

WILLIAM S. HOLLAND:

A MIGHTY LION AT YATES HIGH SCHOOL

By Debbie Z. Harwell



Yates High School, shown circa 1930s, was opened as the city's second black high school in 1926.

Photo courtesy of Story Sloane Gallery, Houston, Texas.

In 1958, Jack Yates High School moved from its original location at 2610 Elgin Street in the Third Ward to its current location at 3703 Sampson, just a short distance away. It should have been an improvement—modern building, larger facility—but instead it marked a reversal from the school's position as a central, guiding force for the community.



William Holland excelled at sports and was nicknamed "Babe" for his talent on the ball field.

Photo from Wabash Valley Profiles.

Jack Yates High School was named for civic leader and Baptist minister, Reverend John Henry "Jack" Yates. It opened in 1926 as the city's second "colored" high school to relieve overcrowding that resulted from the growth of the city's African American population, which tripled between 1924 and 1929. James D. Ryan served as the school's first principal until 1941, when William S. Holland succeeded him. During this time, the school acted as the community's anchor. The building was the location for meetings and community events for the bustling African American community. Further, Holland not only

ran the school, he also set the tone for expectations of success throughout the community.¹

Yates encompassed grades seven through twelve. The building on Elgin was intended to accommodate 1,600 students, but by the mid 1950s the student body was over 2,200. The overcrowding made the Southern Association of Secondary Schools try to revoke its accreditation, but Holland kept the school operating and became an outspoken advocate for the students until the new facility could be constructed. When the new building opened, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) board replaced Holland with Dr. John Codwell, the principal from Yates's staunch rival, Phillis Wheatley High School in the city's Fifth Ward. This act destroyed the community's cohesiveness and hampered its leadership. Once integration began in earnest in the 1960s, many of the black middle-class moved away, sealing the fate of the community as the neighborhood and the school declined. Over the last forty years, Third Ward has witnessed higher rates of poverty and crime, but its heritage and the memories of Professor William Holland remain alive.²

In 2008, members of the Jack Yates Class of 1958—the last class to graduate from the original building, and the last under Professor Holland's direction—took part in the Ryan Middle School Oral History and Digital Media Project, which brought together current Ryan students, former Yates students, two of

Professor Holland's children, students from the University of Houston's Center for Public History and the School of Art, and members of the Center for Digital Storytelling to preserve and share the Yates story as a window into the history of the Third Ward. These interviews revealed a rich legacy of leadership, education, and community.

William "Babe" Holland, born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on March 2, 1904, went to Wiley High School and graduated from Indiana State Normal School in 1925. He attended graduate school at Tennessee State College (now University) and Indiana State Teachers College (formerly the Normal School and now Indiana State University). He played baseball—hence the name Babe—and basketball, and excelled in track, competing in the decathlon. His son, Bill Holland, said that white athletes from other schools and colleges would get together and pick one or two athletes and throw their points to them to keep his father from winning. As a result, William Holland learned "early on that there are things that you have to overcome. You either give in or you overcome."³

Holland came to Houston in 1927 with a letter of introduction from Birch Bayh, Sr., athletic director at Indiana State. Edison Oberholtzer, superintendent of the Houston schools and the first president of the University of Houston, hired him to coach at Yates where he led the football team to the 1930 Texas Negro High School title and numerous track titles. He was promoted to assistant principal and, later, principal on Ryan's death in 1941. When Holland retired in 1974, he was the longest tenured principal in the district's history.⁴

Students who graduated in 1958 were aware of a number of important events in the fight for desegregation and civil rights,



A leader in the Third Ward community, William S. Holland served as principal of Jack Yates High School from 1941-1958.

Photo courtesy of Deloris Johnson.

William Holland took part in the groundbreaking ceremonies for the middle school named in his honor. He is the participant shown second from left with a shovel.

Photo courtesy of William S. Holland Middle School.



Napoleon Johnson, Yates class president in 1958, graduated from Highlands University. He served in the military, worked as a technical editor for NASA, and made his mark in news broadcasting with Houston's KPRC-Channel 2. He retired after twenty-five years as a professor of journalism and mass communications at Houston Community College. He currently teaches part-time at Texas Southern University.

