

Lighting the Fuse



Mary Church Terrell

LIKE AN ACCELERATING TRAIN, the fight to end institutionalized racism in America picked up more and more speed after World War II. It would gain a monumental victory in 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled on a school-desegregation case entitled *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court's decision in *Brown* provided the fuse for the modern civil rights movement. In little more than a decade, American society would be transformed.

It was perhaps predictable that the first major battle of the postwar civil rights struggle would be waged over the public schools of the South, where "separate but equal" and "states' rights" had become segregationist mantras and where the aspirations of blacks—especially their aspirations

for their children—were rising as never before. African-American soldiers had returned from fighting freedom's war to find their children—and themselves—still oppressed in freedom's homeland. Black women, attuned as always to the deepest racial ironies of American life, were less willing than ever to see those ironies destroy their hopes for the future. And in the amazing burst of optimism and opportunity that followed the war, black children were learning that gradualism and compromise were not always the right answer, although courage might be.

As the desegregation train gathered momentum, more and more blacks (and more than a few whites as well) climbed aboard. Women, and even young girls, did so with particular enthusiasm and commitment, many inspired not only by their own deep yearnings but also by the memory of all the deeds of all the mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandmothers who went before them. Some of the pioneers, in fact, were still around, still setting examples. One of them was Mary Church Terrell.

It was fitting that Mrs. Terrell, born the year that Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, would live until two months after the *Brown* ruling. A teacher herself and a child of a former slave, she was a person of such indomitable will and clarity of vision that at least two generations of black women would extol and emulate her. Indeed, just a year before she died, "Mollie" Terrell, who had fought for women's suffrage and against lynching at the turn of the century, would celebrate, at ninety, a new civil rights victory of her own, when she completed the struggle that Pauli Murray and the Howard University students had begun almost a decade earlier at Thompson's cafeteria.

Mary Church Terrell's life is a tapestry of black American life, of blacks' perseverance and struggle, from Reconstruction to segregation. In 1881, the dazzling seventeen-year-old danced at President James Garfield's inaugural ball. Just a few years later, after the introduction of Jim Crow practices, Mary "Mollie" Church Terrell, now the college-educated wife of a successful black Washington lawyer, Robert Terrell, was manhandled on streetcars and turned away from restaurants and theaters she had once frequented. "As a colored woman," she wrote bitterly in 1940, "I may walk from the Capitol to the White House, ravenously hungry and abundantly supplied with money with which to purchase a meal, without finding a single restaurant in which I would be permitted to take a morsel of food . . ."

Such treatment was particularly galling for a woman who was raised to believe she was as good as anybody else—and better than some. Her father was a former slave who had defied all the odds to become a million-

aire real estate entrepreneur in Memphis. Mollie Church, from the age of six, was sent to white schools in Ohio. Fun-loving and popular, a nonstop talker, she was in perpetual motion and found it "extremely difficult . . . to keep still in school from the day I entered till I received my degree from college." She had many white friends but was quick to stand up for herself at the first sign of racism. When a teacher assigned her the role of a cowering black servant in a school play, young Mollie refused to take it.

At Oberlin College, the first white college in the United States to admit blacks, she opted for the rigorous four-year Classical Course, including the study of Latin and Greek. Friends urged her to enroll instead in the "ladies'" Literary Course, which took only two years to complete. Too much education would harm her chances of getting a husband, they advised. "Where will you find a colored man who has studied Greek?" one friend asked her. Mollie ignored them and received her bachelor's degree in 1884.

Later, she studied French and German for two years in Europe, where several smitten young men, including a German baron, proposed marriage. As an old woman, Terrell would recall those lovestruck white youths as she tartly reflected on the widespread belief of whites that blacks were eager to marry them. "I am persuaded that the average Caucasian in this country believes that there is nothing which colored people desire so much as to marry into their group," she wrote. "It seems to me it is my duty to inform those who entertain this opinion that at least one colored woman voluntarily rejected such a proposition three times."

