

Integration of the University of Mississippi Professional Schools

background article

In the 1920s and 30s, the small South Mississippi town of Poplarville and the surrounding Pearl River County was known as “Bilbo Country” because it was the home area of the influential—and virulently racist—politician Theodore Bilbo. Bilbo advocated for segregation in the extreme and was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. From this small town that claimed Bilbo warmly, from families rooted in Mississippi, came two boys who would go on to defy the expectations of the state’s white society.

One of the boys, Blair Batson, was from a locally powerful sawmill family that thrived during the height of the area’s lumber industry. He and his brother, John, remember their parents as people who were willing to resist local conventions, including publicly spurning Bilbo and his politics, and who were open and giving to those very different from themselves. A lengthy bout with typhoid fever as an adolescent and a love of science encouraged Blair to pursue a degree in medicine.

The other family’s livelihood was based in practicing law, and young Joshua Morse followed in his father’s footsteps to become an attorney. Josh Morse and John Batson were peers, while Blair was a few years older. Their mothers became close friends, sharing in bridge games and book club, and it’s likely the two women found a bond in their willingness to think beyond the bounds prescribed by their provincial community.

The boys grew up to become leaders in two of the state’s most influential institutions: Dr. Blair Batson as the head of Pediatrics at the University Medical Center, and Dean Joshua Morse as the leader of the University of Mississippi School of Law. These two professional schools, both part of the University of Mississippi (“Ole Miss”) system, turned out many of the state’s most influential players, the doctors and lawyers who helped form the backbone of Mississippi’s power structure. Graduates of the School of Law, in particular, often went on to serve in political office, including the state legislature and the Office of Governor, shaping state politics and the very society itself.

Before the tenures of Dr. Batson and Dean Morse, both schools had been segregated, excluding African Americans like most other state institutions. Neither men count themselves as activists; both say they were simply doing the right thing by opening doors for black Mississippians to participate in the UM professional schools. Although in today’s climate their actions might seem nothing out of the ordinary, in the Mississippi of the 1960s they were seen as radical, threatening the very structure of the state’s white society. As former Mississippi governor William F. Winter said,

...the forces of massive resistance, those who were threatened by any change whatever in the racial status quo, dominated the state of Mississippi in our thinking, in our relationships, and certainly in our politics. It was almost impossible to express even the most...subtle reference to desegregation...as if that would unleash all the forces that would destroy our Southern way of life.

The US South, and in particular Mississippi, was in the grip of homegrown terrorism. Although such tactics had been common practice throughout the Jim Crow era, with both the implicit and direct support of many white state and community leaders, such incidents became more public, more bold, and more in the eye of the nation starting in the mid-1950s. In 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that so-called “separate but equal” segregated school systems, designed to keep black children and white children apart, were inherently discriminatory. The backlash by white segregationists revealed their determination to resist such efforts to change their way of life. The year following the *Brown* ruling, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago who was visiting family near Money, Mississippi, was kidnapped and brutally murdered by two men who were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury after a deliberation of just over an hour. Within three months of their acquittal the men confessed to the murder. The incident thrust Mississippi’s racial injustices into the spotlight, and the turmoil that followed over the next decade kept it there.

In 1961, volunteer “Freedom Riders” from throughout the state and the US as a whole integrated the interstate transportation system by refusing to adhere to segregation laws in bus terminals, train stations, and airports throughout the South. They did so despite violent attacks, arrest, and incarceration in Mississippi’s Parchman state penitentiary. In 1962, James Meredith became the first black student to enroll at “Ole Miss,” in the midst of riots that left two people dead, the university campus in shambles, and the town of Oxford in a state of literal occupation by federal troops. In 1963, the state’s most well-known civil rights activist, Medgar Evers, was assassinated, shot in the driveway of his home, again with no justice forthcoming in the case. In 1964, the state saw unprecedented levels of violence: during what was known as Freedom Summer three civil rights workers were murdered in Neshoba County, two young black men were killed and thrown in the Mississippi River near Natchez, volunteers and registrants participating in voter registration drives in the Delta faced violence and economic intimidation, and McComb was the site of a series of bombings of black-owned homes, businesses, and churches.

It was with this backdrop that Dean Morse and Dr. Batson did what few white Mississippians had done—they actively fostered the integration of state institutions. In 1965, Dr. Batson invited Dr. Aaron Shirley to become a resident in the Department of Pediatrics at University Medical Center. Dr. Shirley, a doctor in general practice in Vicksburg who was known for his civil rights activism, became the first black doctor at UMC. Dean Morse not only recruited Reuben Anderson and William Miller as the first black law students, he hired a cadre of new law professors from Yale Law School in order to introduce new perspectives into a previously insular and inward-looking Mississippi law community. Dean Morse said of his goals,

...one of the things we were trying to do, was...by getting people from all sorts of different backgrounds, to let the students know there were places to look other than across the street or at the courthouse.

While the two white men on some level risked their professional and perhaps social lives, the men they recruited knew the risks were potentially much greater for themselves. Dr.

Shirley, known in his hometown for his efforts at helping black citizens register to vote, was a particular target. He recounted that he and his family frequently were threatened,

By phone calls, upon phone calls, and strange encounters on the highway, near misses on the highway, big trucks. And I had a friend who was a white guy, who had a liquor store, and he would tip me off sometimes: 'I heard some loose talk, so be careful tonight.' Those kinds of things.

For Reuben Anderson, the backlash took the form more of social isolation. For him and undergraduate black students, the Oxford campus

...was not a pleasant place... there was quite a bit of harassment by students, of...all of the African American students...It was not a place that I enjoyed, but it was a place I decided to go, and I wanted to be a lawyer, and my options were pretty limited at that time.

Anderson, who already had one year of law school behind him, became the first black graduate of the UM School of Law in 1967 and in 1985 became the first African American judge on the Mississippi Supreme Court.

Both Dr. Shirley and Judge Anderson credit the changes in the medical school and the law school, and therefore the state itself, to the leadership of Dr. Batson and Dean Morse. Dr. Shirley said,

If it had not been for Dr. Batson...it never would've happened...I have asked him if he ever had any, any repercussions, and he said no. And he said it wouldn't have mattered, it wouldn't have made any difference, he was going to do it....So that took some courage.

Judge Anderson asserts much the same about Dean Morse's leadership in the law school.

I would doubt whether or not the law school would've been an integrated institution but for him. I know that I wouldn't have been there except that he encouraged me and welcomed me to the university....The other thing I think is more significant was that he brought in a diverse faculty, brought in new thoughts and new ideas, and I think Mississippi needed it at that time.

Today, Dr. Batson, Dr. Shirley, and Judge Anderson live in Jackson, Mississippi, and all have been widely recognized as exemplary leaders in the state. Dean Morse retired in Tallahassee, Florida, where he moved to become dean of the law school at Florida State University when he left Mississippi. In 2008, the University of Mississippi School of Law recognized him for his service and the deep impact he left there.

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