Photo by Debbie Harwell.



including the *Brown* decision in 1954 and the confrontation at Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. While these events drew notice, class president Napoleon Johnson explained nothing changed in Houston, so the Yates students focused on graduating from high school. Johnson remembered Holland speaking at assemblies and hearing "the pain in his voice because he saw students acting in any way that was probably natural to some degree, with being playful . . . just too much play and not enough seriousness. He would get on the microphone, and he would tell us about how difficult it was going to be, and that you are going to have to be twice as good, work twice as hard, and



Rev. Donald Dickson, a hall-of-famer from the Turkey Day game, was born in the Cuney Homes in Third Ward. After graduating from Yates, he attended TSU, served in the military, played football in Canada, and returned to graduate from TSU. He became HISD's first black head coach at a predominately white school, Fonville Junior High School. He also served as an assistant principal and retired after ten years as the director of Barnett Stadium.

Photo courtesy of Victor Matsumura.

those kinds of things. . . . He was basically saying you need to wake up. You don't have time to act the fool. . . . We can prepare you, but you've got to be serious about getting prepared."⁵

Yates Class of 1958 graduate, Reverend Donald Dickson, described Holland as a "personable administrator" and "a stern man . . . a principal who did not play with children, but he would do anything that he could to help children." Deloris Johnson, who acts as the class liaison, described Holland as a "man of great courage, of great responsibility, [who] just led his students to perfection. He told us we had to be the best that we could be because there was going to come a time when integration would come, and we were going to have to be able to fit in . . . to be able to work in the world." Edith Holland Nealy said her father motivated students to go beyond what they thought they could do. "If you were having problems other than just being mentally off the pace, then you had a visit with him in the office to discuss your underachievement. There wasn't a choice. You did it. . . . It was expected."⁶

Holland did not stand alone in the quest for excellence. He set the example, and the teachers followed suit. Nealy recalled, "All of the teachers expected you to achieve. . . . The parents were, I think, very happy to see that their children were being educated that way, that somebody really cared about their children." Dickson agreed with that and explained that many of his teachers, who had also taught his mother, "would not allow you to fail. . . . They would tell you that failure is not an option . . . and they meant that. If it came to chastising you to get your attention . . . or come to your house to tell your parents that you weren't getting it done, or tell the coach that you are not passing . . . you knew what was going to happen." He said the students also worked for many of their teachers. Dickson cleaned his homeroom teacher's house on Saturdays, wiping the windows and beating the rugs. "Our teachers lived in the same places where we lived . . . so, they saw to us," he said. Everyone knew everyone—between school, and church, and home, the paths they traveled were well-watched—they looked out for each other, and they also disciplined when necessary. "[The teachers] were just like our parents, our uncles, and our aunts . . . so they saw to it that we did what was necessary . . . so that when we left that class, we not only passed the class with flying colors, but we knew the content."⁷

Judge Robert Anderson moved from Houston to Austin County, Texas, and later to Montclair, New Jersey, where he started high school before returning to graduate from Yates. This gave him the unique perspective of someone who had experienced both integrated and segregated school environments in the rural and urban South, as well as the North. Going to an integrated school broadened his opportunities in many ways, including an expanded curriculum and the chance to take field trips to Broadway plays. Nevertheless Anderson noted, "The teachers at Jack Yates took personal concern whereas, in New Jersey, you didn't get that kind of personal interaction and concern on the part of the teachers." Looking back, he sees that both Holland and the faculty were "very outspoken" and the type of role models that were really quite necessary. They were leading both students and the community.⁸

Professor Holland understood the importance of education, having been schooled in the era of racial uplift; and the community shared his views. Bill Holland stated that his father's approach to education was "more than his personal philosophy,

Judge Robert Anderson grew up in Houston and Austin County, Texas. He moved to New Jersey where he started high school, and returned to Yates for his junior and senior years. He attended TSU, served as a captain in the Air Force, and returned to TSU Law School. He worked with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, cofounded the city's first black law firm, and was appointed by Mayor Louie Welch to the Municipal Court for the City of Houston, where he served until going back into private practice.