As one of the new generation of independent, well-educated black women activists who came of age at the turn of the century, Mollie Church plunged into the fights for civil rights and women's rights. Her father had wanted his headstrong daughter to be a "lady," like white women, and enjoy the luxury of staying at home and not working. But she considered that a "purposeless existence." Insisting on a life where "I could promote the welfare of my race," she went, instead, into teaching.

From childhood, she had advocated the right to vote for women, once saying she could not "recall a period in my life . . . that I did not believe in woman's suffrage with all my heart." As a freshman at Oberlin, she wrote an essay called "Resolved, There Should Be a Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution Granting Suffrage to Women." Though angered at white suffragists' lack of concern about black women, Terrell nonetheless worked closely with white leaders in the suffrage campaign. During World War I, she joined other suffragists in a months-long picket line in front of the White House. She was also active in efforts to improve living condi-

tions for blacks. When the National Association of Colored Women was formed in 1896 to combat racial injustice and to organize social services for the black community, Terrell was elected its first president. In 1909, she signed the Call for creation of the NAACP and attended its organizing conference. Later, she was elected vice president of the organization's Washington branch.

Terrell was in her mid-eighties when World War II ended, and some regarded her as a throwback to a bygone era. Virginia Durr recalled that "Mrs. Terrell looked old and dressed old." But Terrell rejected the very idea that she might actually *be* old. "I can dance as long and as well as I ever did," she wrote at the age of seventy-seven, "although I get very few chances to do so." If there were any doubts about her strength and endurance, she put them to rest when she charged back into the public spotlight, more radical than ever, to lead an antisegregation battle in the nation's capital.

During Reconstruction, ordinances had been enacted to prohibit discrimination against blacks by restaurants, theaters, and other public places in the District of Columbia. Early in the post-Reconstruction era, when American-style apartheid was imposed, the city's white fathers didn't bother repealing the antidiscrimination laws; they simply ignored them. Segregation by fiat soon became as much a part of life in Washington as segregation by law in any city in the Deep South. Then, in 1946, the eighty-three-year-old Terrell was named head of an interracial committee demanding that the laws be enforced. She and the committee became the guiding force behind an extraordinary several-year campaign of picketing, leafleting, and boycotts. During a December snowstorm, the stooped, white-haired old lady, in her fur coat, gloves, and pearls, marched outside a downtown five-and-dime, one hand holding a "Don't Buy at Kresge's" placard, while, with the other hand, she leaned heavily on a cane. In the sweltering humidity of July, she was outside Hecht's department store, directing the action and inspiring her fellow marchers, among them a seven-year-old boy named Carl Bernstein and his mother. (Bernstein would later team with Bob Woodward at *The Washington Post* to help expose the Watergate cover-up.) "When my feet hurt," said another demonstrator, "I wasn't going to let a woman fifty years older than I do what I couldn't do. I kept on picketing." Said Eleanor Holmes Norton, a native Washingtonian who became a prominent figure in her own right in the civil rights struggle: "When I was a youngster, I didn't understand why black people were not protesting, had not found a way to protest. And then came Mary Church Terrell."

On January 7, 1950, Terrell, accompanied by three companions, hobbled into Thompson's cafeteria near the White House, where Pauli Murray and the other Howard students had conducted their 1944 sit-in. Terrell got further than they did. She managed to place a bowl of soup on her tray before she and her friends were ordered to leave. That afternoon, their lawyers filed suit in a local court, alleging that Thompson's had broken the never-repealed Reconstruction laws. Three years later, the Supreme Court heard arguments in the Thompson's case, and on June 8, 1953, it handed down its decision: Racial segregation was against the law in Washington, D.C. "EAT ANYWHERE!" proclaimed a black Washington newspaper in a banner headline.

As immensely satisfying as the Supreme Court ruling was and as much as she delighted in the results of her long years of activism, Mary Church Terrell looked back on her life and thought wistfully about what might have been. At the age of seventy-seven, she had observed: "While I am grateful for the blessings which have been bestowed upon me and for the opportunities which have been offered, I cannot help wondering sometimes what I might have become and might have done if I had lived in a country which had not circumscribed and handicapped me on account of my race, but had allowed me to reach any height I was able to attain." Nothing that happened afterward, not even the victory in the Thompson's cafeteria case, changed her mind.

