have been stopped, searched and/or jailed. The conscious decision of the GPD not to respond to this confrontation explains why local authorities were and still are a target of anger for several

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<sup>53</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Public hearing DVD collection. Public hearings summary Segments of 54 speakers' statements to the Commission: Testimony of Candy Clapp* [video recording], Greensboro: Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> John Marshall Kilimanjaro, "Morningside Massacre," *Carolina Peacemaker*, November 10, 1979, Pg 4.

Morningside Homes Residents. If police had intervened, the situation could have been less violent, if not eliminated entirely.<sup>55</sup>

The distrust from African American residents towards the police spilled out into greater Greensboro. Ironically, voters were scheduled to cast ballots at the polls on November 11, 1979, to elect a city council and mayor in Greensboro.<sup>56</sup> Political observers and candidates feared that the Greensboro police department had facilitated the heightening of racial tensions, which could possibly affect city elections. “I think it will hurt my campaign among the undecided white voters,” mayoral candidate Sol Jacobs said. “I think the fear of racial violence will make people stick to the incumbents they know, rather than take a chance on someone who’s been identified with civil rights causes, as I have.” Jacobs had been an active proponent of a ward system of government for years, which had been sought by blacks as a way to get more African American representation on the city council.<sup>57</sup>

Incumbent black council member Jimmie Barber said that he thought the incident would have no effect on the election because the killings apparently were the work of outsiders, not Greensboro people. He went on to say that the incident was not purely racial in motivation because three of the four victims were white. Non-incumbent black candidate, Nathaniel Swindler, disagreed. “I don’t necessarily think the killings will incite racial tension,” he said, “but I do think it will arouse the people and it might have an effect on the turnout.” George Simkins, president of the local NAACP at the time,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> William March, “Shootings May Have Effect On Elections” *Greensboro Daily News*, November 5, 1979, Section B 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Klan Shootings Strain Relations” *Carolina Peacemaker*, December 22, 1979, Front Page.

stated that whether or not if the events influenced the turn-out during elections or not, one thing was certain: the situation certainly could not have improved race relations in the city. The fact that the next edition of the black-owned and operated *Carolina Peacemaker* had no mention of the voting outcomes after the election spoke volumes. Either many in the black community were not concerned with the elections, had no confidence in the voting process, or were too intimidated to exercise their political right. Whatever the reason for a lack of response, the black community certainly had bigger, deeper, and long lasting issues to be concerned with as a result of the violent trauma.<sup>58</sup>

Another difficult aspect of the massacre for residents was that everyone else was seemingly aware of what was about to transpire except for the people who actually lived in the area. Mrs. Beasley, president of Morningside Residents Council at the time, recalls having no advance warning. She said, “The Klansmen knew, the news media knew, the police knew, it seemed everybody knew about Morningside except the people who live here.” In short, they were being treated by others as disposable and, most of all, invisible.<sup>59</sup>

It is clear that the 1979 Greensboro Massacre had been catastrophic for the people living in Morningside Homes. The effects of the violence on the residents were both short and long term, and they proved to be dire. This tragedy did not just entail the interruption of a protest movement and the murder of five people; it also resulted in the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Chip Pearsall, “Echoes of Bloody Saturday Linger On,” *The News and Observer*, November 11, 1979, Pg. 9.



interruption and disintegration of the social, political, and living conditions of Morningside.

The immediate effects of the trauma were primarily associated with residents witnessing the gunning down of human beings. The impact became long-term because the shock recurred. The violence itself did not return to the tenants, but the fear of being violated again by the Klan, the inconsideration of the CWP, and the failure of the police haunted them until the neighborhood was literally no more. Morningside Homes was bulldozed by the city in 2001. The obliteration of the community made it official for many who lived there that the negative reputation that the violence had left behind was irreparable. It further meant that it was highly unlikely that anyone would ever be accountable to the residents for the violation they had experienced.

The blatant disregard for the people of Morningside Homes and the detriment they experienced is exactly why it is only right and fair that the residents are seen as the primary victims of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. They had no part in initiating or participating in the march, but, ironically, were the ones left to repeatedly deal with the fall-out. On the other hand, all of the other players in the event had made a conscious decision to be or not be involved. While the narrative of the shooting has almost always been presented from the view of others, the lingering victimization of Morningside becomes clearer when the story is told from the perspective of the residents in the community.

