

Historical Markers Recognizing two Oak Ridge Schools as the First to Desegregate

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 20, 2023)

As a commissioner of the Tennessee Historical Commission since 2017, I am pleased to have helped restore missing historical markers in Oak Ridge and to assist in the creation of a few new ones. Examples are the replacement of the Oak Ridge marker on the Oak Ridge Turnpike near the Checking Station just west of Westover Drive. Examples of new historical markers are the Oak Ridge Outdoor Swimming Pool, the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies, and the Oak Ridge Playhouse.

However, two of the historical markers that are new have a very significant meaning for a very special aspect of the history of Oak Ridge – the Scarboro 85 desegregation of two Oak Ridge Schools in 1955.

John Gunning had a key role in getting these historical markers designed, approved, funded, and installed. He selected the sites and is proud to see the historical markers designating the historic event of the very first desegregation of public schools in the Southeast.

I have worked with the Scarboro 85 Monument Committee building on the efforts John helped begin, along with the plaques in each school created by the 65th anniversary committee working to recognize these 85 individuals. Our combined efforts are to make visible reminders of this historic event which set an example of managing and overcoming great odds. We also want to bring suitable recognition to the Scarboro 85 as a breakthrough part of the Civil Rights Movement and get them included in the Civil Rights Movement Timeline and on the US Civil Rights Trail.

The next step in our initiative is to host a luncheon to launch the fundraising campaign for a beautiful new civil rights monument, honoring the courageous Scarboro-85 students. The monument is slated for center-city Oak Ridge in A. K. Bissell Park and will cost several million dollars.

The luncheon will be held on February 23, 2023, between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm, at the Doubletree Hotel, 215 South Illinois Avenue in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Tickets for the luncheon cost \$50, each. These can be purchased at Eventbrite Registration: www.eventbrite.com/e/scarboro-85-monument-kickoff-luncheon-tickets-514041310397

A limited number of tables are available for corporate sponsors at \$1,000, each.

This Historically Speaking column is intended to highlight the efforts of John Gunning. It will call attention to the two historical markers placed near the two Oak Ridge Schools that were the first in the Southeast to be desegregated and thus helped to set the stage for further such efforts to follow.

Tennessee Historical Markers recognizing the desegregation of Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School have been installed in front of Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Middle School. These schools desegregated on September 6, 1955 and were the first public schools in the Southeast to do so.

This was well known to the 85 Black students from Scarboro who set this landmark precedent. However, this has not been well known in the rest of the community or to the country. Martin McBride, Rose Weaver, and others have sponsored programs to better communicate this to the community. At approximately the same time that these recognition events were initiated, Tennessee Historical Markers identifying this desegregation were being planned for placement in front of Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Middle School.

The background for the creation of these historical markers is provided below.

Rotary International was founded in 1904 and thus had its 100th Anniversary in 2004. On this occasion The Rotary Club of Oak Ridge (RCOR) undertook a major project for Oak Ridge, and a committee, of which John Gunning was a member, developed plans for and implemented the Secret City

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Commemorative Walk in A. K. Bissell Park. This was a major undertaking with a budget of approximately \$300,000.

The RCOR was founded in 1945 and thus had its 75th Anniversary in 2020. RCOR wanted to celebrate this significant event and John was appointed Chair of RCOR 75th Anniversary Historical Committee. Reaching back to his earlier participation in the Secret City Commemorative Walk, John wanted to originate a worthwhile project for Oak Ridge, but significantly smaller in scale than the Secret City Commemorative Walk.

John was aware of the early desegregation of the two Oak Ridge schools, and during conversations at RCOR lunch meetings with Oak Ridge School Superintendent Bruce Borchers, John observed that the significance of the early desegregation of the two Oak Ridge Schools was underappreciated and not well known.

John thought that this should be addressed and, given his role as RCOR Chair of the 75th Anniversary Historical Committee, decided that an excellent project would be to make this desegregation more well-known. After some research, he discovered the Tennessee Historical Commission and the roadside historical markers that it assists in creating.

He located and communicated with Linda Wynn, on the Tennessee Historical Commission staff and completed the forms, including providing supporting material such as copies of original newspaper articles, marker locations, authorization to install on school property, and originated the text for inclusion on the markers. John had the text reviewed by Oak Ridge Historian D. Ray Smith.

The next issue was how to fund the reasonable amount of \$3,000 for these markers. Naomi Asher assisted in communicating with the Presidents of the three Rotary Clubs in Oak Ridge – Becky Dobson, Ruby Miller, and Jennifer Enderson, to gain support for the effort, and each club contributed \$1,000.

After Tennessee Historical Commission review and manufacture, the historical markers were delivered and installed by the Tennessee Department of Transportation on December 27, 2021.

One historical marker is on the Oak Ridge Turnpike front side of the Oak Ridge High School, on the left side of the driveway loop in front of the main entrance. The other is similarly on the left side of the driveway loop in front of the Robertsville Middle School.

Please take the time to see these historical and significant installations. Our thanks to John Gunning for the foresight to recognize the historical significance of the Scarboro 85 and to take the initiative to assure historical markers were strategically placed as reminders and as recognition for the brave young students who led the way to school desegregation in the Southeast on September 6, 1955!

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John Gunning, celebrated the placement of the historical markers while still in the Christmas spirit on December 27, 2021