A teacher born during the Civil War, who lived to see the Supreme Court strike down "separate but equal" public education, might, however, have taken some satisfaction in the knowledge that her example, and that of many others like her, had helped to embolden a new generation of female activists. One such young woman, sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns, lived in the drowsy town of Farmville in rural Virginia. A decade before the mass civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s, she was already pondering how she and her friends could force changes in a school system that was as separate and as decidedly unequal as Farmville's.

Although she had spent much of her early life there, Farmville was a place where Barbara Johns never really felt she belonged. The seat of Prince Edward County, Farmville was a trading center for tobacco and lumber, a town that didn't seem to have changed much since Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant had separately stopped there in April 1865 on their way to end the Civil War at Appomattox Court House. In 1951, local blacks were barred from the hotel where the generals had rested, just as they were barred from Farmville's restaurants, its drugstore counters, and its

only movie theater, bowling alley, and swimming pool. And, of course, its all-white public schools. The school Barbara Johns attended, Moton High School, featured "temporary" buildings that were really just tar-paper shacks, and classrooms that were usually too stuffy and hot in the fall and spring and too cold in the winter. For years, the all-white school district had been promising the black community a new school, but somehow it was never built. The blacks, despite their resentment, did not dare complain too loudly.

Barbara Johns could not understand such docility. Pretty and bright, she had always been an outspoken child; family members said she took after her uncle Vernon, the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The family didn't mean that as much of a compliment, but Barbara, who idolized her uncle, took it as one anyway. Vernon Johns was a hot-tempered crusader for civil rights, who railed at his congregation and other blacks for their complacency in the face of racial and other social injustice. Not much loved by the affluent black members of his church, he was destined to have a powerful influence on his young successor at Dexter Avenue, Martin Luther King, Jr.

When Johns visited Farmville, Barbara loved to hear him talk. "He was beyond the intellectual scope of everyone around the county," she said. "I remember that white men would . . . listen to him speak and shake their heads, not understanding his language." As much as she hero-worshiped her uncle, however, she didn't shy away from disagreeing with him. "We'd always be on opposite sides in an argument. I'm afraid we were both very antagonistic."

At Moton High School, Barbara Johns participated in the drama club, the chorus, and the student council. Those activities made it possible for her to travel to other black high schools around the state. Many, she couldn't help noticing, were in better shape than Moton. What bothered Johns and her fellow students most about their school were the tar-paper shacks, with their leaky roofs and pathetic woodstoves. An occasional motorist, driving by the school, would stop to ask the students what the shacks were. One man, told they were part of the school, responded: "School? Looks like a poultry farm!"

In the fall of 1950, Johns decided to take action on her own. She brought five other student leaders together for a clandestine meeting in the bleachers of the school's athletic field. Farmville's black adults, she said, had made no headway in getting a new school. "Then," recalled one of the other students at the meeting, "she said our parents ask us to follow them but in some instances—and I remember her saying this very

vividly—a little child shall lead them. She said we could make a move that would broadcast Prince Edward County all over the world.”

For six months, the students planned their strategy. They put it into effect on April 23, 1951. Late that morning, Moton's principal, Boyd Jones, received a phone call from one of the conspirators, advising him that two of his students were about to be arrested by police at the Greyhound bus station. Jones left school in a hurry, never suspecting that the summons was a ploy to get him safely away so that a note with Jones's forged signature could be sent to each classroom, announcing an immediate school assembly. After the teachers and the school's 450 students gathered in the auditorium, the curtains on the stage parted and revealed Barbara Johns, not Boyd Jones, standing at the podium. She declared that the meeting was for students only and asked the teachers to leave. When some teachers protested, Johns removed one of her shoes and smacked it on a bench. "I want you out of here!" she shouted. At that, all the teachers left, some with student escorts. Then Johns got down to business. The time had come, she said, for dramatic action. Joined by the other student organizers, she called for a student strike and produced hand-lettered picket signs proclaiming "We Want a New School or None at All" and "Down with the Tar-Paper Shacks." The students cheered and marched out of the auditorium, with Barbara Johns in the vanguard.