As with the short-term effects of the Greensboro Massacre on the black community, the long-term repercussions became undeniably evident. Mrs. Ruth Beasley,

President of Morningside Residence Council, had expressed worry concerning the psychological and emotional effect the incident would have on residents, especially the children who witnessed the shootings.<sup>60</sup> Her concerns were more than valid. The shooting permanently brought fear and damaged community relations and, of course, individual lives. Residents who have spoken publicly about how their community was affected all discuss the unspeakable fear that fell upon their community. Their fright was primarily based upon uncertainty. Because they had been previously made unaware of the protests and violence that happened, they were unsure if and when perpetrators would return. For example, there had been rumors that the Klan was going to come back into Morningside and blow up the gas lines that ran through the community. While that ultimately did not happen, residents still were not quite sure what the Klan was capable of and the rumors were enough to keep people on edge.<sup>61</sup>

After the bodies had been carted away and the traces of blood cleansed, the memories and the terror remained with the residents. For former Morningside resident, Tammy Tutt, the fear that the Klan put in the people in the community became “bigger than what was right.”<sup>62</sup> By this Tutt meant that the fear overcame the ability of tenants to rightfully challenge those who had specifically violated them. It also meant that fear had caused the community to lose much of its connectedness and damaged the confidence of the people. In support of this idea, former resident of Southeast Greensboro, Nettie Coad, recalled, “We were so afraid that people refused to talk about it. All we knew was what

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Testimony of Candy Clapp*, Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Collection.

<sup>62</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “*Public hearing DVD collection. Public hearings summary Segments of 54 speakers' statements to the Commission: Testimony of Tammy Tutt.*”

we read in the paper because we were too scared to discuss it with each other. It was easier just not to deal with it.”<sup>63</sup>

Fear also led to the breakdown of community relations. Prior to the shooting, it was common to find children outside playing or visiting their friends. It was also common for adults to be found sitting on their porches conversing with their neighbors. After the violence of November 3, children were too frightened to play, and adults did not want to be potentially caught in any crossfire. As a result, many relationships became strained. The residents had reluctantly allowed the violence to steal from them the very thing that had always been so important, a thriving and tightly woven community.<sup>64</sup>

The fear also seemed to follow and affect several of the residents, even when they were outside of their neighborhood. For example, Nettie Coad recalled driving through Greensboro when she heard a sound that resembled a gunshot. She knew she had been hit and had no idea how she was still alive by the time she made it to the next few streets over. Coad, in reality, had not been shot. However, hearing the sound automatically jolted her to the fear of terror, and she was sure that the Klan was working on finishing their job of murder by killing her. She attests that still to this day she will never know if the sound she heard was really a gunshot or a car backfiring. All she does know is that the fear had convinced her that the Klan was still out to kill.<sup>65</sup> Claude Barnes, Morningside Homes resident who was in graduate school in Atlanta at the time of the shooting, also recalls being hysterical after the massacre. He was too paranoid to leave

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<sup>63</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “*Public hearing DVD collection. Public hearings summary Segments of 54 speakers' statements to the Commission: Testimony of Nettie Coad.*”

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

his dormitory for days. Barnes had grown up in Morningside and had associations with Nelson Johnson before Johnson became a communist. Because it was unclear at the time why Morningside was targeted, Barnes was frightened and suspicious that the Klan might come to Atlanta and kill him as well, due to his past affiliations with the Black Power Movement.<sup>66</sup> While Barnes' fears may seem a bit exaggerated now, to him his fears were very real. Panic outside of the community of Morningside was equally genuine for former resident, Candy Clapp. Clapp, who was fifteen years old at the time of the incident, still speaks of having crowd phobias as a result of what happened on November 3. In Clapp's case, the short and long-term effects of the event unfortunately developed into something seemingly permanent. It is fair to assume that she is not alone in her abiding and lingering paranoia. In fact, resident Elijah Andrews speaks of how devastating and helpless it felt to have experienced such a scene. Andrews went into a depression, still has flashbacks, and continues to suffer from a sense of hopelessness.<sup>67</sup>

