

The University of Houston and Texas Southern University: Perpetuating “Separate but Equal” in the Face of *Brown v. Board of Education*

By Andrew Joseph Pegoda

Sometimes the most illogical ideas have the strongest hold on a society’s hopes and fears. Such is the case with race. The various attributes that identify race are merely social and cultural constructions that vary according to time and place. Events that occurred in the 1950s in a tiny corner of Houston occupied by the University of Houston (UH) and Texas Southern University (TSU) provide a unique glimpse into the consequences of giving undue significance to individual differences—namely skin color—that we falsely define as race.

In 1927, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) created two colleges during a local economic boom: Houston Junior College, and a “separate but equal” branch, Houston Colored Junior College. Eventually, Houston Junior College became the University of Houston in 1934, and Houston Colored Junior College became Texas Southern University in 1951.¹

As segregation had arisen socially in the 1880s and legally in the 1890s, the University of Houston and Texas Southern University were segregated. Until slowly overturned in the 1950s and 1960s, “separate but equal” doctrines said that segregation was legal as long as the separate white and black institutions were equal; however, they were rarely—if ever—actually equal. Across time and place, there is always a gap between the law and the reality. While *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the landmark Supreme Court case that outlawed segregation in public education, is likely the most well known, other cases also made progress toward overturning apartheid conditions beginning in the late 1920s. This included two 1950 Supreme Court decisions that preceded *Brown* and specifically addressed the inequalities created by segregation in higher education institutions: *Sweatt v. Painter* against the University of Texas, and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* against the University of Oklahoma.

What became TSU only admitted black applicants until 1956, and UH only admitted non-blacks until June 1962. UH admitted women, Mexican-Americans, and international students excluding those of African or African American ancestry. UH employed a few African Americans in service positions, including a black maid and a black bus driver in the 1940s. Segregation, then, was about maintaining the white status quo.²

Nonetheless, administrators at UH had less difficulty excluding African Americans than other institutions of higher education throughout the United States, and especially in the South, because of the co-existence of TSU and UH, located less than two city blocks from each other. Although available documentation does not clearly define the complete relationship, some University of Houston officials had occasional administrative and/or teaching responsibilities at their neighboring institution. Anecdotal evidence holds that Houston College for Negroes, formerly Houston Colored Junior College, was originally going to be located on a portion of the UH campus established in 1937 with donations from wealthy Houston families. Tradition and anecdotal evidence further holds that Hugh Roy (H. R.) Cullen,

the University of Houston’s most noteworthy and generous benefactor, was reputed to be a racist who never wanted African Americans to attend UH. In order to maintain segregation, he donated land for TSU a block away from the University of Houston. The presence of TSU made it possible for the two schools to hold some “separate but equal” courses, and hopes of maintaining that system continued well into the 1960s despite *Brown v. Board of Education*.³

Throughout the University of Houston’s debates regarding segregation, desegregation, and admission of blacks, the



