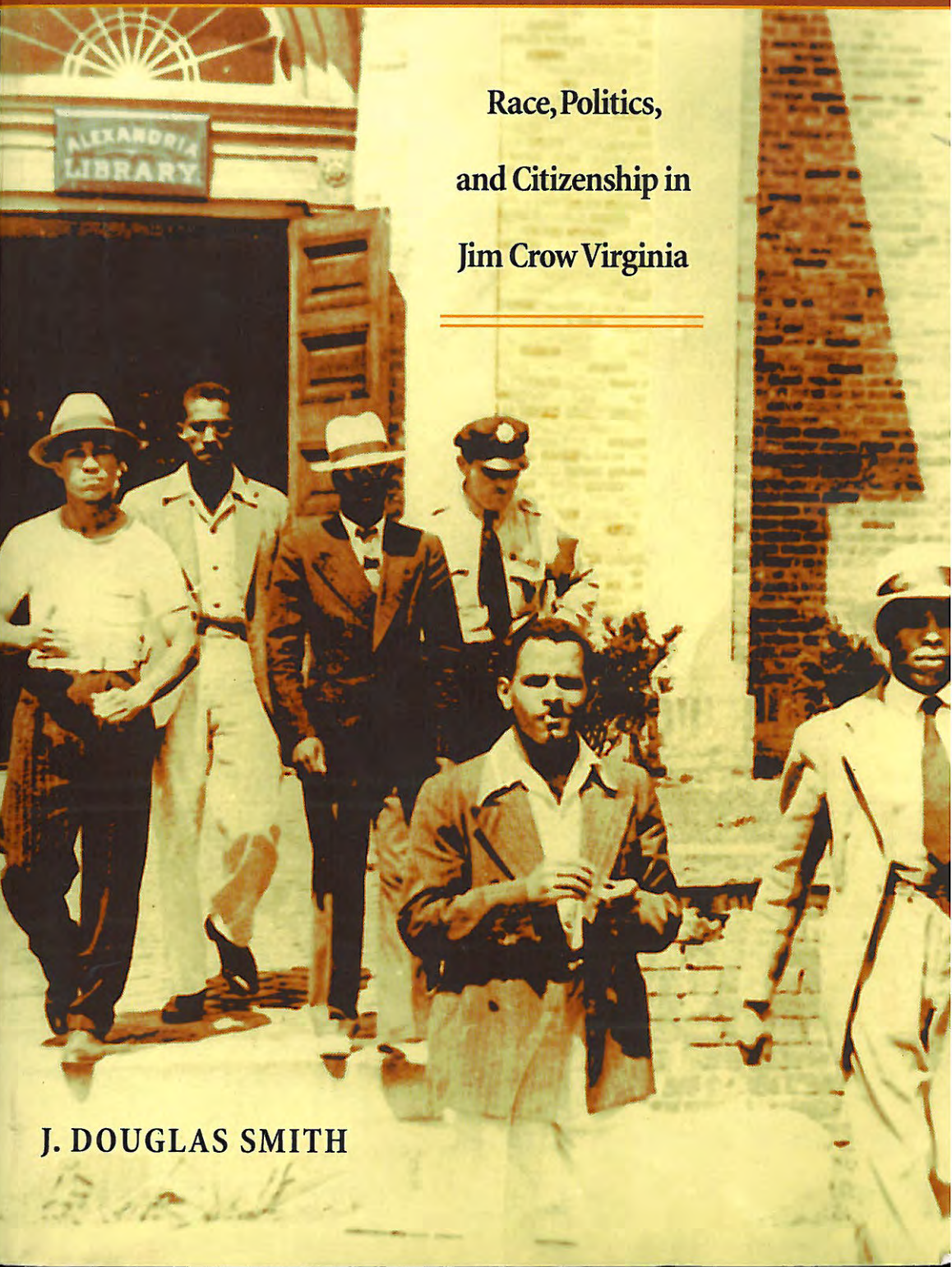


Managing White Supremacy

Race, Politics,
and Citizenship in
Jim Crow Virginia



J. DOUGLAS SMITH



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For my parents,

John and Eleanor Smith

Redefining Race

THE CAMPAIGN FOR RACIAL PURITY

While nothing can be said against racial integrity, much can be said against the un-Christian, undemocratic, and inhumane methods too often employed in its attainment. The integrity of both the white and Negro races stands better chances of preservation through a racial pride begotten of spiritual freedom than through force born of fear. There is an inverse ratio between race mixture and Negro advancement and this alone should relieve the morbid fears that too generally characterize interracial politics.

—GORDON BLAINE HANCOCK, 1944

In September 1922 John Powell, a Richmond native and world-renowned pianist and composer, and Earnest Sevier Cox, a self-proclaimed explorer and ethnographer, organized Post No. 1 of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America. By the following June, the organization claimed four hundred members in Richmond alone and had added new groups throughout the state, all dedicated to “the preservation and maintenance of Anglo-Saxon ideals and civilization.” For the rest of the decade, John Powell and his supporters dominated racial discourse in the Old Dominion, successfully challenged the legislature to redefine blacks, whites, and Indians, used the power of a state agency to enforce the law with impunity and without mercy, and fundamentally altered the lives of hundreds of mixed-race Virginians. Although few whites questioned the assumptions central to the Anglo-Saxon ideology, the fulminations of the organization exposed a fissure in elite ranks as to the most effective means of managing white supremacy: genteel paternalism or rigid extremism.¹

Most accounts of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs have emphasized, with good reason, the leading role played by “a small but determined group of racial zealots” who “played effectively on the fears and prejudices of many whites.” Fearing that increasing numbers of individuals with traces of black blood were passing as white, these extremists made a “last stand” against racial amalgamation.² The leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs could not have succeeded, however, if their views and policies had not resonated with a much broader swath of the white population. The Anglo-Saxon Clubs did not merely manipulate the racial fears and prejudices of whites but rather tapped into the same assumptions that undergirded the entire foundation of white supremacy and championed segregation as a system of racial hierarchy and control. The call for racial purity appealed especially to elite whites in Virginia who were obsessed with genealogy and their pristine bloodlines. Lady Astor, for instance, reportedly informed her English friends that they lacked the purity of the white inhabitants of the Virginia Piedmont. “We are undiluted,” proclaimed the native Virginian. Author Emily Clark satirized this prevailing view in Richmond when one of her characters remarked, “[F]or here alone, in all America, flourished the Anglo-Saxon race, untainted, pure, and perfect.” White elites across Virginia gave their support to the Anglo-Saxon Clubs and allowed Powell’s message a hearing—state senators and delegates approved legislation, governors publicly advocated the aims of the organization, some of the most socially prominent women in Richmond joined the ladies auxiliary, and influential newspapers offered editorial support and provided a public platform for the dissemination of the organization’s extreme views.³

Ironically, it was the extremists, not the genteel paternalists, who most clearly recognized and acknowledged that Virginia’s system of managed race relations had become increasingly unstable in the 1920s. John Powell and others reacted with alarm precisely because they understood that paternalistic support for interracial cooperation and black education—strongest in the state’s urban areas—might ultimately lead to the breakdown, not the reinforcement, of white supremacy. That all white Virginians did not share the concerns of John Powell and Earnest Cox only confirmed their worst fears. While those elites most devoted to paternalism considered additional statutes unnecessary, humiliating, and violative of harmonious race relations, Powell and his supporters desperately sought increasingly rigid laws to shore up the foundation of white supremacy.

In addition to exposing a fundamental weakness in the system of managed race relations, the efforts of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs unintentionally revealed the absurdity of the basic assumption that underlay their mission: it proved impossible to divide the state, or, for that matter, the nation, into

readily identifiable races. The longer the clubs waged their campaign, the more apparent it became that they could not divine the precise amount of nonwhite blood in a given individual. Furthermore, the Anglo-Saxon Clubs met a great deal of resistance from individuals and communities who rejected the clubs' particular construction of racial identity. Communities across the state revealed a variability in race relations that confounded those elites most committed to a discrete, binary definition of race.