As the years passed, it seemed that Morningside was never able to rebuild its viability as a community and was on the road to decline. Candy Clapp remembers that with all of the scarring memories and negativity, "Everyone wanted out of Morningside after that happened."<sup>68</sup> Little did she know, many of the people would eventually come out of Morningside, just not in a way that they would have predicted. In 2001, what was considered to be an "obsolete" Morningside Homes began to be transformed into a "vibrant, mixed-income community" made possible as a result of a seventy-six million

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<sup>66</sup> Claude Barnes, in conversation with author.

<sup>67</sup> "Interview with Elijah Andrews by the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission," July 15, 2005, Box 12, Folder 5.c, Truth and Reconciliation Collection, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

<sup>68</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Testimony of Candy Clapp*.

project spearheaded by the Greensboro Housing Authority. The revitalization effort focused on the Morningside Homes/Lincoln Grove areas and covered roughly two hundred and forty acres. With this new development, Morningside Homes changed names and became the area known as Willow Oaks. Willow Oaks generated over forty million in private investments to create the new community. Other financial support came from a twenty-three million grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under the HOPE VI Revitalization Program. The remaining twelve million was provided by the City of Greensboro.<sup>69</sup>

The design of Willow Oaks was patterned on a city planning movement called “New Urbanism,” which draws on close-knit, pre-World War II neighborhoods. New Urbanism typically emphasizes friendliness that encourages neighbors to interact. Examples of these features include front porches, sidewalks, and homes built close to the street. Designers planned this community for six hundred and eight units with one- to four-bedroom residences. Plans included attached housing as well as stand-alone homes built in traditional styles that would supposedly help the new buildings blend into the older surrounding neighborhood. Public space was also included in the features of Willow Oaks. A combined childcare, recreation, and life long learning centers were implemented and became the main focal points of the community. The project was also structured to offer those living in Morningside Homes opportunities to achieve career training, better jobs and self-sufficiency.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Greensboro Housing Authority Newsletter, *Willow Oaks-Hope VI*, 2000. Identical information can also be located online at [www.gha-nc.org/hope6.htm](http://www.gha-nc.org/hope6.htm).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

These new components of Willow Oaks sounded promising and certainly were all of the things that the people of Morningside deserved. After all of these years, they were deserving of better housing that they had demanded for so long, better job and education support systems, as well as a community that was committed again to rebuilding neighborly ties. On the surface, the new Willow Oaks was perfect. It appeared that the federal government, along with the city, had finally acknowledged and treated the people of Morningside with fairness and respect. Most of it, instead, became a mirage for many of the residents of Morningside.

The lead developer for the Willow Oaks project, Mid-City Urban, had secured other organizations to run a self-sufficiency program, which was responsible for relocating current Morningside Homes' residents to other public housing or Section Eight housing. Only Three hundred of the six hundred and eight units of Willow Oaks had been subsidized by the Greensboro Housing Authority. The remaining three hundred and eight housing units were rented or sold at market value for whomever may have wanted to live there. Priority for the subsidized units was supposedly given to the former residents of Morningside Homes, but what about all of the other tenants? While it may have been true that many residents wanted to leave the area as Clapp suggested, they did not want to be forced out under these circumstances only to be transferred to other public housing areas that also fought the demons of a bad stigma, poverty, and overall decline.

As a result of the displacement of several Morningside residents, it began to appear that the Willow Oaks community was created in an effort to eliminate certain members of the community, erase social and political memories, and destroy the

infamous history of the area. The reality was that Willow Oaks was not placed there to primarily help those who had been mentally and emotionally scarred as well as socially damaged. If so, perhaps the new stipulations of the community would have been accommodating for everyone who was already living there. “There is no doubt in my mind that the city bulldozed our community trying to erase the damage that had been done as a result of November 3,” said former Morningside Homes’ resident, Sammy Pass. “Hope VI Project? Since when did they ever care about bringing positive change to Morningside? And how did Morningside get chosen over the other public housing areas?” he continued.<sup>71</sup> This is certainly Nelson Johnson’s position. “There is no doubt in my mind that the reason Morningside was done away with was due to what had happened there twenty five years earlier. By the city ridding itself of Morningside, they would no longer have to face their failure of the people. The easiest thing, then, was just to get rid of the place and pretend the 1979 Greensboro Massacre never happened.”<sup>72</sup>