The strike leaders sent a letter to the NAACP in Richmond that same afternoon. "We hate to impose as we are doing," the letter began, "but under the circumstances that we are facing, we have to ask for your help." Three days later, two top civil rights lawyers were on their way to Farmville. By this time, the NAACP had already decided to challenge "separate but equal" in favor of total desegregation. Although there may have been, as Richard Kluger has written, "no less promising place in all Virginia to wage the fight for equal schools," the NAACP lawyers were willing to try. In a shabby basement meeting room of a local church, they told the students and some parents that the NAACP would help them *only* if they were prepared to go for broke—desegregation or nothing—and then only if the students could demonstrate that they had the support of the adults in the black community. The strikers were stunned but enthusiastic. "It seemed like reaching for the moon," said Barbara Johns.

The toughest part would be getting the adults to go along. When Farmville's blacks held a mass meeting the following week, there was increasing pressure on the students to end the strike and return to school. Moton High's principal had written a letter to every parent, warning of repercussions for their children if the strike continued. At the meeting, a for-

mer principal, J. B. Pervall, stood up to denounce the very idea of an NAACP lawsuit. At that, Barbara Johns, who earlier had delivered a pro-strike speech, claimed the microphone again. Looking Pervall straight in the eye but speaking to the crowd, she said: "Don't let Mr. Charlie, Mr. Tommy, or Mr. Pervall stop you from backing us. We are depending on you." And that did it. The audience roared its approval—and its opposition to "separate but equal." A short time later, only a month after Johns had summoned her schoolmates to battle, the NAACP lawyers filed suit on their behalf in federal court. Joined with four other complaints, the suit became part of perhaps the most significant Supreme Court decision of the twentieth century—*Brown v. Board of Education*. And a sixteen-year-old girl had led them.

Her family, however, had helped make her what she was. There was her uncle Vernon, of course. But there was also her maternal grandmother, Mary Croner. As a girl, and later as a young woman, Croner used to seclude herself in the woods near her home and deliver passionate, unheard speeches about the degradation to which she and other blacks were subjected. "I would speak out and pretend the trees was listening," she said. When she married and had children, "I gave the speaking up, it left my mind," partly because her family did not share her passion. But then came Barbara. When Barbara spoke up at the mass meeting, "I got real frightened," her grandmother said. "She had a microphone and I thought, My goodness, she don't know what to say . . . [But] the people in the audience were nodding and saying 'That's good.' . . . It came to me that it was my grandchild who was carrying on the speaking . . . I felt that God had instilled in her what I was trying to do."

To be sure, there were costs for Johns and her family. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of Barbara's house. Terrified that worse might happen, her parents shipped her off to stay with her uncle Vernon in Montgomery. She never returned to Farmville to live. But the difficulties were outweighed by the satisfaction of knowing that she and the others in the Farmville suit had helped change the face of a nation.

For months before *Brown v. Board of Education* was finally handed down, the South—and much of the rest of America—awaited the Supreme Court decision with feverish anticipation. From Montgomery, Virginia Durr wrote a friend: "This schools thing is like dynamite." Indeed, it threatened to destroy the racial framework—the rigid separation of races—on which Southern society was based. The explosion occurred at 1:20 P.M. on May 17, 1954, when Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the decision. By a

unanimous vote, he said, the Supreme Court had found racial segregation of public schools to be unconstitutional. "Separate but equal" in education was a legal dead letter.

Amid the jubilation and despair that followed, few paid attention to the decision's silence on the question of enforcement. As one journalist wrote: "It was the first time that the Court had vindicated a constitutional right and then deferred its exercise for a more convenient time." Immediately after the decision, several Southern cities and states announced they would comply. But when it became clear that the Supreme Court was not about to implement the ruling anytime soon, Southern white supremacists swung into action. They exploited long-festered grievances and fears to whip up a paroxysm of rage and racial hatred throughout the region. Even so, the Supreme Court, a full year after *Brown*, continued to dither on compliance. It vaguely decreed that desegregation should be implemented "with all deliberate speed" but failed to set a deadline.

