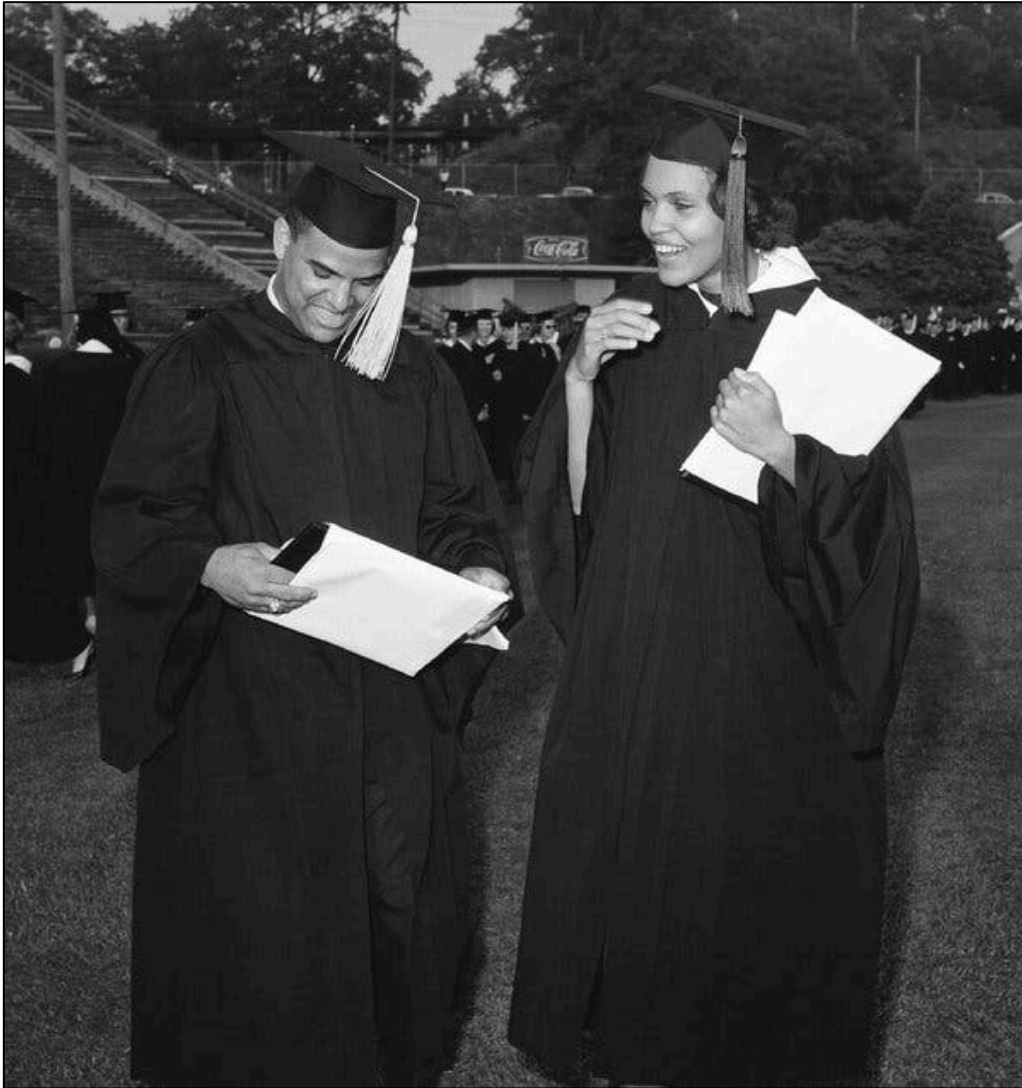


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Opinion

I Desegregated the University of Georgia. History Is Still in the Making.

The duty to remember our country's history belongs to all Americans.



Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Hamilton Holmes graduated at the University of Georgia in 1963.

By Charlayne Hunter-Gault

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Sixty years ago, I walked onto the campus of the University of Georgia along with my high school classmate Hamilton Holmes.

Ordinarily this would have been a routine exercise, as it had been for students since the institution was established in 1785. Except in all that time, not one Black person had ever been allowed to attend the University of Georgia.

Hamilton and I wanted to change that, though not because we wanted to make history. We applied to UGA with the same kind of dreams and ambitions as every student there. Hamp, as he was widely known, wanted to be a doctor. I had wanted to be a journalist since I first read the comic strip “Brenda Starr, Reporter” when I was around 5.