The new development may have been successful in changing the face of the area but not the residual damage of the community as a result of the past. Former Morningside Homes’ resident Gloria Scales, who now works as a realtor, attests to the negative stigma that is still attached to the community. “There are some beautiful homes down there, but people just are not buying them because of the area it is in. The history is, unfortunately, just still attached to the place.”<sup>73</sup> Even the success of the goals of community building in Willow Oaks seem to be questionable. George Pass, who also

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<sup>71</sup> Sammy Pass, in conversation with author.

<sup>72</sup> Nelson Johnson, in conversation with the author, August 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Gloria Scales, in conversation with author.

used to live in Morningside, recalled recently driving through Willow Oaks and saw almost no signs of community connectivity. “I rode through there and almost nothing looked the same. As I rode through, no one even looked up! It was never that way in Morningside. We used to be so connected and accountable to each other that there was no way someone would drive through the neighborhood and we not know who it was. It’s just a different place down there.”<sup>74</sup> In short, it seems that the area formerly known as Morningside has not been repaired and, perhaps, never will. As encapsulated by former resident, Candy Clapp, “You all can put new buildings on old soil, but the dirt will never change. It’s still bloody.”<sup>75</sup>

The CWP is traditionally portrayed in the media as being the only victims in this tragedy, but the local black-owned and operated newspaper, *Carolina Peacemaker*, identified the residents of Morningside not only as equal, but as the primary, victims. In his article “Morningside Massacre,”<sup>76</sup> editor and publisher John Marshall Kilimanjaro charged that Nelson Johnson used the black community to further the cause of his organization, not to further the cause of people in Morningside Homes who were the primary victims of the violence that occurred. “Five members of the CWP are now dead. That in itself is a wasteful tragedy,” stated Kilimanjaro. “For what reason did they die? These five paid a high price, but what about the people in Morningside? They are still here to keep on paying.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> George Pass, in conversation with author.

<sup>75</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Testimony of Candy Clapp*.

<sup>76</sup> Kilimanjaro, “Morningside Massacre,” *Carolina Peacemaker*, November 10, 1979, 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The 1979 Greensboro Massacre is more than just a story about five people who were murdered largely because of their racial views and political stances. This narrative is also about victimization, betrayal, survival, and resiliency for all of those involved. The voices in this tragedy have been brought to the forefront for the purposes of illustrating just how complex this shooting was. Clarity has also been brought to some of the rumors surrounding this event by distinguishing, through evidence, what is fact or not in this event.

Equally important to understanding the “truth” in the 1979 Greensboro Massacre is the removal of the key players from behind the veil of their organizations into understanding them as real human beings. Members in both the CWP and the KKK, though often misguided by their own politics and passions, strongly believed in protecting their own views, values, and what *they* understood as justice and equality. Unfortunately, both groups often failed to understand how their actions inadvertently and negatively affected certain communities, and in this case, an entire city.

Nonetheless, as has been demonstrated in the research, this event and the people involved in it were not always what it seemed. The CWP did not intentionally bring violence into Morningside Homes; its members had not been properly warned about the

danger of the Klan coming into Greensboro. As for the Klan, many of its members were unaware that the instigators in their organization were really infiltrators that “set them up” for a violent clash with the CWP. Despite showing up with weapons, the Klan claimed to not have violent intentions but only a desire to vocally demonstrate their disdain for communism, which was understood as being a threat to the American way of life. It was only when they were attacked by the protestors with sticks that they fired their weapons in efforts to “protect” themselves.

As for the police, they also suffered from the conundrum of their role in the shooting not being fully understood. It was true that they had not provided a significant amount of protection for the marchers and the residents. It was also true that a few of the officers were aware that the Klan would be present and would have weapons. However, the majority of the police who were present at the march were not knowledgeable of what was about to happen and the failure to communicate the information hindered any efforts to provide better protection. Still, the lack of action on the part of the police has caused a rift between themselves and the community they were supposed to protect on that day. The tension between the officers and the residents is warranted, but perhaps could be resolved if a better understanding of the police’s actions were dissected.