The 1924 Racial Integrity Act, the major legislative achievement of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, did not directly affect the majority of black Virginians who never tried nor had any desire to pass as white. But over time, John Powell and his supporters engendered a great deal of interracial hostility and ultimately contributed to a crack in the edifice of white supremacy and to an erosion of paternalistic race relations. While many members of Virginia's ruling class objected to the rhetoric and tactics of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs as excessive and injurious to otherwise harmonious race relations, they never questioned the essential rightness and necessity of racial integrity. Before long, these elites trotted out the same arguments to denounce the demands of black Virginians for equality and justice, but by then the hollowness and inherent contradictions of paternalism had been exposed. Elite Virginians could not defend the segregationist status quo and simultaneously ensure racial harmony and goodwill, the very hallmarks of their paternalism.

John Powell, Earnest Cox, and Walter Ashby Plecker, the director of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics and the third leading member of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, drove the organization's agenda, publicized its platform, and formulated legislation. Powell did not act initially, however, until he felt confident that he had the implicit backing of some of the Old Dominion's wealthiest and most powerful citizens. In January 1921, more than eighteen months before the establishment of Post No. 1, Powell wrote to William T. Reed, a tobacco magnate and arguably Virginia's most powerful unelected individual. Powell was pleased to report that John Kerr Branch, one of the wealthiest men in the state and a close friend of Reed's, had "expressed wholehearted approval of the purposes of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs and I believe he will really be willing to help our program along. I am sure his changed attitude is the result of your influence."⁴

From the outset, supporters of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs defined themselves in opposition to the Ku Klux Klan, which never received the support of Virginia's elites, and asserted their intention to achieve their goals

"in the spirit of good sportsmanship and fair play." Powell's claim earned him both explicit and tacit support from many of the same elites who condemned the Klan as a threat to law and order. Leading newspapers, especially the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, added much-needed editorial support. The organization's early history, however, suggests a much closer connection to the Ku Klux Klan than Virginia's elites ever cared to admit.⁵

In fact, just weeks after the establishment of the first post of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, the *Times-Dispatch* reported that the local chapter of the Klan had seceded from the national organization based in Atlanta. According to J. T. Bethel, an attorney for the Richmond Klansmen, the capital city's lodge had determined that the national Klan was run by "bad characters" whose primary concern was making money. Furthermore, Richmond's membership, including some of the city's "best citizens," found the national organization a "rampant anti-Catholic organization instead of an organization to maintain white supremacy." Consequently, the membership voted to sever its ties with the Klan and to join instead the local chapter of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs in an effort to "retain the best there is in the Klan and to eliminate the worst."⁶

Bethel explained that in Richmond, as in numerous cities throughout the state and country, scores of white residents had rushed to join the Klan in 1920 and 1921. Posing as the American Civic Association, Klan members concealed their identity in order to maintain ties with Richmond's business community. Before long, however, Klansmen in Richmond began to distrust the motives and character of national representatives, several of whom seemed most interested in making money from the sale of memberships, robes, and regalia. The decision of the Richmond Klan to leave the national organization led to a series of suits and countersuits as the national organization attempted to take control of local funds and to enjoin the Richmond lodge's officers from acting as official representatives of the Klan. In response, the Richmond members went before a notary public and swore that they were no longer members of the Ku Klux Klan and that the national organization therefore had no authority over them. The Richmond chapter finally settled the issue by returning over five hundred robes to the national organization.⁷

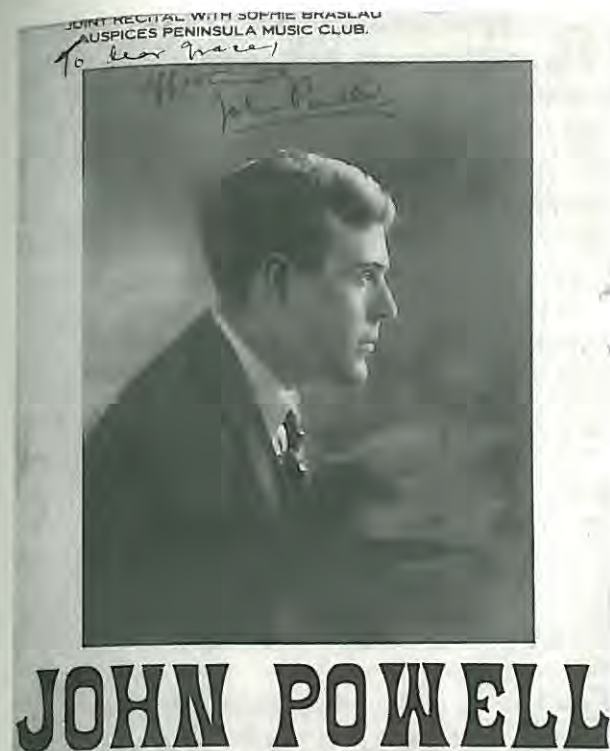
While no evidence exists to suggest that John Powell himself ever belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, his insistence that he and supporters of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs were in no way connected with the Klan was simply not true. Dr. Lawrence T. Price, W. C. Maddox, and W. I. Stockton Jr., respectively the chairman, president, and secretary of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, all appeared in the notarized list of former Richmond Klansmen

who had renounced their membership. By putting a new face on the Klan, Powell was able to legitimize the Anglo-Saxon Clubs in the minds of respectable, elite Virginians.⁸

Although Powell and Cox initially placed their efforts within the broader nativist context of the national debate over federal immigration policy, they soon ceased to mention immigration at all. Instead, they focused their energies toward “achieving a final solution” to the “negro problem.” In July 1923 the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published lengthy articles by Powell and Cox, both of which ran under the headline “Is White America to Become a Negroid Nation?” Powell argued that the passage of Jim Crow laws and the disfranchisement of blacks had “diverted the minds of our people from the most serious and fundamental peril, that is, the danger of racial amalgamation.” Insisting that such laws addressed only the more superficial aspects of the issue, the pianist and composer declared that “it is not enough to segregate the Negro on railway trains and street cars, in schools and theaters; it is not enough to restrict his exercise of franchise, so long as the possibility remains of the absorption of Negro blood into our white population.”⁹

Powell acknowledged that Virginia’s laws already prevented the intermarriage of blacks and whites, but he warned that such laws did not necessarily “prevent intermixture” and that “numerous individuals with Negro blood are legally white and may not marry Negroes.” Powell and his colleagues in the Anglo-Saxon Clubs believed that a 1910 Virginia statute that defined a black person as having at least one-sixteenth black blood no longer maintained the integrity of the white race. Pointing to census figures that showed that the number of mulattos in Virginia decreased from 222,910 in 1910 to 164,171 in 1920, they argued that an increasing number of people with some black blood were therefore passing as white. Consequently, according to Powell, a new, “absolute” color line offered the only “possibility, if not the probability, of achieving a final solution.”¹⁰

Powell’s analysis of census data, however, was fraught with problems that point to the absurdity of his campaign to define race in absolute terms. While Powell interpreted the steep drop in mulattos in Virginia in the 1910s as proof of increased passing, historian Joel Williamson argues that mixing between whites and blacks essentially ended after emancipation. By the early twentieth century, the only significant mixing occurred between lighter-skinned blacks and darker-skinned blacks. Even census officials warned in 1920 that “considerable uncertainty necessarily attaches to the classification of Negroes as black and mulatto, since the accuracy of the distinction depends largely upon the judgment and care employed by the enumerators.” Mulattos in Virginia did not become white between 1910



A world-renowned pianist and founder of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, John Powell inscribed this concert poster to his childhood friend Grace Copeland (see Chapter 4). (Courtesy of the Prints File, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia)

and 1920, but rather became black. Not surprisingly, the census bureau did away with mulatto as a category for the 1930 enumeration.¹¹

