

# **Fifth Ave. High School Racial Problems<sup>†</sup>**

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## **January 1939**

Eight students arrested after a fist fight erupted in front of the school. Police, who had tips that trouble was brewing, were waiting outside school after classes were dismissed. Inspector Harvey Scott of the Centre Avenue Police Station said police “knew that there had been friction between the Negro and White students for some time.”

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## **March 1942**

Race rioting at the school for three of four days. Trouble is supposed to have started when after a White student hall guard failed to let a Black youth leave the building for lunch without a pass. At one point, the Press reported; “Riot calls poured into police headquarters as the students, some with clubs and stones, milled in the Soho streets.”

No serious injuries were reported. Patrolman Henry Stackline testified that a fellow officer was knocked and a number of students “jumped” him.” About 500 people milled in the streets during the xxxx. Check with Carl Morris. There was someone with that name who was arrested and fined \$10 for participating in the disturbances.

Laurence S. Bell, at one time vice president of Union National Bank, a graduate. Edward Richards, at one time a vice president of the City Deposit Bank, a graduate. Check with Mabel G. Wilson. There is a person so named who was elected a director of the school’s alumni association in 1947.

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## **April 1942**

Following the March riots, a subcommittee of the school board, headed by James H. Gray, a former judge, met with a delegation of Hill District Social workers to discuss how racial problems could be averted. One of those involved in tide discussions was Rev. Harold Tolliver.

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<sup>†</sup> Transcribed from a typewritten report on file at the John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center. Transcription made on 12 and 13 March 2005. The grammar, spelling and punctuation as riddled with errors so I reworded this document to make it more readable. – R.A.C.

It was suggested that more Blacks be hired as teachers in schools with a large percentage of Black students. Dr. Gerald H. Whitney, associate superintendent of schools, told the Black delegation that there were only 20 Blacks on the eligible list form which teachers were hired in order of their standing. The highest Black on the list ranked fourth. The next highest ranked 48<sup>th</sup>, said Whitney.

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**March 19, 1942**

The press reported that Black and White students, during a special assembly all shook hands and agreed to end a week of racial disturbances at the school. Student leaders, meeting at the Soho community house with members of the rival groups, helped to cool the disturbances. Dr. Arthur B. Siviter, Fifth's principal called the assembly "one of the finest exhibitions of school and community spirit I have ever witnessed."

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**January 20, 1943**

Hitchcock Estate, next to Fifth Avenue, was purchased for \$5,000 and was used to build a playground.

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**March 21, 1958**

Byrd R. Brown, a young attorney, speaks out against a plan to transfer 360 students from Fifth Avenue to Schenley, contending the move would make Schenley, which at the time had a large percentage of White students, a "predominately Negro school."

The school board planned to change Fifth from a junior and senior high school to an elementary and junior high school. The board said this would save an estimated one million dollars in the cost of building a new Forbes and Soho elementary school. Fifth Avenue, under the plan, was to become known as the general Forbes School. This did not occur as planned.

Brown, instead urged, the board to shift students from Alderdice which was overcrowded, to Schenley, which was undercrowded. Judge Albert Fiok is a member of the schools 1932 class.

Also, some of Fifth's students were to be reassigned to South High School under the 1958 plan.

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### June, 1958

The school board decided not to close Fifth Avenue, due chiefly to neighborhood pressures. Instead, the board decided to upgrade Forbes School and close the old Soho school, transferring those students to Forbes and Miller school. Talk to Mrs. Maxine Aarons about it, she was on the board at the time.

With respect to the White kids going to South—in May 1958, the board decided that those living south of Fifth Avenue would go to South High and those living north of Fifth Avenue would go to Schenley. Maybe Mrs. Aarons could be helpful.

Fifth Avenue always served community and city needs, functioning during the early sixties as a the home of special classes for immigrants who wished to learn English and during the forties and fifties for a wide variety of English adult education classes during the years of the First and Second World War.

Check to see if the Fifth Avenue High School Scholarship Association is still in existence. Bill Fisher might be of some help, in this, and certainly in other areas—also Mrs. Susan Gurrentz, who used to live at 3413 Ridgewood Drive, Penn Hills. She was instrumental in getting the thing setup. She would also have lists of Fifth Avenue alumni.

Check and see if Debbie Korn, who was a student at Sewickley Academy in 1970, during that year the Academy and Fifth Avenue had an exchange program going.

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### The Sixties

The sixties paralleling the nation's problems, was a period of tumult at Fifth Avenue. There were frequent fights between Fifth student and students from other schools at athletic games.

After one particularly bitter exchange between students from Fifth and Carrick in which twelve students were injured and six arrested, and in which the infamous TPF was called in to quell a situation at South High Stadium during a football game, earlier that year.

After a doubleheader basketball game at the Civic Arena including one between Fifth and Schenley in which 20 people received minor injuries in post-game disturbances, the board cancelled all night basketball games involving city schools.

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**May, 1965**

A group from the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality picketed Fifth, claiming that “with good administration, Fifth can be best but negative treatment makes negative students.” They also complained that Fifth Avenue was plagued with unsanitary conditions and was unsafe.

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**December, 1968**

A small fire in a school shop was blamed on arson.

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**February 29, 1968**

Forty to fifty students from fifth picketed the Board of Education, including several who shattered a glass panel in a door at the Board. They were complaining about the alleged lack of heat in their classrooms, demanding to see Dr. Sidney Marland, then the superintendent and “none of his henchmen.”

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**March 19, 1969**

Gangs of stone throwing youths ran rampant in Oakland and the Hill District after Fifth Avenue’s basketball team lost a title game to Farrell at the Pitt Field House. Twenty-three were arrested and thirteen including ten policemen were treated at hospitals for minor injuries.

It was also a period of much attention being paid to Fifth by private firms, such as Bell Telephone which sent some of its personnel in for a tutoring session for those failing math. Also, Mrs. Helen Faison, now a deputy school superintendent, became the first Black—and Black woman—named a principle of a high school.

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**1968**

There were many instances of referees being assaulted during games at Fifth’s gym.

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**1972**

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, National President of Operation Push, led a local delegation of pickets which were successful in having Leroy Irvis and Milton Shapp close a liquor store near the store. [There were] numerous reports that adults were buying booze from the store for kids who showed up for classes drunk.