Southern demagogues took full advantage of the time they had been given. They were stirring a potent brew that had been simmering since the Civil War—a mixture of fury at the North and the federal government, racial antagonisms, sexual fears and anxieties, and a nostalgic yearning for the phantom glories of the lost Old South. In the mid-1950s, statues of Confederate soldiers still stood guard in virtually every Southern town square (as statues of Union soldiers still guarded countless Northern cities). The South's pulverizing defeat in the Civil War had been transmuted into a heroic crusade of gray-uniformed chevaliers—a romantic and doomed crusade that captured Southern hearts. As immediate as the war was for most white Southerners, so, too, were the Reconstruction-era humiliations and affronts that had been heaped on a prostrate South. And nothing had been more degrading, in the view of many whites, than being ordered to treat ex-slaves as equals. Now, the despised Yankee government, through its despised court, was again dictating to them, attacking their most hallowed traditions. Unless the South resisted, its whole way of life would be swept away, some politicians thundered. It was time to mount the ramparts again, under the banner of "states' rights."

Sex, as usual, underlay much of the fear. According to segregationists, the mixing of blacks and whites in the classroom would inevitably lead to the bedroom, with the worst possible result: "mongrelization" of the races. In his book, *Black Monday*, a masterpiece of racist demagoguery about the *Brown* decision, Judge Tom Brady, a Yale-educated white supremacist who later would be appointed to the Mississippi Supreme Court, put the issue in overheated terms that every white Southerner could understand. First,

you have the "negroid man," whom Brady compared to "the modern lizard." Then you have "the loveliest and the purest of God's creatures, the nearest thing to an angelic being that treads this terrestrial ball . . . a well-bred, cultured Southern white woman or her blue-eyed, golden-haired little girl." In language resembling that of florid antebellum Southern novels, Brady spelled it out: At all costs, the animal must be kept far away from the angel.

In Philadelphia, Mississippi, a young white woman who expressed approval of *Brown* learned to her shock that even the mildest dissent from the point of view espoused by Brady and other segregationists would not be tolerated. "After commenting that Jim Crow laws had made a mockery of the Constitution and being met by surprisingly unfriendly responses, I ceased to express my opinion," Florence Mars later wrote. "Other Mississippians learned the same lesson. It was the issue of 'mongrelization,' the fear of Negro men desecrating white women, that more than anything stirred the emotions of the white population."

Mars, who ten years later would help the FBI track down the killers of three civil rights workers, had discovered how lonely a white Southern liberal could be. For while white supremacists whipped up anti-integration fury in the South, most so-called liberal and moderate leaders lay low. For the most part, they declined to call forthrightly for compliance with the Supreme Court decision or to provide any other alternative to defiance. As historian C. Vann Woodward put it: "In this atmosphere . . . words began to change their meanings so that the moderate became a man who dared to open his mouth, and an extremist someone who favored eventual compliance with the law, and compliance was something which was equated with treason." Carl Rowan, a black *Minneapolis Tribune* reporter who traveled throughout the restive South a year after *Brown*, offered his own bitter definition: "Apparently a 'moderate' is any white southerner who can prove that he hasn't lynched any crippled old Negro grandmothers during prayer-meeting hour."

The South's two most famous liberals—Lillian Smith's old nemeses, Hodding Carter and Ralph McGill—did not think *Brown* should be resisted, but they didn't like it and weren't in favor of immediate compliance by the South. Both counseled the federal government and the North to let the South work out on its own a gradual path to school desegregation. Smith, one of a handful of influential white Southern liberals who openly championed *Brown*, was incensed at what she considered Carter's and McGill's insidious influence in persuading many in the North to adopt their point of view. She wrote in a letter to a friend: "There is an increas-

ing group of appeasers [in the North] who have been won over by our Hodding Carters and Ralph McGills and who now say "The South must be let alone; they must take their own time about this." In the avalanche of news coverage following *Brown*, Carter and McGill, and their views, gained nationwide fame. In January 1955 *Time* wrote that "even liberal Editor Hodding Carter . . . who opposes segregation on 'moral grounds,' feels that the Supreme Court decision has hurt the gradual progress of desegregation in the South by forcing both segregationists and desegregationists to 'extremes.'" The two prominent editors insisted that putting the screws to the South would result only in an upsurge of racial hatred and violence. They did not seem to consider that a vicious campaign of racial hatred was already raging, in the *absence* of pressure on the South.