Powell and Cox borrowed much of their rhetoric from the science of eugenics, and from its counterpart, scientific racism. Although they referred most often to northern eugenicists like New York attorney Madison Grant and *Saturday Evening Post* contributor Lothrop Stoddard, the clubs’ leading spokesmen need not have looked far from home for intellectual sanction. Virginia, and in particular the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, had become a hotbed of eugenical studies by the mid-1920s. According to the leading scholar of the eugenics movement in Virginia, biology professor Ivey Foreman Lewis and a number of other eugenicists at the university developed a curriculum that “taught that heredity governed all aspects of life, from anatomical form to social organization.” By

definition, therefore, eugenics “reinforced the social hierarchy that elevated the elite, extolled sedate whites as fit, and considered troublesome whites, poor whites, and all others to be genetic defectives in need of control.” Firmly rooted in the ethos of Progressive Era reform, Lewis and his compatriots sanctioned white elite rule in scientific terms and “provided generations of educated, self-consciously modern Virginians with a new method of legitimating the South’s traditional social order.”¹²

The belief of Lewis and other eugenicists in heredity as the determining factor in all aspects of human interaction culminated in the 1924 passage of an involuntary sterilization measure, ultimately upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. For nearly fifty years, the commonwealth of Virginia sterilized thousands of individuals, white and black, deemed feebleminded, insane, or prone to criminal behavior. Those at the top of Virginia’s social order, including Douglas Southall Freeman, commented on the “beneficent effects” of the bill. Many of Lewis’s students, especially those who went on to careers in medicine and politics, were directly responsible for the enforcement of the sterilization statute; in this respect alone, Lewis’s teachings had a profound and long-lasting effect on public policy in the Old Dominion.¹³

Lewis’s beliefs and teachings quite naturally led him to embrace the aims of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, although he was never a leader of the organization. He never appeared before the legislature on its behalf and did not promote its cause in the state’s major newspapers, but he did admire the positions taken by John Powell, Earnest Cox, and Walter Plecker. As late as 1929, as Plecker came under increased pressure to moderate his views, Lewis urged him “to stand firm in the face of ill considered and ill tempered criticism” and referred to Plecker’s efforts as “the most important public service being rendered in Virginia.”¹⁴

Though never a serious student of eugenics, Powell recognized an opportunity to whitewash his extreme prejudice with a veneer of respectable intellectualism by clothing his ideology in theories of biology and ethnography. In particular, Powell latched on to Mendel’s theories of heredity, arguing that when two races interbred “the more primitive, the less highly specialized, variety always dominates.” A widespread belief in the inferiority of blacks allowed the Anglo-Saxons to claim that “every race that has crossed with the Negro has failed to maintain its civilization and culture.” Powell warned, therefore, that “one drop of Negro blood makes the Negro.” He acknowledged that blacks had been forced to come to the United States against their will and consequently remained “innocent of responsibility for the existence of the Negro problem.” Perhaps mindful that he needed at least the passive acquiescence of Virginia’s dominant

and paternalistic elites, he added that “these considerations should compel us, in any sentiment of the matter, to treat him not only with meticulous fairness but also with large generosity. Noblesse oblige would permit no less.”¹⁵

Powell and Cox underscored the degree to which the Anglo-Saxon movement reflected an admission among whites that they, at the very height of the classical period of segregation, had become powerless to guarantee racial boundaries in absolute terms. “Those of us who live in the South,” Cox explained, “will detect with comparative accuracy the presence of colored blood in the individual, but not always are we sure, and in a large number of cases where the race purity of the individual is suspected there is lacking adequate means by which the white race may be protected.” Legislation was therefore necessary to “remove the ‘suspect’ from uncertainty and place him on the right side of the color line.”¹⁶ As evidence of the problem in Richmond, Powell reported that he had stood for forty-five minutes at the intersection of Broad and Second Streets. “During this time,” observed Powell, “I counted among the passers-by over 200 Negroes, of whom only five were black. In addition, I counted over thirty individuals of whom I could not with any degree of certainty state whether they were white or colored.”¹⁷

Although Powell clearly worried about the biological breakdown of the color line, he was also concerned that interracial cooperation on social welfare committees and in training schools led to inappropriately familiar forms of address that threatened “social and caste distinctions.” Knowing that many of his friends in Richmond’s elite circles participated in such interracial work, Powell noted the noble motives of these whites but warned of the “advance of social equality under existing conditions.” In addition, Powell expressed concern that a younger generation of Virginians lacked the wherewithal to protect the color line. To all these problems, legislation offered the only remedy.¹⁸

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the most widely read morning paper in the state, enthusiastically embraced the positions taken by the two Anglo-Saxon Club leaders. In an editorial published alongside the pieces by Powell and Cox, the Richmond daily concluded that all “thinking men and women in Virginia” had to give the articles “serious consideration.” Acknowledging that the Anglo-Saxon platform alone would not “solve the negro problem,” the paper did suggest that the platform “will at least express an ideal, and throw every possible safeguard around racial purity.”¹⁹

Two weeks after the appearance of the Powell and Cox articles, Walter Plecker provided an early glimpse of the zeal with which his department, the Bureau of Vital Statistics, would attempt to define Virginians as

white or black. Plecker instructed local registrars in Amherst and Bedford Counties, both home to persons of contested racial heritage, "to firmly refuse to admit them as white if they have even a trace of negro blood on either side."²⁰ This determination to redefine blackness according to a "one-drop" rule, however, flew in the face of Virginia law, which defined as black those persons with one-sixteenth or more black blood. In essence, Plecker granted himself legislative authority and sought to define race in terms favored by the Anglo-Saxon Clubs before the General Assembly had considered the issue. This attempt to tighten the law in matters of miscegenation resonated throughout the South. Beginning immediately after emancipation, all of the southern states adopted or reinforced preexisting laws against miscegenation. Custom and belief dictated to all white southerners that "one drop" defined a black person, but the law in most states said otherwise. Some states ultimately followed Virginia's lead and adopted a "one-drop" test, but other states kept a "one-eighth" or "one-sixteenth" rule on their books. Some states even maintained one definition of blackness for the purpose of intermarriage and a second definition for all other purposes.²¹

No doubt Plecker's concern was only heightened by the reaction that his instructions prompted from at least one unidentified local registrar, possibly from Bedford County, who expressed a concern with the damage to his own business if he did not register people according to their wishes. The official told Plecker that "these people have their own churches, schools, etc., and do not associate with either class, yet they are registered as white on the voting list, and the only thing I could do without being injurious to my business, was to let the birth registers go on as handed in to me by the midwives as white." Several months later, this registrar resigned rather than choose between the health of his business and complying with Plecker's instructions. Plecker's experience with local registrars not only revealed the degree to which some communities in Virginia rejected his rigid definition of race but also further convinced him of the need for a state law that would leave local officials with no discretion in the matter of racial classification.²²

With the Virginia legislature not due to convene until January 1924, John Powell and his supporters set about building support for their agenda. In October 1923 the Anglo-Saxon Clubs held their first statewide convention. Representatives from twenty-four posts, including eight colleges, met and declared themselves "for the preservation of racial integrity; for the supremacy of the white race in the United States, without racial prejudice or hatred; and for all principles of liberal Americanism conceived in the spirit of broad patriotism." The convention further decreed the organi-

zation open to "all native-born, white, male American citizens, over the age of eighteen years, of temperate habits and good moral character, who are qualified to vote or who will pledge themselves to qualify at the earliest opportunity." To make certain that they were not confused with their robed and hooded cousins, the Anglo-Saxons declared themselves "in no sense a secret, fraternal organization."²³

