

5E) Racial Violence Erupts in Freeport High School

3 Beaten as Students Disrupt School in Freeport, *New York Times April 26, 1969*

Freeport, L.I., April 25--Negro students beat three persons today after overturning furniture in the Freeport High School cafeteria and shouting and marching through the corridors of the school. The disturbance came in the aftermath of fights last night in which three students were stabbed. One of the youths was reported in critical condition today. More than 80 village and Nassau County policemen, many of them wearing riot helmets and carrying clubs, were posted at the school and throughout the village before classes restore calm to this tense community.

The police said 70 Negro students gathered in the school cafeteria before 8 AM, overturned tables and chairs, and then marched through the corridors of the two-story building. The youths finally left the building within an hour after they had been warned by the police that they would be arrested if they refused to go to homerooms or leave the building.

When word of the trouble at the high school spread through this South Shore village, hundreds of parents went to the school and took their children home. By noon, only 300 to 400 students were left in classes out of a total enrollment of 2,200. The fight last night and the outbreak this morning came as a surprise to village and school officials, who have been working for several months to ease tensions in this community of 42,000 people, 14 percent of whom are Negroes. Last Friday, school officials granted nine of 12 demands made by black students at the high school. Among the demands agreed to by the school board were the hiring of more black personnel, Yoruba and Swahili courses, and "soul food" in the cafeteria.

The fights last night occurred after a meeting of the high school student council at the village community center. The students were trying to resolve racial tensions at the school and had adopted a resolution requesting "all students to refrain from any violent and antagonistic conduct, which can only lead to further polarization between the races." During the meeting a white student, Robert Kelly, addressed the predominantly Negro crowd with a list of five requests by white students at the school to "keep tensions down in the school." He was booed by the audience and two teacher counselors adjourned the meeting and told the students to go home. After the meeting, 200 students Negroes and whites, started milling around and several fights broke out. Two Negroes were stabbed and the Kelly youth was beaten.

Freeport High Disrupted But Will Reopen Monday, *Newsday, April 26, 1969*

Freeport--Demonstrations, student walkouts and scattered incidents of violence disrupted Freeport High School yesterday, but village and school officials announced early today that the school would be open for classes Monday, with police protection if required. The decision came at the end of a five-hour joint meeting of the Freeport village and school boards in the village hall.

The unrest was blamed partially on the presence of six "teacher aides" by Camille Smith, associate executive director of the Long Island Council of Churches and one of about five black adults who met with school officials during the day. Removal of the aides was one of the demands recently submitted to the school administration by black students. The spokesman for the joint board meeting said, however, that the aides would continue to be on the job Monday, acting "strictly as observers" in hallways and lavatories. "They will not restrain anyone, only keep aware of anything that happens." Smith said that the students regard the aides, some of whom are moonlighting New York City policemen, as a "peacekeeping force."

Once-Quiet Village Perplexed, *Newsday, April 26, 1969*

Freeport--This is a neat and tidy village, middle class, peaceful. Although its citizens have tended to be politically and socially conservative, it had not been hit by the racial strife and tension that so often marks middle-class white communities with substantial black populations. But though the village has avoided racial confrontation and tension, the series of racial incidents and bitterness that in recent days has spilled over into stabbings, fights and ugly disorders. Just why is the question in the minds of Freeport residents today. The answer, or answers, was sought among a variety of points of view.

Mayor Robert Sweeney sat in his office in the village hall and rattled off a list of the village's accomplishments in racial understanding. "We were the first village in the state to set up a human relations commission," he said, "and now we have a Negro who is serving as a community relations consultant. "When I took office, the only Negroes employed by the village were in the highway and sanitation departments," Sweeney added. "Now we have Negroes on the board of zoning appeals, on the parks and recreation commission and on the ethics board."

School officials also are quick to recount all that they have done to ensure integration: human relations courses for teachers, revised curriculums including black contributions to culture, community workers visiting homes to help problem students, special class visits to colleges, work with dropouts. But despite all the efforts, the schools have suffered racial disruptions: Fist fights in December; fire bombings in January, then relative peace in February and March as a biracial student committee sought to calm the tensions that are strong enough to be felt by a casual visitor. Then this month, a quickly escalating series of scuffles and fights that resulted in two stabbings and free-for-all yesterday.

Christopher Warrell, school superintendent, and School Board President Joseph McAndrews put the blame for the strife on two separate but related conditions. The presence of what they term a hard core of about 50 black students who would not be satisfied even if all black student demands were granted and, opposing it, an embittered group of about 50 extremist white students. A theory that racial antagonism between the student groups was the direct result of racial antagonism felt by parents in the community.

Parents Picket in Freeport, *New York Times*, April 29, 1969

Freeport, L.I., April 28-- A group of about 25 white parents concerned with the safety of their children in this racially tense village picketed Freeport High School this morning. The group, which calls itself the Concerned Parents of Freeport, was formed over the weekend as a result of racial troubles involving high school students last week. The pickets carried placards demanding the "strict enforcement of the law both in the school and on the street, and the arrest of all violators."

Whites Ask School Law, Order; In Freeport, Anger, *Newsday*, April 29, 1969

Freeport-- About 600 white adults met here last night and angrily demanded stern "law and order" measures in the village schools in the wake of racial violence that has resulted in the posting of police in Freeport High School. Calling themselves the Concerned Parents of Freeport, the participants crowded into the sons of Italy Hall to hear speakers berate the school board and Mayor Robert J. Sweeney. "Our problem is not with the black community," said Jomer Rand, temporary chairman of the group, explaining why blacks were not admitted to the meeting. "We just want to see that our children have adequate police protection."

In a voice vote, the group passed almost unanimously a list of demands that included suspension of any student who leaves school premises without permission, carries a weapon or participates in an unauthorized meeting during school hours; arrest of any student found in the halls without permission who refuses to return to class; patrol of the halls during school hours, and "public review" of demands made by black students.

As the whites met, a group of Negro Parents and students gathered at the Second Baptist Church nearby. After their meeting, they issued a statement that said: "The black parents of Freeport are deeply concerned for the safety and education of their children. The environment of Freeport has not been conducive to these things in the recent months."

Questions:

- 1- What explanations are offered for the eruption of racial violence in Freeport High School?
- 2- In your opinion, why did racial violence erupt in Freeport High School?
- 3- If you were a local school official in Freeport, how would you have responded to increasing racial tension in the schools? Why?