



William S. Holland: Building a Civically Engaged Student Body

By Debbie Z. Harwell

A leader in the Third Ward community, William S. Holland served as principal of Jack Yates High School from 1941 to 1958.

Photo courtesy of Deloris Johnson.

When William S. Holland took on the role of principal at Jack Yates High School in 1941, he stepped into big shoes. The school and its first principal, James D. Ryan, had built a reputation central to the support and development of Houston's Third Ward. The high school opened in 1926 as the city's second "colored" high school, and Ryan, an East Texas native and seasoned local educator, served as the school's head until his death in 1940, when Holland succeeded him. During these years, Yates set an expectation of success and acted as the community's anchor.¹

The original building located at 2610 Elgin Street was both a social hub and educational institution. It hosted meetings and community events for the bustling neighborhood and welcomed students in grades seven through twelve. Built to accommodate 1,600 students, by the mid-1950s Yates's student body exceeded 2,200. Overcrowding threatened Yates's survival, but Holland kept the school operating until a new facility could be constructed. The new building opened in 1958 at 3703 Sampson, just a mile away. It should have been an improvement but, instead, marked a reversal from the school's position as a guiding force for the community.²

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) board replaced Holland with Dr. John Codwell, the principal of archrival Phillis Wheatley High School – an act that destroyed the community's cohesiveness and hampered its leadership. Desegregation in the 1960s sealed the community's fate as the neighborhood and the school saw a decline, but Third Ward's heritage and the memories of Professor William Holland remain alive.³

"Mr. Holland ... spoke out about what he thought was best for his students no matter what it was, no matter to whom he was speaking, he did not bite his tongue about what was right and wrong."

– Deloris Johnson, Yates Class of 1958

William S. Holland

William "Babe" Holland, born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on March 2, 1904, graduated from Indiana State Normal School in 1925. He attended graduate school at Tennessee State College and Indiana State Teachers College (formerly the Normal School and now Indiana State University). He played baseball and basketball and excelled in track, competing in the decathlon. His son, Bill Holland, said that White athletes from other schools would pick one or two athletes and throw their points to them to keep his father from winning.

As a result, William Holland learned "early on that there are things that you have to overcome. You either give in, or you overcome."⁴

Holland came to Houston in 1927 with a letter of introduction from Birch Bayh Sr.,

athletic director at Indiana State. Edison Oberholtzer, then superintendent of the Houston Schools, hired him to coach at Yates where he led teams to the 1930 Texas Negro High School football title and numerous track titles. He was promoted to assistant principal and, later, principal on Ryan's death. When Holland retired in 1974, he was the longest tenured principal in HISD's history.⁵

Though the national fight for desegregation and civil rights heated up in the 1950s, Yates 1958 class president, Napoleon Johnson, explained that nothing changed in Houston, so Yates students focused on graduating.



A star baseball player, Holland was quickly nicknamed "Babe," likening him to Babe Ruth.

Photo from Wabash Valley Profiles.



Both members of the class of 1958, Deloris Johnson and Napoleon Johnson (no relation) went on to careers in education and broadcasting respectively.

Photo courtesy of Debbie Harwell.

Johnson remembered Holland speaking at assemblies and hearing “the pain in his voice because if he saw students acting in any way that was probably natural to some degree, ... just too much play and not enough seriousness, he would get on the microphone, and he would tell us about how difficult it was going to be, and that [we] are going to have to be twice as good, work twice as hard ... He was basically saying you need to wake up. You don’t have time to act the fool. ... We can prepare you, but you’ve got to be serious about getting prepared.”⁶

Reverend Donald Dickson, class of 1958, described Holland as a “personable administrator” and “a stern man ... a principal who did not play with children, but he would do anything that he could to help children.” Deloris Johnson, who acts as the 1958 class liaison, described Holland as a “man of great courage, of great responsibility, [who] just led his students to perfection. He told us we had to be the best that we could be because there was going to come a time when integration would come, and we were going to have to be able to fit in ... to be able to work in the world.” Edith Holland Nealy, Holland’s daughter, said he motivated students to go beyond what they thought they could do. “If you were having problems other than just being mentally off the pace, then you had a visit with him in the office to discuss your underachievement. There wasn’t a choice.”⁷