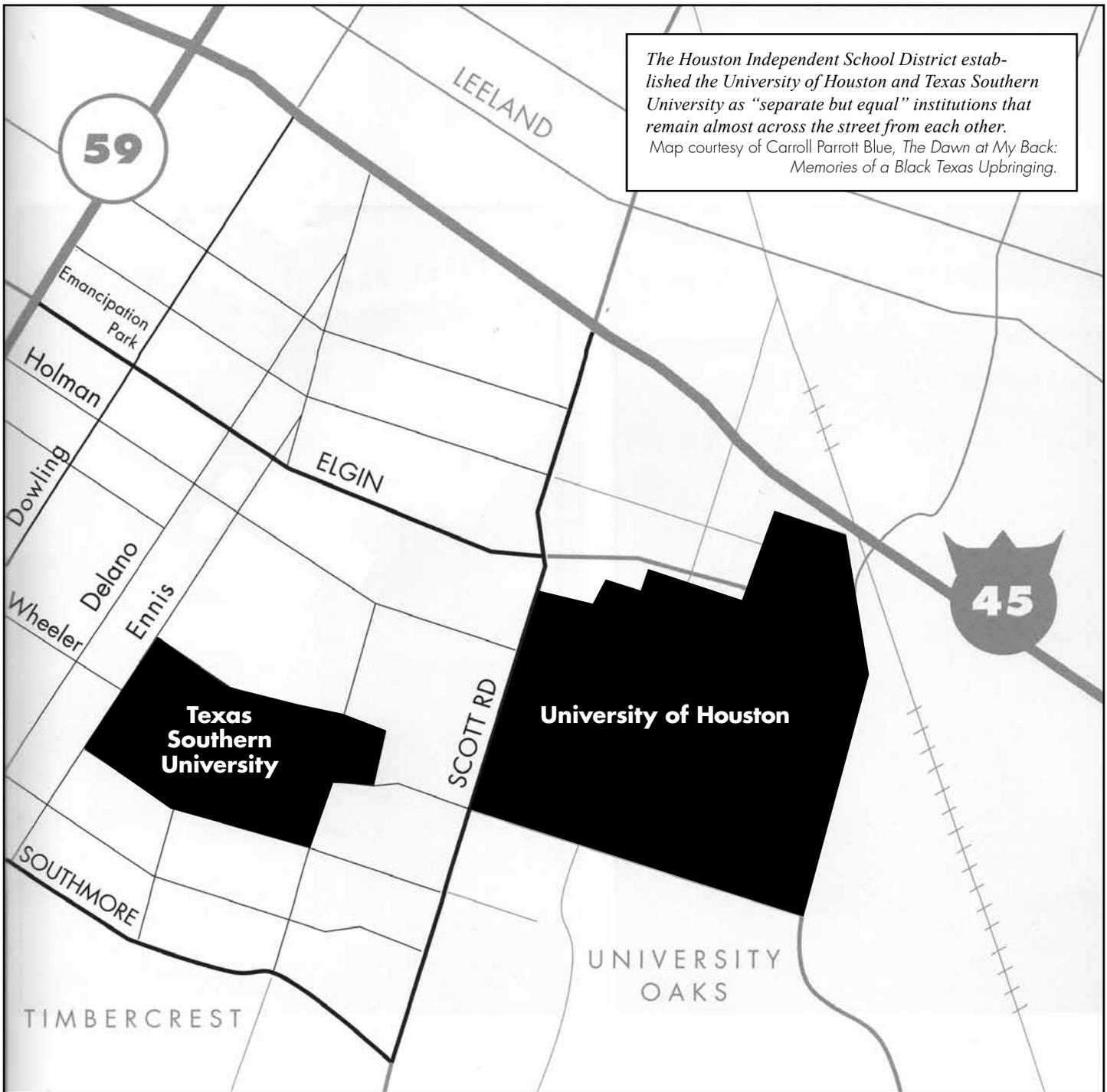
A. D. Bruce, Clanton Ware Williams, and H. R. Cullen shake hands at the University of Houston during the 1950s. As administrators, these three men were important in deciding issues related to desegregation.

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Office of Admissions did not make the decisions. Chief campus administrators—the president, or vice president, or sometimes a dean—with a handful of exceptions, directly handled the entire situation when a black individual was involved. High-ranking officials treated seemingly everyday matters, such as a misplaced wallet, as urgent, suspicious situations if they involved a black person; and these “unusual” circumstances were handled very quickly.

UH (like other places) did not necessarily officially practice segregation. All of the University of Houston’s admission requirements, mission statements, and founding goals and principles said UH welcomed anyone and everyone. The exclusion of blacks and those with African ancestry was so assumed in this apartheid society that it was not viewed as necessary to officially exclude them in writing.⁴

Beginning in at least 1956, black Americans wrote the University of Houston requesting admission. Some of these potential pupils directly wrote UH inquiring about its attitude regarding African Americans. Others wrote campus administrators and asked for information—such as a catalog and



application. In various examples, some of these students would communicate back and forth with officials at UH several times until the registrar knew the person's skin color or ancestry. The UH application asked, with two separate blanks, "What is your race?"—"What is your color?" To "what is your race," students put "Negro." To "what is your color," some put "Negro" again, while others put "dark brown," or "light brown," or "black," or "brown." Most of these students were referred to TSU.

As would become increasingly feared, some African American students did not send a letter or call seeking admission. Rather, some came to one of the UH campuses and stood in line to register for classes. University of Houston officials worried about what these black students might be capable of doing. Would they cause a disruption? Because they feared the

unknown, UH would later implement a policy indicating exactly what to do in such a situation.