Although Powell never realized his grand ambitions of turning the Anglo-Saxon Clubs into a nationwide organization, his influence was nevertheless broad. From its first post in Richmond in September 1922, the club apparently reached its peak in 1925 with thirty-one posts in Virginia, plus three in the North. In addition, the Women's Racial Integrity Club of Richmond had at least forty members. A number of these women gravitated toward Powell because of his influence in Richmond's music circles, but many others were members of the capital's most socially prominent families. Although plans to start chapters in North Carolina and Mississippi apparently never came to fruition, Powell succeeded in garnering support for legislation in other states. He was invited to address the Georgia legislature in 1925; his pleas contributed to that state's adoption of a racial integrity law two years later, the same year that Alabama added a similar statute.²⁴

While a number of college chapters appeared on early lists, their membership proved less than reliable. The Hampden-Sydney post objected to the new constitution as "too complicated." Only a week after the first statewide convention, M. O. Williams, president of the chapter at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, told John Powell that only ten members remained in his post; several months later, just as Powell, Cox, and Plecker prepared to present legislation to the Virginia General Assembly, Williams resigned his presidency and withdrew his membership. The collegian claimed to remain "in accord with the aims" of the organization but decided that "the method followed by the Anglo-Saxon Clubs does not lead to a solution as I see it."²⁵

This kind of unreliable support, coupled with other, more threatening campus activities, further convinced Powell that the younger generation of whites lacked the necessary commitment and upbringing to maintain white racial integrity. A front-page story in the January 10, 1924, issue of the student newspaper at Virginia Tech, for example, detailed the proceedings of the Student Volunteer Conference, held in Indianapolis over the Christmas holidays and attended by 7,000 students, including fourteen from Tech. Most of the coverage centered on discussions of race, and no doubt the conclusion of at least half of the participants that racial distinctions should not be drawn terrified Powell. Conference participants

proposed to “eliminate the white superiority complex ingrained in the primary schools,” to “utilize every opportunity to become friends with members of other races,” to “begin tackling the problem by converting our own families!” and to “work for the breaking down of racial discrimination in dormitories, class-rooms, societies, athletics, fraternities, churches—in college life generally.” The last two suggestions in particular drew Powell’s attention. Although the article did not specify how Virginia Tech’s delegates responded to these questions, the student newspaper reported favorably on the convention as a whole and gave full coverage to the discussions on race. To make matters worse, M. O. Williams, the former president of Virginia Tech’s Anglo-Saxon Club, had attended as a delegate.²⁶

Powell received further evidence of a breakdown of racial decorum on college campuses several months later when W. S. Gooch, a textbook salesman for the Macmillan Company, wrote about alleged interracial activities at Lynchburg College. In one letter, Gooch asserted that black men and women sat at the same table with whites for lunch. “I cannot understand,” exclaimed Gooch, “such a meeting being tolerated in Virginia under any circumstances.” Several days later, however, the textbook salesman reported to Powell that his earlier account had been wrong and that whites and blacks had not sat at the same table at what he now revealed to be a YMCA-YWCA meeting. Not to fully disappoint Powell, however, Gooch assured him that several months earlier blacks and whites did dine together at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College in Lynchburg. “I think,” concluded Gooch, “this sort of thing ought to be nipped in the bud.”²⁷

Whether or not he realized it at the time, Gooch had stumbled upon the genesis of the southern student interracial movement. In early 1924, as a result of discussions at the Indianapolis conference, collegians established interracial groups in a half-dozen southern cities, including Lynchburg, Virginia. When a handful of students from Lynchburg College, Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, and the Lynchburg Theological Seminary, a black college, gathered at the Lynchburg YWCA, local citizens and YWCA officials forced them to meet instead in the city’s black slums. Although the students did not openly challenge legalized segregation, they proved far more committed to genuine interracial cooperation than did their adult counterparts. In an effort to break down the psychological and physical barriers imposed by segregation, the collegians promoted social interaction, held debates, musicals, literary readings, and, as Gooch discovered, even dined together, an absolute taboo in southern society.²⁸

In many respects, the activities of the Lynchburg students reflected the growing awareness of Howard Kester, the group’s leader. Although Kes-

ter’s devout Christianity led him in his youth to denounce bigotry and discrimination, he arrived at Lynchburg College in the fall of 1921 imbued with vestiges of the paternalism that guided the management of white supremacy in the Old Dominion. Kester, like so many well-meaning white elites, believed that he “understood” African Americans, their desires, needs, strengths, and weaknesses. During the summer of 1923, after his sophomore year, Kester traveled to war-ravaged Europe under the auspices of the YMCA. Shown one of the massive locks formerly used to seal off the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, Poland, Kester awoke to a realization that white southerners restricted and exploited blacks in much the same way. Upon his return to college that fall, Kester’s continued involvement with the YMCA led him to address a group at the Lynchburg Seminary. Attempting to express his concern for the plight of African Americans in the South, Kester asked his audience “to please be patient” as “progress was slow.” His plea, which clearly embodied the essence of cautious paternalism, drew a stinging rebuke from Channing Tobias, the highest-ranking black official with the YMCA. Tobias forced Kester to recognize that, in fact, he did not understand the feelings of blacks, whose patience had already run out. In this respect alone, Kester’s awakening set him apart from the vast majority of white elites who supported interracial cooperation, but only on their own terms. Although difficult to accept at first, Tobias’s condemnation launched Kester on a path to fight for the absolute equality of African Americans in social, economic, and political terms; the Lynchburg student interracial movement proved to be just the first stop on a lifelong journey that ultimately distinguished Kester as a true radical in racial matters. Howard Kester embodied John Powell’s worst nightmare, a white southerner advocating not only interracial cooperation, but the equality of all people.²⁹

In February 1924 Powell and other supporters of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs finally had an opportunity to present their case to the Virginia General Assembly. Sponsors in the house and senate introduced legislation based on Powell’s stated aims: rigid, mandatory registration of all Virginians under the auspices of Walter Plecker and the Bureau of Vital Statistics; one year in the penitentiary for willfully lying about one’s color; mandatory presentation of racial certification to local registrars before a marriage license could be issued; prohibition against whites marrying anyone save another white; and the definition of a white person as one “who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian.” This last provision marked the first time Virginia law defined white persons. In addition, to meet the concerns of white elites who descended from Pocahontas and John Rolfe

(blood traced to that union was considered a badge of status in the Old Dominion and offered the sole example of acceptable nonwhite ancestry), supporters created a "Pocahontas Exception": persons "who have less than one sixty-fourth of the blood of an American Indian and have no other non-Caucasic blood shall be deemed to be white persons."³⁰

John Powell headlined the list of supporters who appeared before a legislative committee on February 12. Citing cases from around the state that showed the danger of racial mixing, Powell quoted leading northern eugenicists Lothrop Stoddard, Madison Grant, and Franklin Giddings, all of whom predicted the downfall of white civilization without proper legislation. Powell claimed that the Anglo-Saxon Clubs had in mind the best interests of both races, and he repeatedly emphasized that racial integrity was more important than rigid racial separation. Yet he simultaneously regarded even the most basic manifestations of racial cooperation as inevitably posing a threat to white racial integrity. Thomas Dabney, a black professor at Virginia Union University, underscored the inherent contradiction in Powell's rhetoric by pointing out how often Powell "lamented" the degree to which barriers between the races were coming down." In his testimony, for example, Powell argued that blacks would have to receive greater rights and opportunities if they remained in the South. He specifically mentioned that the proposals of the Student Volunteer Conference would likely lead to amalgamation. Powell worried, moreover, because white southern students had attended this convention. While no credible evidence suggested that miscegenation was actually on the increase, student newspapers and interracial groups proved to Powell that interracial cooperation was on the rise.³¹

Virginia's black press remained relatively quiet as the racial integrity measure wound its way through the legislature. Aimed at those mixed-race individuals who were no longer clearly identifiable as black, the proposed statute did not directly affect the vast majority of black Virginians. The *Richmond Planet* opined that "we do not see that it concerns any Negro in this state. . . . Every well-thinking colored person who understands existing conditions wants the line of racial demarcation to remain. They want the white man to 'stay on his side' of the line and they will do the same on their side." Upon the measure's passage, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* added its regret that the statute was intended to preserve only the integrity of the white race.³²