Even with the offered explanations of each of these key players, questions still surround how truthful their perceptions really are. A search for more answers and a call for more “truth” will probably continue for years to come. However, the way the CWP, KKK, and GPD understand and “remember” serves as a particular truth that cannot be dismissed simply because others may disregard these groups’ political affiliations. Their

feelings, their interpretations, and their stories are very real to them and, therefore, hold validity.

The CWP, KKK, and GPD were all misunderstood and mischaracterized at some level. However, it was the residents of Morningside Homes, who experienced the highest forms of injustice, disregard, and victimization in this tragedy. This community was one with very few, if any, ties with the CWP, one that was ambushed by the KKK, and one that was left unprotected by the local police department. The fact that the residents had no connection to either group or the planning of the event makes this tragedy that much more paramount. No one from Morningside Homes was murdered, yet they were the ones that continued to suffer from the post-traumatic stress, troubled relationships with the police, and the eventual pushing out of their living spaces, which was connected to the fact that the massacre took place there. The implication of the experience of those from Morningside Homes was that there was a general disregard for black people who were poor. This experience of the residents brings new revelations to this story and demonstrates why the interpretation(s) of Morningside Homes must be included in this narrative for the purposes of having a complete understanding of what happened on November 3, 1979.

The story of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre focuses on how one event that took less than two minutes to occur continues to permeate and affect everyday people over thirty years later. The implication also is that this event should continue to be examined. Plenty remains to be done in fleshing out how this local narrative continues to be understood and how it fits into the national conversation of working-class politics,

extremist behavior, and troubled relationships between the police and the African American community. It also opens the door for further research as it relates to how local occurrences fit into national trends which facilitate a continuation of racial and economic disparities. In short, the story of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre makes it plain that the long civil rights struggle continues and the work for equality is unending.

## CHAPTER VII

### EPILOGUE

Twenty-four years later after the Greensboro Massacre, in 2003, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was formed by and with the support of former CWP members. Modeled after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which confronted the mental and emotional scars of apartheid, GTRC assembled in an attempt to gain reconciliation and healing throughout the city of Greensboro in the aftermath of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre. It was firmly believed, especially by former CWP members such as Nelson Johnson, that the city could not reach its potential unless it faced its history. Thus, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP) was created.<sup>1</sup>

On January 16, 2003, the project was launched at a press conference.<sup>2</sup> Former mayor Carolyn Allen, Reverend Zeb Holler, and Nelson Johnson released the Declaration of Intent, signed by thirty-two community leaders, which began:

It is the declared intent of the signers of this document to work with all sectors of Greensboro and with a cross section of national and international leaders to forge a broad and effective GTCRP....Our overall purpose is to lead Greensboro into becoming a more just, understanding, and compassionate community. We believe this project can have positive implications for cities and communities throughout the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Greensboro Truth & Reconciliation Commission, *Greensboro Truth & Reconciliation Commission: seeking truth, working for reconciliation* (Publication information and year not printed), 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 371.

Further, the purpose of the Greensboro project, according to the founders of the process, was not to find scapegoats or to criticize certain parties, but rather, to “name the truth, to examine the whole community’s role, to look it in the face, to forgive, and to find room for healing.” The press statement continued:

We believe that by helping to clear up lingering confusion, division and ill feelings and by promoting reconciliation among individuals, sectors, and institutions within our community, the project will transcend the hurtful legacy of events of November 3, 1979. It is our conviction that this undertaking will go a long way in both healing long-standing wounds and opening new possibilities for Greensboro to become a better, more just, and compassionate city.<sup>1</sup>

The GTRC consisted of seven panelists who listened to members of the Greensboro community testify, including former CWP members, Morningside residents, Klansmen, judges, lawyers, media, and any other extended communities that were affected. The goal of the GTRC to gain reconciliation appeared to be an ideal, although challenging and daunting, task. The reality, however, was that many residents of Greensboro were not eager or interested in “digging up old bones” that would do nothing beyond “bring divisive tensions back to the city.” Many citizens of Greensboro doubted that the GTRC would be successful in ultimately bringing reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