Photo courtesy of Victor Matsumura.

it was the community philosophy. . . . It is the way black folks thought and how they valued education.” He went on to explain:

What people forget [is that] in the days of segregation, the public schools had the best and brightest in the black community as teachers because basically, the jobs that black folks could get—good jobs—were post office, public school system, and a handful of doctors and lawyers. So, your teachers may have a master’s degree or Ph.D. in physics or chemistry or mathematics. You had really smart people teaching you. You also had an understanding during segregation that the future generation, the generation being educated—the student—was the future of the race, and that meant something. People were expected to take responsibility for their actions for what they did to achieve. . . . It was a different time.⁹

Professor Holland was not only outspoken about education, but also about segregation. Edith Holland Nealy explained, “The standard in our household was if you couldn’t go the day you wanted to go, then you didn’t go at all. That applied to the rodeo, it applied to Playland Park, it applied to the department stores downtown where they made you try on clothes in a broom closet.” Deloris Johnson recalled Professor Holland advising the students not to go to Playland Park on the one day they admitted blacks, Juneteenth, the anniversary that marked the freeing of Texas slaves. During segregation, Houston had a thriving black business and social community. Bill Holland said that, “We were raised with certain golden rules, and one of those rules was ‘why are you going to be stupid enough to give your money to someone who won’t let you through the front door?’” William Holland accepted “no excuses.” The problems of integration were “obstacles to be overcome, and that one must take responsibility in his or her own hands.”¹⁰

The Yates graduates all remembered Holland coming to the defense of the marching band. Holland arranged with the principals of Wheatley and Washington High Schools to present

a united front to district officials in refusing to march in the rodeo parade behind the multitude of horses and wagons, where they had to dodge the droppings. They were moved in front of the animals. When the text books they received had been passed down through so many students at the white schools that there was no room left for his students to write their names, Holland petitioned for materials equal to those received in white schools.¹¹

Another source of dissension with the school board centered on the revenues the school received from the Turkey Day game that pitted Yates against its Fifth Ward rival, Phillis Wheatley High School. First played in 1927, the game became an annual tradition that created a strong bond in the community, drawing an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 spectators to Jeppesen Stadium (now Robertson Stadium at the University of Houston). Deloris Johnson remembered, “People dressed up in their finest and after they ate their Thanksgiving dinner, they were out and on the way to the football game.” The event was one of the largest money makers for the district, and yet, Holland had to fight for the school’s fair share of the revenues. Not until the principals banded together and threatened to quit playing did the district share the funds in a percentage comparable to events at white schools.¹²

While Holland’s outspokenness made him a hero to the students at Yates and the Third Ward community, it did not sit as well with school district administrators. Deloris Johnson pointed out, “Mr. Holland was so controversial because he spoke out about what he thought was best for his students no matter what it was, no matter to whom he was speaking, he did not bite his tongue about what was right and wrong in the community.” In 1958, after thirty-one years of service at Yates,



When Deloris Johnson came to the Third Ward from Louisiana as a young girl, her heavy dialect caused others to call her “geechee.” Since speech therapists were not available for black children, she became one, graduating from Hampton University. During her career with HISD, the district promoted her to Speech Therapy Coordinator, and Governor Ann Richards appointed her as the first black member of the State Board of Examiners for Speech-Language Pathology.

Photo courtesy of Victor Matsumura.

seventeen of them as principal, he was told he would not move to the new Jack Yates High School. He would stay at the old building, which would become Ryan Junior High School, where he was essentially being demoted.¹³

The community presented the school board with a petition signed by 3,635 residents in a plea to reconsider—students also signed a petition. The board refused to change its ruling. Two board members Walter W. Kemmerer and Mrs. A. S. Vandervoort voted against all of the administrative assignments in protest. While the community did not win a reprieve for Holland, they may have had the last laugh when, later in 1958, voters stunned the conservative politicians by electing the city's first African American to the school board, Hattie Mae White. Two years earlier, White had used the board's own records to illustrate how Houston's system did not provide an equal education to black students, from facilities to courses offered and textbooks. No doubt White received support from some of the same constituents who had voted 22-to-1 in favor of challenger Louis Cutrer to defeat incumbent Mayor Oscar Holcombe who had attempted to exploit race as an issue to garner support of the elite.¹⁴

