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Book Review of Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston

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WILLIAM HENRY KELLAR. *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston*. (The Centennial Series of the Association of Former Students, Texas A&M University, number 80.) College Station: Texas A&M University Press. 1999. Pp. xv, 226. \$38.95.

In recent years, historians have published a significant number of books examining the process of school desegregation in local communities. Texas cities, however, have received less attention than have cities in many other southern states. William Henry Kellar's book helps to fill this gap by providing us with our best understanding to date of school desegregation in Houston, home to the country's largest de jure segregated school system in the 1950s.

Texans reacted to the Supreme Court's desegregation mandate in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) with less defiance than did much of the South, indicative of Texas's border-state status. In the aftermath of Supreme Court's May 1955 implementation decision in the *Brown* case, school officials in a number of Texas cities, such as San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Galveston, Waco, and Austin, announced plans to desegregate their schools. Although a few of these districts backed off early decisions to end school segregation, several Texas school districts, particularly in the state's mostly white western counties, desegregated their schools in the fall of 1955, becoming some of the first southern school districts to do so. Several months later, only five of Texas's twenty-two members of the House of Representatives signed the Southern Manifesto denouncing the *Brown* ruling. Although Governor Alan Shivers did exploit the desegregation issue for his own political advantage, his resistance efforts were less successful than those of many other southern governors.

In Houston, many residents strongly opposed racial mixing, but the city was less united in its opposition to school desegregation than many other southern cities. In 1957, a mere two weeks after federal district court judge Ben Connally ruled that the Houston schools were unconstitutionally segregated, Houston voters elected the more racially liberal of two mayoral candidates with over sixty-three percent of the vote. One year later, at the height of the city's struggle with the school desegregation issue, Houston voters elected their first African-American school board member, Hattie Mae White, a forceful proponent of school desegregation, and re-elected the racially liberal Walter Kemmerer, former president of the University of Houston, even though African Americans comprised less than twenty-five percent of the city's population.

When Houston began its decidedly token school integration in the fall of 1960, there was virtually no violence, in sharp contrast to the simultaneous and far more tumultuous desegregation of the New Orleans schools. As Kellar notes, "Houston's business and political leaders acquiesced in limited school desegregation, because the alternative—a city disrupted by

racial violence—seemed more distasteful. Houstonians had learned the lessons of Little Rock and desegregated the country's largest segregated school peacefully" (p. 138). Kellar suggests that the experience of Little Rock influenced Judge Connally in his handling of the Houston desegregation litigation. Although Connally found the city's schools unconstitutionally segregated in 1957, shortly after the onset of the Little Rock crisis, he waited three years, until 1960, before ordering the school board to implement a very modest, one-grade-per-year desegregation plan.

Kellar focuses his attention on the 1954–1960 time period. Although Kellar does consider the post-1960 era in an epilogue, this time period, in many ways the most interesting phase of the city's desegregation history, invites further exploration. In the fall of 1970, the Houston schools opened under a much more extensive court-ordered desegregation plan. This desegregation plan triggered extensive white flight from the city school district, as well as protests from black and Hispanic parents who argued that the burden of desegregation fell primarily on their children. At the same time, residents of Houston's largely Anglo westside neighborhoods initiated efforts to secede from the Houston school district. One leader of this separatist effort, former school board president Robert Eckels, announced that he would "go to jail before seeing white children bused to predominantly black schools" (p. 159). This secession movement was ultimately thwarted by the courts, but white flight from the Houston school district proved dramatic. Whereas non-Hispanic whites comprised fifty percent of the school district population in 1970, by 1980 that figure was twenty-five percent, and by 1995, twelve percent. Like so many large urban school districts, white flight in Houston led to an overwhelmingly non-white school district. Closer scholarly examination of this aspect of urban school desegregation across the nation will be welcomed.

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