There clearly had been at least some support of the reconciliation process from certain people. Much of the public response to it, however, was skeptical at best. Prior to the Truth and Reconciliation Process, there had been two criminal trials, a careful look

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<sup>1</sup> Greensboro Truth & Reconciliation Commission, *Greensboro Truth & Reconciliation Commission: seeking truth, working for reconciliation*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Lehmert, “City May Reopen Truth, Reconciliation Issue,” *Greensboro News and Record*, June 16, 2009, A 1.

at the shooting event by an ad-hoc Citizens Review Committee, a report issued by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and, later, the 1985 civil trial. Chuck Forrester, a contributor to the *Greensboro News and Record*, argued that after these five microscopic looks at November 3, 1979, during which anyone who wished to speak could have, the idea the city should support a sixth do-over twenty-six years later was “absurd.” Forrester continued, “The one thing missing from this ‘crawl-backward’ commission was an objective end. The reader who expects to get any truth out of the Communists better have a big lunch packed. And who will testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? Will the Klan come back for some reconciliation? Yeah, right.”<sup>3</sup>

Several key members of the Greensboro community, specifically those on the city council, continued to ignore and disregard the GTRC, noting that the matter of November 3, had been closed when the courts rewarded a \$351,000 civil suit to former CWP members in 1985. As a result, the majority of the council voted to neither support the GTRC Project nor any of its proposed recommendations. The tragedy in this unfortunate position is that these key players still failed twenty-six years later to see any party beyond the CWP as a victim in the massacre.<sup>4</sup>

Editors of the local black owned and operated newspaper, *Carolina Peacemaker*, were less pessimistic, but still skeptical. They wanted to make sure that if this process was going to proceed, the right questions needed to be asked. Representatives of the African American community desired explanations as to why textile management of local

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<sup>3</sup> Chuck Forrester, “‘Truth’ inquiry desperate, absurd” *Greensboro News and Record*. April 27, 2005, A 11.

<sup>4</sup> Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors Eyes*, 322.

mills as well as the sitting mayor at the time of the shooting, Jim Melvin, were conspicuously absent and silent during the GTRC trials. Additional questions that still demanded answers were, why did the police not stop the Klan caravan and arrest them for carrying concealed weapons? Who decided that the police could leave the Morningside area immediately before the shooting and instead cover the Windsor Community Center?<sup>5</sup>

Because the CWP had served as the primary initiators of the commission, the Communist Workers Party was neither immune nor exempt from chastisement by the black community during the reconciliation process. It wanted to be known if the CWP realized that the name “Communist Worker’s Party” might incite violence? Why did the CWP deem it necessary to challenge the Klan by referring to them as cowards? More important, the process provided the perfect time to ask the CWP to confront why they chose Morningside.<sup>6</sup>

Some former Morningside residents opted to give their own statement to the commission either publicly or privately. Many other residents, however, refused. Those who participated were anxious to use this platform to finally be heard, while those that did not participate either doubted the process or still had fear of repercussions if they participated. In either case, what their participation or the lack thereof represented was

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<sup>5</sup> Afrique Kilimanjaro, “Key players missing in truth and reconciliation,” *Carolina Peacemaker*, July 21, 2005, 4A.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



that the wounds of the black community had not healed. In fact, in the words of local African American pastor Mazie Fergusson, “The wounds walk up and down our streets.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, much of the African American response to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Process was grim. However, the commission was still able to secure fourteen hours of testimonies from others at the first of the three public hearings. This kind of response made it hard to ignore that a significant portion of the city was at least curious about the process, although still skeptical. There were three public hearings between July and September of 2005, and by the end of the third hearing, over fifty people had testified.<sup>8</sup> The Communist Workers Party got plenty of time at the microphone to recount its version of the events leading up to November 3, with talk of government conspiracy and right-wing death squads. The commission, however, also heard voices that strongly challenged some of the theories used by those particular victims to explain the context of the killings. Each of the hearings also attracted significant numbers of audience members. The participation of a variety of testifiers and spectators revealed that, despite to what critics may have assumed, the seven-person panel was interested in hearing more than the communist party line. Further, the community was at least willing to give the process the benefit of the doubt. There was a

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<sup>7</sup> Elyse Ashburn, “Panel: Healing already started,” *Greensboro News and Record*, October 2, 2005, Front page.