We were approached by an activist group of Black men in Atlanta known as the Atlanta Committee for Cooperative Action (ACCA) who wanted to put *Brown v. Board of Education* to the test. It had been five years since that 1954 Supreme Court decision; they believed it was time for action.

So they proposed that we apply to a local college in town. But to their surprise, we suggested an alternative: the University of Georgia. While it was some 70 or so miles from Atlanta, a journey riddled with K.K.K.-inhabited towns along the way, we were not deterred.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Though, really, the rest was only the beginning. History is often defined as what happened in the past, and, as my journalism professor said on the first day of class, “We learn from history that we do not learn from history.”

But this does not mean we should allow ourselves to forget. Sixty years after Hamilton and I desegregated the University of Georgia, I hope we can all remember and examine our country’s history in its difficult entirety — at a time when the kind of division I experienced walking onto that campus on Jan. 9, 1961, has reared its ugly head all over this country.

In my five decades as a journalist bearing witness to the cyclical nature of our country’s history of racism and division, I’ve come to believe that my professor’s sentiment was his way of challenging us to not only learn from our history, but also to use our craft as journalists to help the public know our past, because the duty to remember does not belong to journalists alone. It’s only through this knowledge that we’re all able to make informed decisions about our lives — decisions that, in turn, affect our neighbors near and far.

Indeed, knowing our history inspired Hamilton and me to make our own: We had attended a high school named for Henry McNeal Turner, a pioneering minister and politician who was elected to the Georgia legislature during Reconstruction, a brief time in the 1800s when newly freed slaves were granted full citizenship and could vote for the very first time. We were reminded of that history every day as we walked through the school doors.

A few months before we enrolled in college, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges exercised her right to enroll in the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Her walk, accompanied by federal marshals, was immortalized in the Norman Rockwell painting “The Problem We All Live With.” (The same painting formed a shadow in Bria Goeller’s photo illustration of Kamala Harris after Ms. Harris became the first Black woman nominated by a major party for vice president of the United States.)

Hamilton and I were also empowered by the history of our people and the struggles they confronted and overcame, dating to their first steps off the slave ships and onto these shores in 1526. It took a village to teach us this legacy — the teachers in our segregated schools and churches; our neighbors and families.

And it took yet another village to help us play our own part in this history. Our lawyers Constance Baker Motley, Donald L. Hollowell and Horace Ward were advocates for us, along with the newly minted young lawyer Vernon Jordan. Mr. Jordan helped lead us through the crowd of students yelling ugly racial epithets as we walked on campus to register for classes. And earlier, that village comprised the men of ACCA who encouraged us to apply to college in the first place.

It's because of this village that a Republican judge, William A. Bootle, gave his historic ruling ordering UGA to accept us. It's also because of this village that, 40 years after we set foot on campus, former Gov. S. Ernest Vandiver of Georgia apologized in person at the university for having vowed, "No, not one" — not one person the color of Hamilton and me would ever be allowed to enter its hallowed halls.

With this history in my head and heart, my path forward includes working to ensure that the doors of my alma mater are open even wider to Black students who, along with their classmates of all colors, will embrace this stated UGA goal: "to foster the understanding of and respect for cultural differences necessary for an enlightened and educated citizenry."

We have many challenges ahead. There are times when, watching the news, I am brought to tears, not least when I see some of those I still think of as my fellow citizens, nevertheless exhibit awful behavior toward others who don't look like them — the latest in the despicable behavior at the Capitol.

It is in these moments that I wonder: Why have they not learned from history? Is it because not all of our history is being taught in many schools around the country? And why is there no embrace of respecting differences of opinion?

As we make sense of these questions, history will continue to echo itself. As Georgia elected its first Black senator, Raphael Warnock, I thought back to Henry McNeal Turner, my high school's namesake, and other Black officials freely elected to office during the brief period of Reconstruction over 150 years ago.

And so as I reflect on the 60th anniversary of my university's desegregation — as a Black person and a woman, as a wife and mother, as a sister, aunt and citizen — remaining true to my calling as a journalist, I leave you with the question: What can we all do to keep working toward a more perfect union? Go Dogs!

Charlayne Hunter-Gault is an award-winning journalist and the author of the forthcoming "My People," a collection of 50 years of her reporting.