A revealing event took place when two African American students from TSU appeared at the Downtown School of the University of Houston. The Downtown School, originally serving the business community, operated from 1942 to 1979 when it became its own university, the University of Houston Downtown. Starting in the 1950s, this branch also housed all of the university's continuing education programs.⁵

Walter Petteway visited on September 13, and Lorenzo Lucas followed on September 14, 1957. Lucas and Petteway wanted to enroll at UH to take an accounting course, since TSU had discontinued its parallel accounting class because of low enrollment. Apparently, UH had already planned to provide the same

course. Additionally, UH offered this course at the same time as the course canceled at TSU. After waiting in line to register, the Registrar's Office explained to both Lucas and Petteway on their separate visits that the Board of Governors took the matter seriously, that once a policy had been reached they would hear about it in the news, but that UH did not admit African Americans and operated as a segregated educational institution. Additionally, an unspecified individual at UH criticized TSU for no longer offering the accounting course in demand.⁶

For unexplained reasons, Petteway also had a private meeting with Myron "Bud" Swiss, Director of Admissions, lasting about twenty minutes. No record exists of exactly what these men said, but twenty minutes could indicate that the conversation was more than the typical explanation given to black students about why they could not enroll at UH. In official reports, Swiss said that this private session "was most polite" and was "free of any emotional display." This statement, especially that the meeting was free of emotional display, must be questioned. Significantly, Petteway's supposed emotions—not what he and Swiss discussed—received documentation. Just as with other black students UH encountered and documented, Petteway's behavior, not his academic desires and needs, received emphasis.⁷

Unlike other black students who were rejected, Lucas and Petteway continued trying to enroll at UH to take the desired accounting course. Both worked for George West of A. J. Folger & Company. One morning they asked West if they could continue trying to gain admission to UH with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) without endangering their jobs. According to University of Houston President Clanton W. Williams's official report, West replied that they could do as they pleased but should be prepared for the consequences. West warned Lucas and Petteway that prematurely forcing desegregation at UH would upset Folger employees and would further divide the entire city of Houston.⁸

West contacted Reagan Cartwright, the University of Houston's lawyer, and President Williams on September 18, 1957, resulting in an additional series of events. First, Williams asked West if he would excuse Petteway and Lucas from work so that they could attend a meeting with him the next morning at 9:30. West agreed. Then, Williams called Samuel Nabrit, the second president of TSU, who "knew nothing about the matter." Nabrit, again according to Williams's report, agreed to investigate the situation and find a way to reimplement the course rather than "have the University of Houston embarrassed by a law suit." That evening at ten, Nabrit followed up with Williams, requesting that UH provide an instructor for the course. They "agreed that such an attempt would be made unless it were ascertained that Petteway and Lucas with NAACP backing were determined to bring a test case anyway."⁹

On September 19, I. E. McNeill, chair of accounting at UH, and the dean of TSU's College of Business visited over the phone to discuss arrangements for an instructor.¹⁰ At exactly 9:30 a.m., Petteway and Lucas arrived as arranged through West. McNeill, Alfred R. Neumann, and President Williams also attended this meeting. Reportedly, "*the boys* were told of developments and were quite pleased" (*italics in original*). Additionally, Petteway confessed, according to official reports, that he only used the threat of court action and alliance with the NAACP as leverage in hopes that the course would be created at either TSU or UH. Forty minutes later, the UH president and

TSU president conferred once more to polish the agreement and ultimately continue an idealized "separate but equal" philosophy at the twin schools.¹¹

Representatives at UH and TSU created the course on September 19, 1957, just one week after Lucas and Petteway's first attempt to take an accounting course at the Downtown School. TSU offered the course at the time these two students sought and did not seek additional enrollment. The two universities agreed that the students could watch accounting instructor McNeill's lectures through the University of Houston's distance education program delivered through the UH television station, and that TSU would provide additional instruction and a graduate student to answer questions, hold laboratory sessions, and grade papers. (UH was the first university in the nation to offer distance learning through television.)¹²

Williams sent an official report to General and Chancellor A. D. Bruce, Cartwright, and others detailing the encounter with Petteway and Lucas. It is possible that Williams provided a softer version of events; for example, he repeatedly emphasized that "the boys" were very agreeable when approached.¹³