In contrast, Lillian Smith, after *Brown*, wrote in delight to Pauli Murray that the decision was "a Magna Carta for the world's children." While Smith felt that Southern racism "has always been too involved, too tangled up with sin and sex and God and money to be unravelled by a Supreme Court decision," she strongly believed that desegregation of public schools was an essential first step for overall integration. Her book *Now Is the Time*, written in 1955, was aimed at persuading white Southerners not only to comply with *Brown* but to end other forms of discrimination and segregation as well.

In the poisonous post-*Brown* climate, Smith found herself the target of a heightened intimidation campaign, including hate mail and threats. On July 4, 1954, she invited a group of forty-five children, black and white, to Old Screamer Mountain for hot dogs and ice cream. She found out later, she wrote a friend, that "the colored folks were warned never to do that again" and that the whites "were warned that if they did, certain jobs would never be available to them." A little more than a year later, a fire set by arsonists roared through her house, destroying her bedroom and study, reducing to ash a twenty-year accumulation of letters, manuscripts, books, and notes, "everything on my writing career, everything about *Strange Fruit* . . . *Killers of the Dream* and so on," she sadly wrote Pauli Murray. "It was about as awful . . . as anything could be."

A week after Lillian Smith held her interracial picnic on Old Screamer, fourteen civic and business leaders from Indianola, Mississippi, met in their small, sleepy town, just a few miles from the sprawling Sunflower County plantation of Senator James O. Eastland. In their outrage at the *Brown* decision, these respectable, middle-class men voted to form an organization aimed at thwarting any attempt to end segregation. The White

Citizens Council, its founders insisted, would not be like the redneck Ku Klux Klan, with its absurd Halloween-like costumes. The council would use more subtle means to terrorize. Anyone promoting integration—or for that matter, improved conditions of any kind for blacks—would find himself facing the severest of economic penalties. Mortgages would be called in, credit refused, jobs lost, insurance policies canceled. Despite its attempts to distance itself from the men in bedsheets and hoods, the White Citizens Council became widely known as the “uptown Ku Klux Klan.” Within months after the council’s founding, local chapters, claiming as members bankers, judges, lawyers, doctors, congressmen, and governors, had spread, first through Mississippi and then through the rest of the Deep South, wreaking economic, psychological, and even physical violence wherever they sprang up.

It was no accident that the council was founded next door to the plantation of the “Massa of Sunflower County.” James Eastland was the organization’s godfather. He called for its creation, he encouraged its growth, he urged its members on. More than that, he was, and would continue to be, the field marshal of racist forces in the South, fighting just as hard against young civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964 as he did against the *Brown* decision in 1954. As chairman of a Senate investigations subcommittee, he accused leading civil rights activists of being Communists; as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he bottled up one federal civil rights bill after another. Eastland, wrote one historian, was “the most influential individual shaping the direction of the white supremacy movement . . .”

Within days of the *Brown* decision, Eastland, who was up for reelection in 1954, was racing across the South, giving speeches that played skillfully on white Southerners’ deepest fears and resentments. Eastland all but ordered his audiences to disobey the federal government’s mandate. “Southern people will not be violating the Constitution or the law when they defy this monstrous decision,” he thundered. “They will be defying those who would destroy our system of government. You are not required to obey any court which passes out such a ruling. In fact, you are obligated to defy it.” Of Eastland’s crusade and his outpouring of rhetorical bile, Carl Rowan noted: “You follow the words of Mississippi’s senior senator and you see that the South did not revolt, it was manipulated.”

Eastland and others like him, however, were on the losing end of a moral argument. Their first, instinctive response was defiance. Soon they would learn that defiance is a two-edged sword.