Holland set the example, and teachers followed suit. Nealy recalled, “All of the teachers expected you to achieve ... The parents were, I think, very happy to see that their children were being educated that way, that somebody really cared about their children.” Dickson agreed with that and explained that many of his teachers, who had also taught his mother, “would not allow you to fail ... If it came to

chastising you to get your attention ... or come to your house to tell your parents that you weren’t getting it done, or tell the coach that you are not passing ... you knew what was going to happen.” The students also worked for many of their teachers. Dickson cleaned his homeroom teacher’s house on Saturdays, wiping the windows and beating the rugs. “Our teachers lived in the same places where we lived ... between school, and church, and home, the paths [we] traveled were well-watched— [The teachers] were just like our parents, our uncles, and our aunts.”⁸

Yates graduate Judge Robert Anderson had the unique perspective of someone who experienced both integrated and segregated schools in the rural and urban South, as well as the North. Going to an integrated school in the North broadened his opportunities in many ways, including an expanded curriculum and field trips to Broadway plays. Nevertheless, Anderson noted, “The teachers at Jack Yates took personal concern whereas, in New Jersey, you didn’t get that kind of personal interaction and concern on the part of the teachers.” Looking back, he realized Holland and the faculty were “very outspoken” and the type of role models who exemplified leadership to the students and the community.⁹



Rev. Donald Dickson, a hall-of-famer from the Turkey Day game, was born in the Cuney Homes in Third Ward. After graduating from Yates and Texas Southern University, he became HISD’s first Black head coach at a predominately White school and served as an assistant principal and director of Barnett Stadium.

Photo courtesy of Victor Matsumura.



Holland demanded HISD share the revenues produced by the massive crowds at the Turkey Day Classic in the same proportion as that received by White schools for their games. Many believed this contributed to the district's decision to demote Holland.

Photo courtesy of Yates and Wheatley High School.

Approach to Education and Segregation

Having been schooled in the era of racial uplift, Holland understood the importance of education. Bill Holland observed that his father's approach was "more than his personal philosophy, it was the community philosophy... It is the way black folks thought and how they valued education." He went on to explain, "In the days of segregation, the public schools had the best and brightest in the black community as teachers because basically, the jobs that black folks could get—good jobs—were post office, public school system, and a handful of doctors and lawyers. So, your teachers may have a master's degree or Ph.D. in physics or chemistry or mathematics." He added, "The student was the future of the race and ... [was] expected to take responsibility for their actions, for what they did to achieve."¹⁰

Holland was also outspoken about segregation. Referencing businesses that restricted Black patrons to certain days, Edith Holland Nealy explained, "The standard in our household was if you couldn't go the day you wanted to go, then you didn't go at all." That applied to the rodeo, Playland Park, which only opened to Black visitors on Juneteenth, and department stores where they had to "try on clothes in a broom closet." Bill Holland said, "We were raised with certain golden rules [like] 'why are you going to be stupid enough to give your money to someone who won't let you through the front door?'" Yates students received these same messages. Holland believed segregation presented obstacles to overcome, and each person must take on that responsibility.¹¹

Holland came to the defense of the marching band and arranged with the principals of HISD's other Black high schools to present a united front in refusing to march in the rodeo parade behind the horses and wagons, where they had to dodge the droppings. They were moved in front of

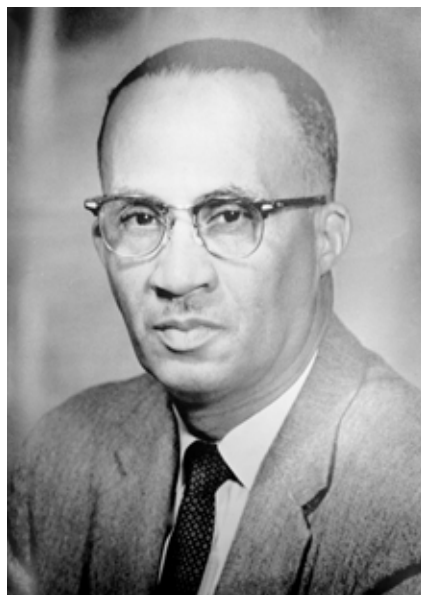
the animals. When they received textbooks that were worn out and missing pages from use by White students, Holland petitioned for materials equal to those received in White schools.¹²

Another source of dissension with HISD centered on the minimal revenues the school received from the Turkey Day football game that pitted Yates against its Fifth Ward rival, Phillis Wheatley High School. First played in 1927, the game became an annual Thanksgiving tradition in 1942 that created a strong community bond, drawing an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 spectators to Public School Stadium (later Jeppesen and then Robertson Stadium). Although the event was one of HISD's largest moneymakers, Holland had to fight for the school's fair share of the revenues. Not until the principals threatened to quit playing did the Black schools receive revenue comparable to that of White schools.¹³

