CONFRONTING change

An exhibit commemorating the efforts of those who fought to ensure that the Carolina Theatre provided equal access for everyone.
A SEGREGATED AMERICA

Nearly 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, many businesses and institutions in the United States — particularly in the American South — still had segregated facilities condemning Americans of color to second-class citizenship. The Carolina Theatre of Durham in North Carolina was one of these segregated establishments, but beginning in 1955, a series of events heralded a historic change for the theater, the South, and the nation.

Fearless African Americans joined in powerful, peaceful protests, creating a climate that spurred challenges of the racially-divisive laws which had governed America for far too long. These vital protests included the boycott of the Montgomery, Alabama busing system in 1955-1956; the creation of a Durham-based youth chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1957; the historic sit-ins at Durham’s partitioned Royal Ice Cream Parlor in June 1957; and the sit-ins by college students at a segregated lunch counter at Woolworth’s in Greensboro in 1960.

The movement to integrate the Carolina Theatre and other public facilities in Durham was in the vanguard of change that swept America.

In 1957, a Greensboro, N.C. court ruling — Simkins v. City of Greensboro — opened the door to the simple fact that public properties should be open to all Americans. African American dentist and community leader, Charles Simkins, challenged the courts and won the right to use a publicly-owned golf course, even though it was privately leased.

At the Carolina Theatre, the same tension emerged between public and private funding. The building, originally opened as the Durham Auditorium, was renovated and renamed as the Carolina Theatre in the late 1920s. By 1961, the city leased the building to Charles Abercrombie for $10,000 a year. As a city-owned building, the Carolina Theatre had been using public funding to continue the contentious policies of segregation. With these facts, protesters found a legal basis to demand integration of the theater.

TARGETED FOR CHANGE

A North Carolina attorney, Floyd B. McKissick Sr., began directing the efforts of the local youth chapter of the NAACP to protest the segregation policies at the Carolina Theatre and other theaters in Durham in the late 1950s. McKissick and the NAACP began targeting the Carolina because of its city ownership.

At the time, Durham had several movie theaters, each governed by its own policy
of racial segregation. The Black-owned Regal Theater in the Hayti District was located within Durham’s African American community, but some theaters located in other parts of the city refused admission to Black people entirely.

There were about a half-dozen movie theaters in Durham when, in 1961, action began to integrate both the Carolina Theatre and the Center Theater. Since its opening, the Carolina Theatre had admitted Black customers, but patrons of color had a much different experience than white customers. Black patrons were forced to enter the theater through an outside entrance on the side of the building and climb 97 unsteady steps to seats in the “colored balcony,” sometimes referred to as the “buzzard’s nest” or “buzzard’s roost.” McKissick and others would soon begin challenging this system of inequality.

A YOUTH-LED MOVEMENT

The Durham Youth Chapter of the NAACP played a key role in ending segregation of public accommodations in Durham. The chapter was organized under the leadership of McKissick, with a core group of about 20 youth from the North Durham community.

Soon after its establishment, the chapter became involved in picketing Durham’s Royal Ice Cream Parlor, one of the nation’s first significant civil rights protests. The movement gained momentum and soon had participants from all three Black high schools in Durham County. The Black college, business school, and beauty and barber college students also joined in.

Over the next several years, youth chapter members marched, sang, picketed, and prayed — often seven days a week — to achieve their goal of ending segregation in the city’s public accommodations.

PROLONGED PROTESTS

Planning for the protests at the Carolina Theatre and other Durham theaters began in earnest around 1959, spearheaded by the NAACP Youth Chapter. As aforementioned, there was a Black-owned theater for “Negroes” — the Regal Theater — across the railroad track in Hayti, where many other businesses serving the Black community were located.

On November 2, 1960, the NAACP petitioned the Durham City Council for many racial reforms, among them the integration of the Carolina Theatre. The City Council referred the case to the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations.

By January of 1961, the NAACP sent a letter to the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations; George Aull, the City Manager; and Milo Crawford, a manager of the Carolina Theatre. The NAACP had acquired signatures of students from high schools, the college, and other institutions

On January 20, 1961 — the same day that President John F. Kennedy was inaugurated on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. — demonstrators from these Durham schools and colleges began peacefully protesting the policies of segregation at the Carolina Theatre and Center Theater in downtown Durham. Undeterred by the frigid air of January and February, which remained in the low thirties, students and some faculty picketed the theaters in shifts. The protesters hoped to force the venues into allowing any patron, regardless of race or color, access to a seat in the theater halls. About a week after the protests began, the Center Theater closed its balcony and refused to admit Black moviegoers at all.