<sup>8</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Public Hearing DVD Collection. Public Hearings Summary Segments of 54 speakers’ Statements to the Commission (videorecording)*, (Greensboro: Truth and Reconciliation Commission), 2006.

genuine effort to listen to and consider several perspectives while attempting to move towards healing.<sup>9</sup>

By 2006, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission had completed the hearings and their final report. From all of the evidence gathered, testimonies given, and all things considered, the commission made several suggestions to the people of Greensboro of how the community should move forward. First, according to the final report, the city was urged to formally recognize that the events of November 3, 1979, represented a tragic, but important occasion in Greensboro's history and to issue a proclamation lifting up the importance of that date in the history of the city.<sup>10</sup> Second, individuals who were responsible for any part of the tragedy of November 3, 1979, were admonished to reflect on their role and apologize--publicly and/or privately--to those harmed. The Commission recommended that the Greensboro Police Department and the City of Greensboro issue public apologies for their failure to protect the public--specifically, the Communist Workers Party demonstrators, Morningside Homes residents, media representatives and others present at the shooting site. The final report went on to state that institutions also should issue an apology to city residents for not appropriately acknowledging the event and taking necessary steps for community healing. Third, the Commission recommended the building of a public monument on the site of the shootings to honor those killed and wounded on November 3, 1979.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Cone, "Truth Commission makes impressive debut" *Greensboro News and Record*, January 24, 2005, H3.

<sup>10</sup> Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation, *Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: Executive Summary*, (Greensboro: Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2006), 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

One mainstream political figure, former mayor Carolyn Allen, said she agreed with what she had read and supported the recommendations that the police apologize for not protecting marchers.<sup>12</sup> Nelson Johnson was also in agreement and urged the city of Greensboro to receive the report as a “splendid gift.” While admitting that the over six-hundred page document was not without flaws and weaknesses, Johnson pleaded with the community to utilize the report as a means of gaining a better understanding of the context of the events, and its consequences, as well as the city and its culture. In a newspaper article, Johnson pleaded, “I appeal to all my black, brown, yellow, red, and white brothers and sisters: Let’s do a new thing! We can raise the bar of democracy and transform the tragedy of death into understanding and healing. Now is the time!”<sup>13</sup> Attorney Hal Greeson, on the other hand, who had represented one of the Klansmen at the time of the criminal trials in the 1980s, called the report “shallow and adding no real contribution to the literature.” Further, Greeson noted that from the report’s executive summary it was obvious that commissioners had not read the trial transcripts when testimony was given under oath. Greeson stated, “It is the only thing we have under oath and with any dignity. The CWP refused to testify at the criminal trials, but were now eager to tell their stories without the fear of perjury or anything else.” John Forbis, city council member in 1979 and later mayor, added, “I didn’t see anything in the report that wasn’t fully discussed and fully aired in the immediate months and years that followed the massacre.” Forbis’ interpretation is theoretically correct. Former reports did indeed

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<sup>12</sup> Jim Schlosser, “TRC report gets mixed reviews,” *Greensboro News and Record*, May 27, 2007, Front page.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Johnson, “Truth report is a gift-read it,” *Greensboro News and Record*, June 14, 2006, A9.

consider the victimization of the police, did question the protection tactics of the police, and did question what role, if any, the community had in the event. However, there still was no evidence of the city implementing any real restitution to the victims.