Breaking the Spirit

While Holland's outspokenness made him a hero to Yates students and Third Ward, it made him controversial to HISD administrators. In 1958, after thirty-one years of service at Yates, seventeen of them as principal, Holland was told he would not move to the new Jack Yates High School. HISD essentially demoted Holland by forcing him to remain at the original building as the principal of what became Ryan Junior High School.¹⁴

The community presented a petition signed by 3,635 residents asking the school board to reconsider—students also signed a petition. The board refused to change its ruling, however. Board members Walter W. Kemmerer and Mrs. A. S. Vandervoort voted against all the administrative assignments in protest. While the community did not win a reprieve for Holland, they were victorious nonetheless when, later in 1958, voters stunned conservatives by electing the



Dr. John E. Codwell, who was promoted to principal of Wheatley in 1945, was transferred to Yates when the new campus opened in 1958.

Photo courtesy of Yates High School.

city's first African American to the school board, Hattie Mae White. Two years earlier, White had used the board's records to effectively demonstrate HISD failed to provide an equal education to Black students.¹⁵

Holland's children remembered members of the community wanted to bomb or burn down the new school, but Holland called for calm, believing HISD "had the right to reassign him but not the right to fire him."¹⁶

Rev. Dickson expressed the disappointment students felt, "Finally, the things that he had fought so hard to get for us—new chemistry labs and new auto mechanic buildings and just an upgrade in the school itself. ... We felt that the man who worked so hard to get us to that point should be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor." The insult did not stop there, however. "The slap in the face was that they brought a principal from our rival school ... from Wheatley." And Dr. John Codwell brought many of his teachers with him. Dickson surmised that HISD wanted to show Holland that "next time, maybe you will keep your mouth shut."¹⁷

The results were devastating. "It killed the school spirit," Dickson stated. Deloris Johnson agreed and explained that with the family of Yates teachers split between the new high school, Ryan Junior High School, and Wheatley, and with Holland no longer at the helm, the traditions vanished. It also changed the community. Dickson observed, "Yates did not have that decorum that they always had. They didn't have the faces of teachers ... [It had a] negative impact on the neighborhood and on the community ... the morale and the character of the school began to degrade ... because we were hurt."¹⁸

Wheatley and Fifth Ward felt an equally devastating impact at the loss of Codwell, who, like Holland, had risen through the ranks from coach to principal, and the loss of their faculty. Betty Taylor-Thompson, class of 1959, contended, "the whole idea of mixing up the principals ... was done to crack the black community, to try to keep us apart ... [and] crack that rise to the middle class that was happening from blacks



Judge Robert Anderson grew up in Houston and Austin County Texas. He started high school in New Jersey, returned to Yates for his junior and senior years, and later earned his law degree at Texas Southern. He was appointed to the Municipal Court by former mayor Louie Welch.

Photo courtesy of Victor Matsumura.

at Yates and Wheatley." William Jordan, a 1956 Wheatley graduate, said it made them mad and they wanted Codwell to refuse, but he would have lost his job either way.¹⁹

Lessons that Endure

Integration further exacerbated the negative effects felt by the Third and Fifth Wards—not that anyone would have said segregation was a better system. Alumni of Yates and Wheatley argued that the district sent inferior White teachers to the Black schools while sending the best Black teachers to the White schools. Edith Holland Nealey observed that integration "tore part" the sense of community. Deloris Johnson felt the gains from integration came at the price of change in the schools and neighborhoods. Homeowners moved to new areas and their houses became rental property; stores closed, and people no longer shopped in Third Ward.²⁰

William Holland retired after forty-seven years of service to HISD and was elected to the school board of trustees. The district named a middle school after him in 1979. Holland died on July 22, 1981, at the age of seventy-seven.²¹

Although Third Ward lost its once thriving community, the people did not lose the lessons they had learned from Holland, which they applied in their work and in raising their families. Deloris Johnson, who, like Holland, spent her career as an educator in HISD, approaches her work and life through one of Holland's most influential principles: "You are tomorrow what you were yesterday, plus the few changes that you make today." Dickson, a retired coach and assistant principal in HISD, added, "[O]ne of the greatest things that we learned from Mr. Holland was that we didn't have to take a back seat to anybody and that is because we were not inferior to anybody. We had a brain, we could think; we had eyes, we could see; we had a tongue, we could talk; we had legs, we could run; and we had a mind, we could think. He wanted us to use all of those contributing factors to become good and viable and productive men and women."²² And that they did. ■



William Holland, second from left with shovel, took part in the groundbreaking ceremonies for the middle school named in his honor.

Photo courtesy of William S. Holland Middle School.

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