We Shall Overcome  
1940s-1970s

At Levine Museum of the New South, we look at how Charlotte and the surrounding area has changed since the end of the American Civil War in 1865. These changes range from the types of jobs people have held to the constitutional rights we hold dear today. When we think about the New South, we like to define it as:

• A Time — The New South is the period of time from 1865, following the Civil War, to the present.
• A Place — The New South includes areas of the Southeast U.S. that began to grow and flourish after 1865.
• An Idea — The New South represents new ways of thinking about economic, political and cultural life in the South.

In Unit 3, Building Cities, we learned the causes and effects of Charlotte’s growth into a modern city in the early 1900s. Our journey now continues, beginning around the 1940s. In We Shall Overcome, we’ll learn how the Civil Rights activists changed the course of Charlotte and the United States.

Glossary:

• Segregation - the forced separation of different racial groups in society, primarily African Americans and whites in the South.
• Jim Crow - laws that segregated whites and African Americans in the United States.
• Separate but Equal - a policy that permitted racial segregation in the South as long as there were equal opportunities and facilities provided for all races, which never happened.
• Redlining - refusing property loans, credit, or insurance for property to African Americans and other communities of color.
• Civil Rights Era - a time during which people fought to overcome Jim Crow laws and to secure basic legal rights for African Americans, such as voting, access to housing, and integrated education.
• Boycott - refusing to buy goods or participate in something as a form of protest.
• Sit-in - a form of protest in which activists refuse to leave a place until their demands are met.
• Busing - moving students across the city by bus to integrate schools.
• Integration/desegregation - ending racial segregation.
• Resegregation - returning to racial segregation.

During the Civil Rights Era, many North Carolinians helped bring an end to segregation through individual and group activism, using tactics such as sit-ins and boycotts. The sit-in movement spread from Greensboro, and Charlotte led the nation in school integration through a practice called busing. The invention of the television broadcasted both the challenges and triumphs civil rights activists experienced during their fight for equality. It brought the struggle to people’s attention like never before.
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Section 1: Separate but Equal?

Jim Crow segregation, separating whites and African Americans, began in the South after the Civil War. While African Americans received new freedoms, whites tried to limit them. The first known boycotts were in response to streetcars being segregated in the late 1880s. Jim Crow segregation became the official law of the land with a United States Supreme Court case called Plessy vs Ferguson in 1896. The Court said that segregation was legal as long as facilities were “Separate but Equal.”

However, segregated places such as water fountains, restaurants, public restrooms, waiting areas, transportation, and schools were never truly equal. African Americans were even told what neighborhoods they could and could not live in, which is called redlining. Jim Crow laws kept whites and African Americans from being equal in society, something known as inequality. Sometimes whites and African Americans who mingled together were arrested or physically threatened. If African American children sipped from white water fountains to see what the difference was, their parents would quickly tell them they could not do that.

Think About It!

What are some ways these two water fountains are different?

Answer It!

What examples can you give of how separate was not equal during the time of segregation?
Section 2: Sitting In

In addition to ending segregation, civil rights activists also wanted full voting rights and the ability to run for political office back for African Americans.

Even though they shared common goals, activists sometimes disagreed on how to fight injustice. Some people thought change should be fast, while others thought it should come a little slower. A lot of people believed in peaceful change, but a few people thought a violent response was the way to get things done.

People protested for change by marching and carrying signs, boycotting, and even doing something as simple as having dinner together to discuss ideas.
The **Sit-In** Movement was another very important form of protest. On February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina A & T University in Greensboro went to the lunch counter at a Woolworth’s department store. They decided to protest segregation by sitting down and asking for service at the whites-only lunch counter. Their brave actions inspired people, especially college students, all over the South to **sit-in** at their local lunch counters. The bravery of these activists eventually led to the desegregation of lunch counters across the South.

You can see counter-protestors, those who did not believe in integration, in the photo below.

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**Think About It!**

Look at the two sit-in photos. How do you think the protestors felt? What different emotions can you see in the photos?

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**Answer It!**

What were different ways people protested for change?
Section 3: Busing to School

Not only did white and African American children go to separate schools, they went to unequal schools. African American schools received much less funding. White schools could afford better supplies, books and facilities.

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled against segregated schools in the landmark case Brown v. Board of Education. Three years later, four African American students in Charlotte became the first integrate the city’s schools. Dorothy Counts (pictured on the right) had to withdraw from the school after a few days due to threats made to her and her family.

Darius Swann (pictured with his wife on the left) was a professor at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte. He wanted his son to go to an integrated school, but the school board assigned his son to an African American school. After several attempts to send his son to an integrated school, Darius Swann contacted a lawyer.

Attorney Julius Chambers filed a lawsuit for the Swann family. In response to the case, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools enrolled the Swann children in integrated schools.
Still, most of Charlotte’s schools were not integrated and the case *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* continued to make its way through the courts. Federal Judge James McMillan ordered that **busing** be used to assign children to different schools and **integrate** them. This was very controversial. Many white parents did not want their children bused, and African American parents were upset that their children were bused in higher numbers. The Supreme Court agreed with Judge McMillan, and Charlotte used **busing to integrate** its schools. By the 1980s, Charlotte was very proud of the steps it had taken to **integrate** the school system. Many other large cities experimented with **busing** and looked at Charlotte as a role model.

In 1997, another lawsuit challenged **busing**. Judge Robert Potter decided to put an end to it in Charlotte schools. and many schools are now **resegregated**, with almost all having a majority of African American, Hispanic or white children.

**Think About It!**

Look at the faces of the children in the photos and imagine what they might be thinking or feeling.

**Answer It!**

How were schools for white and African American children unequal before integration?