Discrimination and disregard for certain kinds of people in particular neighborhoods appears to remain an issue for the Greensboro Police Department.<sup>14</sup>

When it came to the 2006 Greensboro City Council and how the final report was received, the council opposed a move by black Councilwoman Goldie Wells to consider the commission's findings.<sup>15</sup> The sitting mayor, Keith Holliday, said that the council should not apologize for the event, but rather, offer an official expression of regret that the events of November 3, 1979, happened. "What we need to do is to focus on the contemporary or current issues of the day. Immigration now overshadows black/white race relations," stated Holliday. As recent as 2009, it was proposed to the council yet again that it consider the findings of the commission's final report. Councilman Zack Matheny was prepared to digress even more than former Mayor Holliday. Unlike Holliday, Matheny did not see the necessity in even providing a statement of regret much less an apology. "My generation is saying, 'Let us move forward, look at all we've accomplished.' We've got an African American mayor, leader of the commissioners, and the superintendent," Matheny said referring to Yvonne Johnson, Melvin "Skip" Alston and Maurice "Mo" Green. The city council voted 5-4 in favor of issuing a statement of regret for the incident of November 3, 1979. Just like in 2006, the 2009 vote was divided on racial lines. The majority of the council members who voted in favor of the "regret"

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<sup>14</sup> Schlosser, *Greensboro News and Record*, Front Page.

<sup>15</sup> Lehmert, *Greensboro News and Record*, A1.

were black. All who were in opposition were white. In response, Matheny went on to state, “When was the last time that you had a race riot?” he said. ‘How many people woke up the morning after the vote and said, ‘That’s all I wanted, so I can heal now, because the City Council passed 5-4 the ‘statement of regret?’” Matheny’s statement suggested that those who voted in favor were doing so to be contrary, not because the regret would make a true difference.<sup>16</sup>

Matheny’s sarcasm also served as a window into some brewing racial tensions that were present as a result of the existence of the GTRC. Because several black city officials supported the commission and many white officials had not, local whites accused the commission of dividing the city along racial lines.<sup>17</sup> Former white city official Chuck Forrester stated, “How pathetic that black elected officials cling to victim status to such a degree they would make a racial cause célèbre out of this ‘Truth and Reconciliation claptrap.’” For Forrester and those who supported his antics but were not bold enough to state them, it was clear that due to their tunnel vision, they did not understand African American involvement in the reconciliation process. Supporting the process, for many blacks, involved more than the possibility of reaching reconciliation of some sort. The process was equally, if not more so, about using the Commission’s platform to challenge city authorities to be accountable about the tension-filled relationship that continued to exist between the city and several African American communities.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gerald Witt, “City’s Regret May Soften Tone of Debate,” *Greensboro News and Record*, June 18, 2009, A2.

<sup>17</sup> Cone, *Greensboro News and Record*, H 3.

<sup>18</sup> Forrester, *Greensboro News and Record*, A 11.

While the GTRC itself acknowledged the people of Morningside Homes as victims, the failure of the city to recognize them was further evidence that time had not healed all wounds and that these residents were still being marginalized, compacted, and in many ways, forgotten. In this regard, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission notably exposed numerous positions of November 3. It also offered an understanding of the precarious situation Morningside Residents had been placed in. In other ways, however, the reconciliation process unfortunately renewed and extended the tragedy of the massacre for its victims, including those from Morningside. There was a general feeling among the community that the TRC would open old wounds, without offering any tangible ways of gaining reconciliation. Nonetheless, the TRC had its uses and demonstrates the culmination of the efforts of a group (the CWP) who refused to forget and attempted to discuss, understand, and heal.

With the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Process being the only one of its kind in North America, this process could have been an opportune moment to demonstrate that the United States was capable of and accountable for its past wrong doings, particularly as it related to politics and race. In 2004 at the beginning of the project, South African Truth Commissioner, Reverend Bongani Finca, called the installation of the Greensboro TRC a “near miracle.” Finca continued that “this ‘near miracle’ offers hope and meaning not only for Greensboro, but for other communities in the U.S. and around the world that seek transformation from an ugly, racist or violent past into a peaceful and authentically democratic future.” Ironically, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Process, rather, largely dashed any realistic hope of any other city within

the United States seeking closure via a truth and reconciliation process. The white reactions and rejections in Greensboro not only reflected a city but, perhaps, a nation, that in the twenty-first century was still not ready to confront its hideous past and once and for all receive everyone as equal, meaningful citizens.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, *Transforming Tragedy into Triumph: Nationwide Call to March in Greensboro on November 14, 2004 (pamphlet)*, Greensboro: GTRCP, September 2004.

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