Nevertheless, Powell's testimony elicited a strong reaction from Gordon Blaine Hancock, who vehemently denied that blacks in Virginia or anywhere in the South were interested in racial amalgamation. "What the negro wants, therefore, is not gratitude, but a man's chance and simple jus-

tice," wrote Hancock in a letter to the *Richmond News Leader*. "The negro is not demanding amalgamation . . . and he resents an implication that he does." Hancock argued that fears of racial mixing had disingenuously been used as a smokescreen to deny to blacks benefits of citizenship such as education and neighborhood improvements. Proponents of racial integrity dismissed such objections as evidence that blacks were "determined to pass over into the white race."³³

While influential supporters such as the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* fully backed Powell's position, some state senators considered the section of the bill that mandated racial registration an insult to whites. Accordingly, the senate amended the bill to allow for voluntary registration and, in a further nod to elites, raised the allowable amount of Indian blood to one-sixteenth. In March 1924 the General Assembly passed and Governor E. Lee Trinkle signed the Racial Integrity Act, a measure that one historian has termed "the most draconian miscegenation law in American history." Several weeks later, the secretary of Post No. 1 of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs thanked Governor Trinkle not only for his support of the bill but for "the promptness of the registration of yourself and family."³⁴

Although John Powell was the Anglo-Saxon Clubs' leading spokesman, Walter Plecker, as director of the Bureau of Vital Statistics, was without a doubt the group's primary enforcer. From 1924 until his retirement twenty-two years later, Plecker waged a campaign of threats and intimidation aimed at classifying all Virginians by race and committed to identifying even the smallest traces of black blood in the state's citizens. In short, the statistician operated on the belief that a person was guilty of being black until he or she could prove otherwise.

Although the Virginia General Assembly had objected to the mandatory registration clause, Plecker considered it his mission to encourage as many Virginians as possible to register with the state. Between 10,000 and 20,000 near-white Virginians, he noted, "possess an intermixture of colored blood, in some cases to a slight extent, it is true, but still enough to prevent them from being white." Such people, declared Plecker, previously had been considered white, which allowed them to demand "admittance of their children to white schools" and "in not a few cases" to marry whites. Plecker reminded his audience that although such people were "scarcely distinguished as colored," they "are not white in reality." Registration, he argued, would enable the Bureau of Vital Statistics to head off such trouble.³⁵

Plecker's concern, however, did not stop at the Virginia border. Soon after his plea to Virginians to register, he prevailed upon the governor to send a copy of Virginia's new statute to the chief executives of all other



Walter Ashby Plecker at his desk at the Bureau of Vital Statistics, 1935.
(Courtesy of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*)

states. He told a Mississippi lawyer that Virginia must get the other states to pass similar legislation and that a successful effort might hold off amalgamation for five hundred years. In a letter to Earnest Cox, Plecker emphasized that Virginia stood to gain most especially from urging Maryland and North Carolina to follow suit. Plecker went so far as to send U.S. senator Morris Shepherd of Texas a draft of a bill to preserve racial integrity in Washington, D.C. John Powell also corresponded with other state legislatures; he praised the efforts of the Ohio house of representatives, for example, but informed its speaker that a definition of black based on "distinct and visible" features would prove insufficient.³⁶

Within days of the passage of the Racial Integrity Act, Plecker sent instructions to county and city registrars, health professionals, and all other officials responsible for the administration of the law. He emphasized the necessity of recording accurately the racial composition of both parents and warned authorities not to accept a person as white if any doubt existed. He instructed physicians and registrars in the proper usage of terms such as "mulatto," "quadroon," "octoroon," "mixed," and "issue." That fall Plecker asked schoolteachers and officials to assist his office in

preventing children with even a trace of black blood from enrolling in white schools and urged them to report to his office any uncertainties. Relying on birth and marriage records from 1853 to 1896 in his office's possession, Plecker confirmed that some families in the past had been "correctly listed as colored, but have now succeeded in passing as white, and intermarrying with white people who have no knowledge of the facts." Nevertheless, according to Plecker, "under Mendel's law, the children from such marriages are likely, even after many generations, to present clear marks of colored ancestry."³⁷

The enforcement of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act produced profound and devastating consequences in the lives of Plecker's targets. Within weeks of the law's passage, Plecker established the tone with which he would use the power of his state agency to enforce the letter of the law. On April 30, 1924, for example, he wrote Mrs. Robert Cheatham of Lynchburg with regard to the racial classification of her child born the previous July, well before the law was passed. According to a birth certificate signed by midwife Mary Gildon, Cheatham and her husband were white. Yet the Lynchburg health department, Plecker revealed, listed her husband as black. "This is to give you warning that this is a mulatto child and you cannot pass it off as white," wrote Plecker. "You will have to do something about this matter and see that this child is not allowed to mix with white children. It cannot go to white schools and can never marry a white person in Virginia. It is an awful thing." Plecker further informed the midwife that "it is a penitentiary offense to willfully state that a child is white when it is colored. You have made yourself liable to very serious trouble by doing this thing." Although John Powell held no state position, Plecker supplied him with copies of agency documents, including this one, at the top of which he scribbled, "This is a specimen of our daily troubles and shows how we are handling them."³⁸

Erroneous reports arose as Plecker and his staff worked during the summer to identify families throughout Virginia that should not be considered white. Reid Williams of Dinwiddie claimed that he had information from Plecker that fifty of the most influential families in Russell County had some black blood, were not actually aware of it themselves, and thus had continued to intermarry with the county's best citizens. Plecker assured the superintendent of the Russell County School Board that Williams had misinterpreted his comments, but he did not totally discount the possibility that some leading whites had traces of black blood. "We are now beginning to get in touch with similar conditions throughout the State and are trying to establish a list of all doubtful families," concluded Plecker.

"Of course, I am up against the question of offending and antagonizing individuals which cannot be avoided. We cannot consider the individual but the State."³⁹

In late April Plecker received from a local registrar in Amherst County a list of families in both Amherst and neighboring Rockbridge County that the registrar knew to be of mixed blood. Several days later, Plecker urged all clerks in Amherst, Rockbridge, and Augusta Counties to use extreme caution in issuing marriage licenses to members of these families. Never for a moment did he consider the possibility that any family with one of the names in question might not actually be part black. A handwritten note to John Powell indicated that Plecker had sent the same warning to school authorities and local registrars.⁴⁰

The degree to which residents of Amherst and Rockbridge Counties would cause trouble for Plecker became readily apparent in the ensuing weeks. Located in the mountainous western part of the state, these counties comprised one of two regions in the state considered home to significant numbers of mixed-race Virginians. Plecker told Earnest Cox that "our Amherst County colony is up in arms and are on the verge of a race riot, threatening the life of one of our local registrars for giving out information concerning them." Plecker revealed that forty-seven suspected mixed-race people had attempted to register as white, but that he could prove they were not. In a letter to John Powell, Plecker added that the "Amherst crowd are all trying to register as white." In response, the bureau had instructed all local registrars to refund the registration fee rather than accept them as white. As almost an afterthought, or perhaps as a reminder that the Bureau of Vital Statistics was busy all over Virginia, Plecker told Powell, "I struck quite an interesting family in Norfolk County yesterday with ten children, seven of whom are registered with us, three as white, three as colored and one doubtful. Think of the benefit of preventing those ten mixed children from going white."⁴¹