Holland's children remember that members of the community wanted to bomb the new school or set it on fire, but Holland called for calm and told them he would take care of it. Bill Holland recalled his father believed that there was a fine line, which the district could not cross: Professor Holland thought the school board had the right to reassign him, but not the right to fire him. He told the school board, "If you try to fire me, and I can't support my family, I'll kill you." He was retained at Ryan Middle School.¹⁵

Rev. Dickson expressed the disappointment they felt, "Finally, the things that he had fought so hard to get for us—new chemistry labs and new auto mechanic buildings and just an upgrade in the school itself. . . . We felt that the man who worked so hard to get us to that point should be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor but that was not the case." The insult did not stop there, however. "The slap in the face was that they brought a principal from our rival school . . . they brought him from Wheatley." The district brought in a principal from their fiercest rival, and that principal took many of his teachers with him. Dickson surmised that the "premise was to really show him [Holland] that next time, maybe you will keep your mouth shut . . . 'Yes, we know you deserve it but you ain't gonna get it.' So, they didn't give it to him."¹⁶


The results were devastating. "It killed the school spirit," Dickson stated. Deloris Johnson agreed and explained that with the family of Yates teachers split between the new high school and Ryan Middle School, and with Mr. Holland no longer at the helm, the traditions vanished. It also changed the community. "Yates did not have that decorum that they always had. They didn't have the faces of teachers . . . [It had a] negative impact on the neighborhood and on the community . . . the morale and the character of the school began to degrade, began to go down because we were hurt," Dickson said. "Yates has never been the same since then."¹⁷

Integration further exacerbated the negative effects felt by the Third Ward—not that anyone would have said segregation was a better system. Some claimed that the district sent inferior teachers to the black neighborhoods, and sent the best black teachers to the white schools. Bill Holland pointed out that if,

for example, you look at athletes then and today, no one at Yates prior to the 1960s believed the students were only capable of "C- or C average" work. Athletes excelled in school and on SAT test scores. So integration was not the "panacea" it was supposed to be for improving education.¹⁸

Edith Holland Nealey observed that integration "tore part" the sense of community. Deloris Johnson agreed and commented that the gains from integration came at the price of change in the schools and neighborhoods. Homeowners moved to new neighborhoods and their houses became rental property; stores closed and people no longer shopped in the Third Ward.¹⁹ In 1966, the University Interscholastic League and Negro Scholastic League merged, which brought a halt to the Thanksgiving Day game tradition. The 1958 graduates said the game was never the same after the placement of the Wheatley principal at Yates. Although the two schools still compete against each other, the rivalry is nothing like past years.

Holland retired after forty-seven years of service to HISD and was elected to the school board of trustees. The district named a middle school after him; it opened in 1979 and is located at 1600 Gelhorn on the city's east side. William Holland died on July 22, 1981, at the age of seventy-seven.²⁰

The Third Ward and Yates High School lost the once thriving community. The people, however, did not lose the all-important lessons they had learned from Professor Holland, and they applied them in their own work and in raising their families. Deloris Johnson, who like Holland spent her career as an educator in HISD, said one guiding principle Holland instilled in his students was, "You are tomorrow what you were yesterday, plus the few changes that you make today." To this day, she keeps that thought in mind as she approaches her life and work. Dickson, a retired coach and assistant principal in HISD, added, "I guess one of the greatest things that we learned from Mr. Holland was that we didn't have to take a back seat to anybody and that is because we were not inferior to anybody. We had a brain, we could think; we had eyes, we could see; we had a tongue, we could talk; we had legs, we could run; and we had a mind, we could think. He wanted us to use all of those contributing factors to become good and viable and productive men and women."²¹ And that they did. 

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The Ryan Middle School Oral History and Digital Media Project is ongoing to accumulate more stories about Jack Yates High School, Ryan Middle School, and the Third Ward. If you are interested in participating or wish further information, please contact Principal Michael McKenzie, Ryan Middle School, 713-942-1932, mmckenzi@houstonisd.org.