

The Desegregation of Arlington Lunch Counters, June 1960

In February 1960, student protests at a segregated lunch counter at an F.W. Woolworth department store in Greensboro, North Carolina, sparked a series of similar sit-ins throughout the South. In response, the Governor of Virginia, Lindsay Almond passed three bills through the Virginia Assembly that criminalized trespassing in an attempt to prevent similar picketing in the state. Inspired by the protests in Greensboro, several Howard University students had founded an integrated group of activists against segregation and racism under the name of the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG.) In June 1960 this group organized demonstrations over various days at seven lunch counters across Arlington.

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Thursday

Around 12 PM demonstrators begin peaceful protests first at the **People's Drug Store at 4709 Lee Highway** in Cherrydale and later at the **Buckingham Drug Fair at 301 North Glebe Road**. The lunch counters are quickly closed and the seats removed from seat posts. Many protestors use books as seats to continue sitting at the counters. Protestors are harassed by shoppers, junior high and high school students, and eventually Neo-Nazis led by George Rockwell, leader of the American Nazi Party, headquartered in Arlington. Police are called but no arrests are made although the protestors have been physically threatened, hurt, and provoked. Demonstrations end at 10 PM when the stores close. A drive-by shooting happens nearby about 30 minutes after the demonstrators leave the Buckingham Drug Fair together through a crowd of approximately 300 onlookers.

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Friday

Howard student and group leader Lawrence Henry is arrested for allegedly unrelated charges of driving without glasses or proper tags. Lunch counters are pre-emptively closed at three drug stores in Arlington today. Protestors arrive around noon at the People's Drug Store on Lee Highway, the **Drug Fair at 5401 Lee Highway**, the **Howard Johnson restaurant at 4700 Lee Highway**, and the **Drug Fair at 3815 Lee Highway** around noon. All lunch counters are closed and eventually crowds, largely high school students, gather to harass the demonstrators. At the Drug Fair at 3815 Lee Highway, George Rockwell and some uniformed Neo-Nazi followers try to provoke the protestors. Police directed the Neo-Nazis and the ensuing crowd of over 100 to leave, allowing the protestors to remain. Lawrence Henry and Dion Diamond are arrested at Howard Johnson. In the evening the demonstrators announce a temporary halt to the protests to allow for negotiations. The Secretary of People's Drug Store and the President of Drug Fair, whose businesses both serve integrated clientele in Washington, D.C., announce they are be willing to discuss mediation. Arlington County Board Chair Herbert Brown states that as a private business matter, the County leadership does not believe there is a reason for the County to mediate between parties.

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Monday

The Arlington County Board Chair announces that stores which cater to the public on a desegregated basis in other departments "might be expected to open their lunch counters to the public on the same desegregated basis" as "[t]he majority of Arlington citizens probably would accept it." However he reiterates that just as patrons have the right to work peaceably toward ending desegregation, store owners have the right to decide what they think is best for their businesses, and as such it is a private manner in which the County will not interfere.

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Saturday

At 11:10 AM 14 protestors sit down at the counter of the Colonial Room, the lunch establishment inside the **Lansburgh** department store in the Shirlington Business Center (now the Village at Shirlington). Although a demonstrator is accidentally served a cup of coffee, the counter is closed. The President of Lansburgh, Ralph Goldsmith, states that the closure occurred to take the time to ascertain whether they were violating any laws by integrating their diner. The demonstrators sit at the darkened counter for seven hours. Around 1:30 PM some of the protestors leave to walk down the street to demonstrate at the Shirlington **F.W. Woolworth** counter. Although the counter is closed immediately, the sitters remain until both stores close at 6 PM. The protestors state that they will not hold any additional sit-ins until the next week to give businesses time to reply to their request for negotiation.

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Wednesday

At 1 PM the F.W. Woolworth store in Shirlington is the first to announce that patrons will be served indiscriminately in their Virginia stores as in their Maryland and Washington, D.C., stores. Around 3:30 PM an integrated group of protestors walks into the Woolworth store and are served at the counter. Lansburgh, Kann's, and the People's Drug Store chain announce they will be desegregating their counters. At 5 PM protestors sit down at the Buckingham Drug Fair lunch counter to be served, but the counter is closed and the lights turned off. Although the Drug Fair chain has not yet desegregated Robert Gerber, the company board's chairman, calls to inform the protestors that the counters will be desegregated in due time so they should feel free to leave. However the protestors remain until the board chairman is convinced to make the announcement public and allow the waiting demonstrators to be served, which they are at 7 PM.

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Thursday

Twenty-one lunch counters open to black patrons. Both in Arlington and in Alexandria, Hecht's, McCrory's five and dime stores, G.C. Murphy's, and Waffle Shops make statements about opening their lunch counters, while Hot Shoppes begin to serve African American patrons without comment. Twelve of the demonstrators are served without incident at two People's Drug Store locations, the Hot Shoppes at the 14th St. Bridge, and the Arlington Towers Shopping Center Drug Fair.