Plecker's instructions to local registrars led to court challenges in the fall of 1924. A. T. Shields, the clerk of court for Rockbridge County, refused to grant a marriage license to Dorothy Johns and James Connor after he determined that Johns had at least a trace of black blood. Johns took Shields to court, where witnesses on her behalf testified that she had no black blood. But Plecker and Silas Coleman, a resident of Amherst County, effectively used birth records that showed she descended from the Johns family of Amherst County, all of whom had "colored" ancestors. Johns's attorney argued correctly that "colored" had been used in the nineteenth century to describe Indians as well as blacks and provided witnesses

who acknowledged her Indian ancestry. Judge Henry Holt sided with the clerk of court and accepted evidence that Johns had at least some black blood. At the same time, he objected to aspects of the law itself. In particular, he found that individuals wrongly accused of having some nonwhite blood would find it nearly impossible to disprove such charges.⁴²

Several weeks later, Plecker found himself back in the same court in an almost identical case. This time the clerk of court had refused a marriage license to Atha Sorrells and Robert Painter, believing that Sorrells had at least some black blood, mixed with white and possibly Indian ancestry. Despite the earlier victory, Plecker approached this second case with extreme caution. He urged his star witness in the *Johns* case, Silas Coleman, to testify a second time despite being "afraid that they will burn your barn and do you other injury." Coleman, however, refused Plecker's request.⁴³

Now lacking any witnesses to support Plecker's testimony, Judge Holt ruled in favor of the plaintiff and ordered that the clerk grant the marriage license to Sorrells and Painter. While the judge expressed support in his opinion for the intent of the Racial Integrity Act, he nevertheless determined that it depended upon a definition of Caucasian "which in the present state of ethnology has no certain meaning." As Holt noted, a literal interpretation of the statute would deny a marriage license to a white woman and a Hungarian nobleman but would permit the marriage of the same woman to an Arab or North African. The jurist argued, furthermore, that nobody could prove without a doubt that they did not have somewhere, generations back, a drop of black blood. "Half the men who fought at Hastings were my grandfathers," reasoned Holt. "Some of them were probably hanged and some knighted, who can tell?" Holt insisted that the "rule of reason" must be applied to law, and therefore "an appreciable amount of foreign blood" must exist to fall within the bounds of the Racial Integrity Act. In this case, the evidence showed "no strain present in the applicant of any blood other than white, except Indian, and there is not enough of that to come within the statute."⁴⁴

In distinguishing between Hungarians and Arabs and North Africans, Holt understood that contemporary ethnography divided humans into five races: Caucasian, Ethiopian, Mongolian, American, and Malay. Hungarians, along with Finns and Turks, were considered Mongolian in origin, while Arabs and North Africans, as well as numerous other darker-skinned, non-European peoples, were deemed Caucasians. At one point, Powell acknowledged that no such thing as an Anglo-Saxon "race" had ever existed, but he concluded that, without a doubt, the words "Anglo-Saxon Civilization" had a distinct cultural meaning. In attempting to

maintain and preserve that culture through legislation, however, Powell and his compatriots failed to recognize that race and color did not necessarily comport with cultural expectations.⁴⁵

Holt's decision stunned Powell, Plecker, and other supporters of the Racial Integrity Act. Newspaper accounts reported that Plecker's office would continue to consider Sorrells and any children as black. An editorial in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* challenged the judge's authority to insist on an appreciable amount of black blood. Normally prone to caustic and vituperative attacks, Powell suppressed personal criticism of the judge but did express an urgent concern with the implications of his ruling. Referring to the birth and marriage records kept by the Bureau of Vital Statistics, Powell warned that Holt's decision, if upheld, "will mean the complete nullification of our most precious possession, our race records, [those of] 1853-1896, our greatest protection against the infusion of negro blood. If this decision is to stand, any negroid in the state can go before a court and say, 'My ancestors are recorded as colored, but that does not mean negro, they were Indians.' He may then be declared white and may marry a white woman." Consequently, exclaimed Powell, "Indians are springing up all over the state as if by spontaneous generation."⁴⁶

Powell's devotion to the state's race records underscores one of the most troublesome aspects of the entire history of the racial integrity crusade in Virginia. Birth and marriage records were kept from 1853 until 1896 and then discontinued until 1912. Five years later, the old records were transferred to the Bureau of Vital Statistics. But no evidence exists to suggest that the old record keepers were especially careful. Many of the records, in fact, were incomplete. "Colored" may well have meant black to one registrar and Indian to another. Plecker and Powell, however, recognized no such uncertainty.⁴⁷

Anthropologists and genealogists agree that tri-racial mixing did occur with some frequency in certain parts of Virginia in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. Whites, Indians, free blacks, and slaves lived as neighbors, most especially along the Tidewater peninsulas between the Rappahannock and James Rivers, but also in the western mountain counties that were home to Atha Sorrells and Dorothy Johns. Some of them certainly fell in love, married, and had children. But just as interracial mixing between whites and blacks slowed to a trickle by the Civil War, so, too, did mixing between Indians, many of whom also had white blood, and blacks. In fact, Indians understood all too well the social implications of blackness. Throughout the late nineteenth century, Virginia Indians sought to separate themselves from their black neighbors, establishing their own schools and churches. Over time, some even dis-

avowed cousins with recognizable black features. As late as 1928, Chief George Cook of the Pamunkey tribe proclaimed, "I will tie a stone around my neck and jump in the James River rather than be classed as a Negro."⁴⁸

Not once prior to the passage of the Racial Integrity Act did Powell or Plecker suggest that their efforts would be aimed at Virginia's Indians. But in the aftermath of the *Sorrells* decision, as individuals and families followed Sorrells's tactic and claimed that any mixed blood was Indian, Plecker attempted to define the state's Indians out of existence. Although tri-racial mixing had certainly occurred, all Virginians of Indian descent did not necessarily have a trace of black blood, a distinction lost on Plecker. Armed with his flawed birth and marriage records, he insisted that no Indians existed in Virginia who did not also share black blood.⁴⁹

While the *Johns* and *Sorrells* cases had originated in the western mountain counties of Amherst and Rockbridge, the majority of Virginians claiming Indian status lived in the eastern Virginia Tidewater counties of Charles City, New Kent, King and Queen, and King William. Plecker devoted himself to interviewing white residents of these counties in an effort to determine the racial classification of the Indians. E. H. Marston and his brother George, both lifelong residents of Charles City County, assured Plecker that no one claimed Indian heritage until the passage of Virginia's first Jim Crow laws at the turn of the century. At that time, a group of mixed-race people organized themselves as the Chickahominy Indians; their first action was to buy train passes that allowed them to ride on whites-only cars. A local registrar in Charles City County confirmed the essence of Marston's account with the story of Hill Adkins, who chose not to join the tribe because he could not afford membership fees. According to the registrar, Adkins said, "I am a negro, and stay with the negroes."⁵⁰

The development of Virginia's Jim Crow laws led many of the Chickahominy Indians to understand that their own self-interest lay in establishing institutions separate from those of their black friends and relatives. After organizing as a tribe, however, a number of Chickahominy Indians maintained their membership in black churches before finally establishing their own Indian congregations. Moreover, their children continued to attend black schools until just a few years before the passage of the Racial Integrity Act, when the Charles City County School Board established a school for Indian children, a development that helped the tribe gain a measure of recognition from census officials in Washington. Members of the Rappahannock tribe, by contrast, were slower to establish their own institutions. In 1924 leading white citizens of Richmond asked the General Assembly to appropriate funds for a school for Rappahannock children.