One year earlier, a similar situation occurred in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Residential requirements said that Beneva Williams had to attend E. O. Smith Junior High School, instead of McReynolds Junior High School. Williams, a black youth, did not want to continue attending the all-black



As student activists, Lynn Eusan and Gene Locke worked tirelessly to gain equal rights for African American students at the University of Houston.

junior high because it was twenty blocks from her home instead of seven blocks to the white school. To avoid making real plans for desegregation, HISD instantly promoted her to high school. She started attending Phillis Wheatley Senior High School, a school that was closer to her residence than the white high schools. At UH and HISD, leading officials tried to solve specific disturbances or problems as they developed rather than addressing the larger issues and finding long-term solutions that would promote equality for everyone involved. Throughout the 1950s, “separate but equal” remained strong, as all parties carefully watched developments on local and national stages.¹⁴

Ultimately, the story of Petteway and Lucas was an exception. In many other cases, TSU did not have “separate but equal” counterparts compared to UH, especially for African Americans seeking a doctorate. TSU did not offer the Ed.D. or Ph.D. until 1974 and 1984, respectively. Moreover, UH provided the only optometry school in the region.¹⁵

The existence of “separate but equal” greatly influenced Freda Celestine Gooden Richardson, whose voice is the most complete in the historical record. On January 18, 1956, Richardson wrote to UH seeking refresher courses in optometry. After graduating from Wiley College in 1949 with her Bachelor of Science degree, she enrolled in the Chicago College of Optometry. In 1953, she graduated with her Doctorate of Optometry and returned to her home in Galveston, Texas. At some point during August 1954, Charles M. Babb contacted Richardson because she had failed the exam given by the Texas State Board of Examiners in Optometry for the second time. Babb told her that in order to take the exam again, she would be required to present evidence of having taken additional courses in optometry. Babb also informed her that if she did not successfully pass the exam on a third try, she would never be able to take the exam again and, therefore, would not be able to practice in the State of Texas.¹⁶

The Board’s standards remain unknown. Considering the general attitudes of the 1950s, it is possible that the Board’s unwritten requirements in order to pass the examination included that the individual not be an African American or female, especially since Texas did not have a school for black optometry students.¹⁷

In her first letter to the registrar, without making any mention of her ethnicity or of having failed the Board’s exam twice, Richardson requested a catalog of courses and provided her credentials. A little more than one week later, Charles R. Stewart, dean of the College of Optometry, replied. He thanked Richardson for her interest, apol-

Since its beginnings in the 1920s, the University of Houston has never stopped growing. In 2010, the University of Houston occupied almost 700 acres of land. The student body consisted of more than 37,000 students from more than 137 nations around the world.

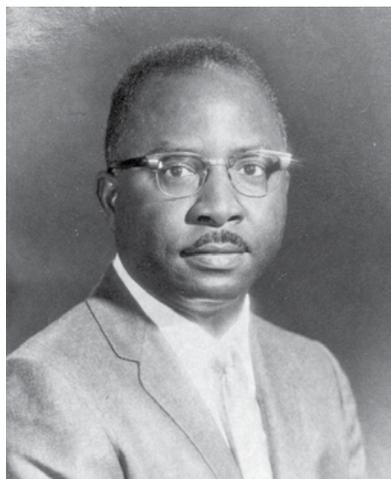
ogized for not responding sooner, and indicated how she could proceed to take the necessary classes. Following this correspondence, Richardson completed her application to UH on February 10, 1956, hoping to begin coursework in the summer. The application included the questions, “What is your race?” and “What is your color?” Richardson responded, “Negro,” and “Colored.”¹⁸

After staff members exchanged several internal memos, including one specifically noting the applicant’s skin color and an-

other one drafting part of a reply, Williams finally replied on April 26, which was an unusually long wait time of more than two months since the last correspondence with Richardson. Williams informed Richardson that issues related to desegregation were currently under study but that UH had never admitted a black individual. Although Richardson supplied all of her background information in her application, Williams requested that she provide the information again. In this reply, he also said he was looking for several “highly qualified” black candidates who might be interested in helping UH quietly desegregate that fall semester. Richardson replied with all of the requested information but did not make any mention of helping UH achieve the first steps toward desegregation. Richardson also indicated for the first time that she needed to take classes in an effort to pass the state’s exam and receive her license.¹⁹