By March of 1961, leaders of Durham’s Black community and faculty members from Duke and North Carolina College began to support the ongoing protests and strongly rallied for the integration efforts. Picketing of the theater continued throughout the year. By late 1961, the local NAACP chapter petitioned the Durham City Council and challenged the legality of the venue’s continued operation, based on the city’s ownership of the theater. The Council referred the measure to the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations at a meeting on December 6, 1961.

In response, the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations stated that the legal question of the Carolina Theatre’s integration should be negotiated, and offered its services to facilitate negotiations. However, the management of the Carolina Theatre, under Charles Abercrombie, was unwilling to participate in negotiations. Abercrombie stated that “the question of whether or not to desegregate had been accepted by the Commission as a foregone conclusion.”

### Timeline

- **1926** The Carolina Theatre, originally named the Durham Auditorium, opens.
- **1955** Peaceful protests begin nationwide.
- **1957** Sit-ins at Durham’s Royal Ice Cream Parlor.
  - *Simkins v. City of Greensboro*
- **1959** Attorney Floyd B. McKissick Sr. helps plan for protests at the Carolina Theatre and other Durham theaters.
- **1960** Sit-ins begin at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, N.C.
- **1961**
  - JAN 20 Demonstrators peacefully protest the policies of segregation at the Carolina Theatre and Center Theater.
  - Feb 1 Superior Court Judge Hamilton Hobgood issues a restraint against picketing at the Carolina Theatre.
  - Mar 16 “Round Robin” demonstrations begin at the theater.
- **1962** Eight students file a lawsuit in federal court against the City of Durham and Abercrombie Enterprise.
- **1963**
  - Jul 5 The Carolina Theatre becomes a fully integrated theater.
  - Aug 28 MLK Jr. gives his public speech, “I Have a Dream.”
- **1964**
  - Jul 2 The Civil Rights Act is enacted.
On February 1, a spokesman for the NAACP Youth Chapter threatened to sue the city over the matter. At a City Council meeting on March 5, 1962, Council took a position that it was "not opposing" integration of the Carolina Theatre and asked the theater management to negotiate the issue. In terms of integration, the theater management continued its obstinate stance. However, continued protests, heightened tension, and the threat of a disrupted peace would provoke a shift in community sentiment.

Protests began in March of 1962 as the "Round Robin" demonstrations: Black patrons approached the white ticket window and were turned away only to resolutely return to the back of the line and continue requesting admission. Long lines developed. When students were denied a ticket, they tried to ascertain the reason to gain evidence that entry was not possible because they were African Americans. Some white patrons supporting the demonstrations would purchase tickets and turn them over to Black protesters, who were sometimes able to push their way into the theater.

At the request of the Carolina Theatre's management, Superior Court Judge Hamilton Hobgood issued an order on March 16 restraining — but not banning — picketing at the theater, and picketing was suspended. The theater owner also filed a $30,000 lawsuit against 34 persons who were named in the restraining order. Early in April of 1962, the Mayor's Commission on Human Relations announced that it had "exhausted any function" it could perform in attempting to resolve the movie theater segregation issue. A lawsuit was subsequently filed, seeking a court decision to order the theater to desegregate. In the summer of 1962, a group of eight students filed suit in federal court against
the City of Durham and Abercrombie Enterprise, which operated the theater under a lease with the city for $1,000 per month. They sought a permanent injunction enjoining the theater from continuing to “enforce or permit” its policy of racial segregation. However, a court ruling was not necessary, due to another change in Durham: a new mayor.

**INTEGRATION ARRIVES**

Pennsylvania-native Wense Grabarek was elected mayor of Durham in May of 1963. Following his inauguration, Grabarek worked tirelessly to convince theater management to negotiate in good faith and embrace the concept of integration.

On July 15, at the initiation of the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations, a solution was proposed that was supported by the theater managers, the NAACP, and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). A 20-day trial period would ensue with a “controlled” integration of the theater. Mrs. Bessie McLaurin, an advisor to CORE, worked with the mayor to schedule an increasing number of Black patrons to the theater on a non-segregated basis during this period.

The Carolina Theatre began operation as a fully integrated theater on August 5, just days before Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I Have A Dream” speech in Washington and a year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forced other businesses and institutions in the South — and the nation — to integrate their facilities with respect to all Americans.

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**REFERENCES**

The Civil Rights Exhibit opened at the Carolina Theatre on April 2, 2014.

Above: The window frame and rail that were part of the original "Colored" box office at the Carolina Theatre. Until the theater was integrated in 1963, "Negro" patrons had to buy their tickets at this window on the side of the building and then climb 97 steps to their balcony seats.
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