Barred from white schools and unwilling to attend black schools, many of these children did not go to school at all.⁵¹

The nieces and nephews of William Archer Thaddeus Jones attended the Indian school near Roxbury in January 1925. When Jones attempted to enroll his children in that school, authorities refused on the grounds that he did not appear on the Bureau of Vital Statistics list of "mixed Indians." The superintendent of schools informed Jones's lawyer, however, that the school board would be happy to enroll Jones's children if the Bureau of Vital Statistics would consent to list him as "mixed Indian." In an interview with his legal advisor, Albert O. Boschen, Jones acknowledged that he had not joined the tribe when he had had the chance several years before. During an interview conducted to establish Jones's Indian heritage, Boschen asked, "You understand, Jones, this is simply to get your children into the 'Indian' school, and not to allow you the privilege of riding on the white cars and intermarrying with white people." "Yes sir," responded Jones, "for nothing else."⁵²

Plecker seized upon such anecdotal, and highly distorted, evidence to bolster his belief that all Indians in Virginia had black blood. In anticipation of the 1930 enumeration, Plecker unsuccessfully pleaded with the director of the federal census not to recognize any Virginians as Indians. Plecker acknowledged that he could not change the status of the Pamunkey and Mattaponi, who had lived on reservations in King William County since colonial times. Since these groups had not been taxed and normal records had therefore not been kept, Plecker lacked evidence to prove they were black. Yet he used the information acquired from interviews with individuals such as the Marston brothers to disqualify the claims of the Chickahominy of Charles City County and the Rappahannock of King and Queen and Essex Counties. By contrast, Plecker disqualified the mulattos of Amherst and Rockbridge Counties, whom he identified as the largest and "lowest socially" group of blacks trying to gain Indian status, based on his reading of the census: the 1900 enumeration showed no Indians in Amherst, and only seven appeared in 1910, yet there were 304 in 1920. Certainly, reasoned Plecker, these people were not truly Indians.⁵³

Throughout 1925 Plecker became increasingly strident in his claims that no Virginia Indians were free from black blood. To combat the success of people claiming Indian ancestry, Plecker concentrated on tightening loopholes in the 1924 statute. A legislative act of 1910 had not defined whites, but it had defined blacks as those with one-sixteenth or more black blood. (Before 1910 blacks had been defined as persons with one-fourth or more black blood.) Hence, according to the law of 1910, a person with at

least a drop but less than one-sixteenth black blood was defined as white and prohibited from marrying a black person. The Racial Integrity Act of 1924, however, also prohibited such a person from marrying a white. Plecker became convinced that an amended law, even if it entailed removing the privileges granted under the "Pocahontas Exception," offered the only means of correcting this statutory contradiction and of preventing certain blacks from continuing to pass as whites or Indians.⁵⁴

In late November, Edward P. Bradby, chief of the Charles City and New Kent Chickahominy Indians, whom Plecker considered black, wrote Governor Trinkle concerning Plecker's intentions to introduce this new, amended legislation. Though the disingenuous governor claimed to know nothing of Plecker's plans, Trinkle assured Bradby that the chief would have an opportunity to present his case to the General Assembly. Remarking that "the Indians have certainly given me no trouble since I have been Governor," Trinkle expressed a desire to avoid such trouble in the future. At the same time, Trinkle admonished Plecker "to be conservative and reasonable and not create any ill feeling if it can be avoided between the Indians and the State government. . . . I am afraid sentiment is molding itself along the line that you are too hard on these people and pushing matters too fast."⁵⁵

The governor's warning illuminated the contours of the relationship between Virginia's political leadership and the Anglo-Saxon ideologues. Trinkle and the vast majority of state legislators found it politically expedient to support the agenda of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs. After all, as politicians they had often employed racial imagery successfully in their own campaigns and feared having their own stated devotion to white supremacy questioned. Many of them, however, found certain aspects of the Anglo-Saxon ideology excessive. Enough senators had objected to the mandatory registration statute, for example, to defeat it. As Trinkle realized, Plecker's mission to enforce mandatory registration in his own terms threatened to create a backlash. Yet the nature and power of white supremacy ideology ensured that the governor would only dare to rebuke Plecker in private. Furthermore, the chief executive appears to have been guided more by a reading of public opinion than by personal conviction. Interestingly enough, the perception among whites that Plecker had gone too far extended only to his treatment of those persons claiming Indian ancestry. No whites publicly doubted the essential rightness of the racial integrity measures. At best, Trinkle and the rest of Virginia's political elites chose to offer minimal resistance to expressions of racial extremism. They proved unable and unwilling to turn off the faucet of race hatred from which they so willingly drank.

Despite the governor's warning, Plecker continued to insist that the Chickahominy group had been classified correctly; Trinkle, in turn, assured Plecker that he in no way intended to interfere with Plecker's enforcement of the Racial Integrity Act. At the same time, Trinkle regretted the negative press, which "makes it look as if we are probably working on them pretty hard and continually exposing their misfortune of having colored blood. I know this is humiliating if it is true and I was in hopes that this could be handled in a quiet way so as not to emphasize and embarrass them any more than possible." Plecker, however, considered Trinkle's position an impossibility. His job, regardless of the negative publicity, was to prevent Virginians with any black blood from passing as white. "I am, therefore, unable," Plecker wrote, "to see how it is working any injustice upon them or humiliation for our office to take a firm stand against their intermarriage with white people, or to the preliminary steps of recognition as Indians with permission to attend white schools and to ride in white coaches."⁵⁶

More than likely, Plecker's exchange with the governor only confirmed his belief that Trinkle's attitude constituted part of the problem in the law's enforcement. A month earlier, Plecker had complained to Richmond attorney Hiram Smith about a photograph of Trinkle posing with Chief George Cook of the Pamunkey Indians and his daughter, Pocahontas, that appeared in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Plecker appealed to Smith "and other prominent men to protest against this thing" so that the newspapers would stop running such pictures. Plecker also implicitly criticized Trinkle in a letter to governor-elect Harry Byrd.⁵⁷

Plecker's criticism of Trinkle drew a strong rebuke from his boss, state health commissioner Ennion G. Williams. The reprimand appeared particularly ironic in that Trinkle had consistently supported Plecker's positions and methods in correspondence with both private citizens and public officials. The censure from Williams was not the first time that Plecker overstepped his bounds as a government employee. As director of the state Bureau of Vital Statistics, a division of the public health department, Plecker's duties included the dissemination of modern health information to new parents. His office provided the latest theories on nutrition, the prevention of disease, proper sanitation, and other aspects of health care. Because he held this position, Plecker also was appointed a special agent of the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. Although he was paid only \$1 a year by the federal government, Plecker's position provided him a federal title and authorized him to mail certain state publications using federal franking privileges.⁵⁸

In addition to the authorized mailings, however, Plecker sent out a pam-



At the height of Walter Plecker's crusade against the state's Indians in the late 1920s, Governor Harry F. Byrd continued a long-standing tradition of meeting with representatives of Virginia's Indian tribes. (Courtesy of the Harry F. Byrd Sr. Papers [#9700], Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia)

phlet entitled *Eugenics in Relation to the New Family and the Law on Racial Integrity*. In an effort to warn young white newlyweds, especially men, of the dangers that confronted them, Plecker decreed, "Let the young men who read this realize that the future purity of our race is in their keeping, and that the joining of themselves to females of a lower race and fathering children who shall be a curse and a menace to our State and civilization is a crime against society, and against the purity and integrity of their future homes and the happiness of their future loved ones and themselves." Educators, health workers, and ministers snapped up more than 60,000 copies of the pamphlet.⁵⁹

Relatively quiet at the time of the 1924 act's passage, the black press denounced the dissemination of Plecker's pamphlet. African Americans decried Plecker's assertion that they were incapable, even under the best of circumstances, of advancing to the level of whites. Furthermore, blacks roundly denounced Plecker's equation of blacks with the moronic, criminal, and undesirable. "With the sanction and seal of the great State of Virginia upon his utterances," the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* opined, "Dr.