Stewart’s next letter on June 5, 1956, contained subtle and not-so-subtle racism. First, Stewart lambasted other schools and their graduates. He indicated that UH had its own method of teaching and training and that professors wasted their time because newcomers had always been slow to adjust. Second, Stewart singled out black patients and students, saying that UH did not see black patients and that some white patients would not approve of being examined by an African American. Stewart felt this possibility would be embarrassing to everyone, assuming Richardson had encountered similar difficulties in Chicago. Finally, Stewart indicated that Richardson might have great difficulty passing a course at UH because of its higher standards. Richardson’s past grades, as indicated by her transcripts, reflected that she would have been perfectly capable of passing a course at UH. Stewart further suggested that Richardson retake basic courses in optometry.²⁰ Richardson replied with her usual positive outlook on June 27, 1956, agreeing that a review of the basic courses would be helpful, that while earning her doctorate she had worked with whites and blacks without any embarrassing situations, and that she understood the concerns about working with a non-white individual.²¹

On July 5, the final exchange of letters between Richardson and officials at the



Charles Churchwell became the first African American employed in a professional status at the University of Houston in 1967. After completing his doctorate, he became a librarian and an advocate for increasing the presence and equality of diverse peoples on campus.

University of Houston occurred. Williams wrote to inform her that the Board of Regents had decided to wait at least one additional year before addressing the issue of desegregation again.²²

In reality, the Board waited six more years until 1962, when UH, a private institution, was completely out of money and had a great amount of debt, before it admitted the first African Americans. Charles P. Rhinehart became the first African American student in June 1962. Several years later UH hired the first African American, Charles D. Churchwell, in a professional capacity.²³

In an official statement, "Summary of Action of Board of Regents Desegregating the University of Houston," the Board of Regents and their allies attempted to rewrite the University of Houston's history in September 1969. This report says that UH admitted black students in 1956 without any formal board action. Moreover, this report stated that more African American students enrolled every year starting in 1956; and that in 1963, when UH became a public institution, "it was taken for granted by all concerned that no racial discrimination was in effect."²⁴

Clearly, these issues were not resolved at UH specifically or in society generally. UH still worked on welcoming African Americans but used TSU to continue "separate but equal" southern mores. In 1965, although desegregation had begun at UH, it yet again partnered with TSU for students at UH to take courses at TSU in African or African American studies. Then in 1969, black UH students, tired of discrimination, issued their famous "Ten Black Demands." A little over one month later on Monday, March 17, 1969, white students attacked Eugene (Gene) Locke; later that day, the campus broke into violence. While investigating the situation, UH took testimony solely from white

students who accused only black students of causing the trouble. All fourteen individuals who were arrested and punished were African Americans.

Administrators at UH quickly and specifically handled any situation involving black Americans such as those with Petteway, Lucas, and Richardson in order to maintain the inequalities created by Jim Crow customs and laws. But Petteway, Lucas, Richardson, and many others fought to change this and to see *Brown v. Board of Education* mean something by seeking admission at the University of Houston. Efforts by these brave trailblazers helped begin the transition by administrators, faculty, and staff at the University of Houston to commit to having a diverse body of students. Moreover, in 1990 the University of Houston selected Marguerite Ross Barnett, an African American female, as the institution's president. She served until 1992; sadly, her tenure was cut short due to a battle with cancer. As an indication of how far the university has come, in 2009 *U.S. News and World Report* selected UH as the second most ethnically diverse university in the nation. Seventy percent of the student body is non-white. On the other hand, seventy percent of the faculty is white. Clearly, UH has come a long way, but still has a long way to go.²⁵ 

Andrew Joseph Pegoda finished his M.A. in April 2010 with a thesis entitled "Watchful Eyes: The Struggle for African Americans to Gain Admission and Equality at the University of Houston, 1927-1969." He is a doctoral student and instructional assistant at the University of Houston studying U.S. history. He has also taught as an adjunct faculty member at Brazosport College.



Established as a community college, transformed into a private university, and then dealing with what seemed to be a never ending battle between campus administrators and African American students, the 1990 appointment of Marguerite Ross Barnett, a female and African American, as the University of Houston's president was an important milestone for the campus.