Plecker, as a Virginia health officer, paid by the taxpayers of the State, Negroes included, is industriously engaged in sowing the seeds of bitterest racial discord, from one end of the country to another." Few whites, reasoned the paper, could possibly read Plecker's literature and not develop a bad reaction to blacks. Labor Department officials agreed that Plecker had exceeded his authority in sending out unauthorized materials and terminated his position.⁶⁰

The loss of his federal position did not slow down Plecker for a moment. He joined John Powell and several other colleagues in extending their influence to the censorship of motion pictures through the Board of Censors, established by the Virginia General Assembly in 1922 and charged with reviewing each motion picture submitted for public viewing in the state. Board members understood that their mandate demanded the censorship of films that portrayed blacks and whites in a manner inconsistent with accepted racial norms. In fact, the board stated clearly in an early annual report that it had "scrutinized with peculiar care all films which touch upon the relations existing between whites and blacks. Every scene or subtitle calculated to produce friction between the races is eliminated." In this regard, the censors worked hard to make sure that Virginians saw only stereotypical images of blacks on the screen: the faithful servant, the ignorant child, and the loathsome criminal. After 1924 the censors consistently explained their decisions in light of the Racial Integrity Act. Moreover, Powell and Plecker used the censorship of such films to judge the fealty of white public officials to their agenda.⁶¹

Most of the films that dared to address racial issues in meaningful terms and to present blacks as fully human were produced by black film entrepreneurs. Historian Thomas Cripps eloquently reveals the degree to which Hollywood productions in the 1910s and 1920s failed to present blacks in ways other than stereotypically subhuman. "At their most well meaning," he concludes, "white movies never really touched the Negro world. That market was supplied by a thin stream of movies created by blacks for black audiences." By the mid-1920s, Oscar Micheaux stood at the forefront of those producing these so-called "race films."⁶²

One Micheaux biographer writes that the filmmaker intended his films to "depict accurately the social, economic, and political conditions under which the black man lived in the United States." Although his films were seen almost exclusively by other blacks, Micheaux refused to produce pictures that simply placed blacks in a favorable light. He understood that, just as Hollywood films that portrayed only the innocent "man-child" or

the "bad nigger" failed to develop blacks in human terms, films that focused only on the growing black middle and professional class ignored the daily reality of the lives of most African Americans.⁶³ Historian Charlene Regester emphasizes that, while determined to "portray blacks neither as degraded caricatures, as white filmmakers had done, nor as one-dimensional, angelic caricatures," Micheaux sought to construct "a racial image of which they could be proud." In this pursuit, the black filmmaker settled upon themes that by definition challenged the sensibilities of white censors. As Regester aptly notes, Micheaux's "films often exposed intraracial and interracial prejudice, color consciousness, hypocritical ministers, corrupt politicians, interracial relationships, incestuous relationships, and vices he felt were destructive of the moral fiber of the African American community." In addition, Micheaux indicted "white America's racism by attacking lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, and the denial of economic and educational opportunities to African Americans."⁶⁴

In March 1925 the Virginia Board of Censors screened *The House behind the Cedars*. Just as had occurred with the examination of two previous Micheaux films, the board's consideration of *The House behind the Cedars* engendered significant controversy. Unlike previous deliberations, however, in this case Oscar Micheaux readily agreed to recut the film according to the censors' wishes and thus was not the actual focus of the uproar. Instead, the board's deliberations became a litmus test for the proper allegiance of white civil servants to the Racial Integrity Act. When Arthur James, an assistant commissioner of public welfare, failed to object to the film with sufficient vehemence, John Powell and members of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs threatened to ruin his career.⁶⁵

The House behind the Cedars tells the story of a mulatto woman who successfully passes as white and becomes engaged to a wealthy white North Carolinian. Before they are married, however, the woman decides to return to her black lover. The young white man, apparently deeply in love and now aware of her color, continues to pursue her until she marries the black suitor. Moreover, the film addresses the general mistreatment of blacks in a segregated society. Not surprisingly, the Virginia Board of Censors found the movie "so objectionable, in fact, as to necessitate its total rejection." The three members, however, chose to screen the film a second time in the presence of at least a half-dozen state officials and private citizens. When reviewing particularly controversial films, the board often called in others to help them pass judgment. In this case, the censors were joined by state labor commissioner John H. Hall Jr., Arthur James of the Department of Public Welfare, Walter Plecker, Earnest Sevier Cox,

Louise Burleigh (later the wife of John Powell), a Mrs. Beattie and a Mrs. Staples. Most of these individuals had gone on record as strict advocates of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act.⁶⁶

The board's report concluded that movies were not "the medium" for handling touchy subjects such as black grievances and intermarriage between the races. Members, however, failed to suggest a more appropriate forum. The censors recognized that *The House behind the Cedars* would screen only in black theaters, but they felt that its exhibition would prove especially harmful in those venues since it was "liable to cause friction between the races and might therefore incite to crime." In a nod to the influence of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs, the Virginia Board of Censors noted that "the picture, either purposely or through the maladroitness of the producers, at least indirectly contravenes the spirit of the recently enacted anti-miscegenation law which put Virginia in the forefront as a pioneer in legislation aimed to preserve the integrity of the white race."⁶⁷

As soon as he received word of the board's decision, Oscar Micheaux responded that he had adapted *The House behind the Cedars* from the novel by Charles Chesnutt, which had been published thirty years earlier and "read by over a thousand white people to every colored person." The filmmaker noted that no other state or local censorship board had ordered eliminations, and that the film had run without incident in theaters across the country. Nevertheless, he indicated his willingness to "reconstruct and eliminate so as to destroy that of which you complain." Micheaux concluded by disavowing any personal interest in promoting interracial marriage and assured the Virginia board that he had no interest "in propaganda or of waging any idea that is likely to incite to riot." While complying with the whims of the censors, Micheaux took the opportunity to let the board know that he felt they had overestimated the negative impact his film might have on other blacks. "There has been but one picture that incited the colored people to riot, and that still does," he explained. "[T]hat picture is *The Birth of a Nation*."⁶⁸

Although Micheaux claimed to appreciate the board's attempt to treat him fairly by calling in the group of citizens, he delicately called into question the board's policy of exclusion when he wrote, "I cannot gather from your ruling, however, that you called in any of your representative colored citizens of Richmond to help you sit in judgment. If you regard the colored Tax payers and leaders as being capable of thought, which I am sure you do, I could more fully appreciate your effort." No doubt Micheaux intended his comment as backhanded criticism. He informed the Virginia censors that in several cases in other southern states "representative Colored people were called in to express their opinion," an ar-

rangment that allayed white fears and reflected growing efforts to achieve interracial cooperation. Micheaux admitted to the Virginia censors that he had initially intended to ask them to allow representative black citizens to screen *The House behind the Cedars* but ultimately decided to "avoid controversy and delay."⁶⁹

The Virginia Board of Censors greeted warmly Micheaux's willingness to make whatever cuts they ordered. In fact, the censors allowed the filmmaker to use their facilities to eliminate a few scenes from his reconstructed version. Micheaux cut one subtitle that implied that a black man would marry a white woman, another that read, "You are going away and will pass as white and marry a fine white man," and a third that contained a derogatory remark of a white doctor toward "trifling negroes" and to the "'pretty women along the borderland' of the race." The board also ordered Micheaux to cut remaining references to the wealthy white man's continued pursuit of the mulatto woman who spurned him for a black man. It is difficult to imagine what remained of the original story, but the board licensed *The House behind the Cedars*, and Micheaux exhibited it in black theaters in the Old Dominion.⁷⁰

Several weeks after the Virginia board reviewed Micheaux's film, John Powell returned to Richmond after a prolonged absence. Upon his return, close friends and colleagues, including Walter Plecker, Earnest Cox, and Louise Burleigh, reported that Arthur James had made inappropriate comments at a meeting of the Board of Censors. Although the official report of the censors gave no indication of the brewing controversy, Burleigh reported that James had expressed opinions "so opposed to the consensus as to indicate that Mr. James' feeling about the proper position of the races differed fundamentally from that of the other people present and from the accepted standard in Virginia." In particular, James reportedly dismissed the need to make certain cuts in the film because "you can at any time, go up to Atlantic City and see the best people in Richmond dancing in cabarets with negresses." James further offended his accusers when he said that he would like to see the most competent black lawyers, doctors, and ministers move to Richmond. Burleigh's report reminded Powell of a visit he made in January 1925 to James's office, where he saw a copy of Plecker's controversial eugenics pamphlet. Powell claimed that when he remarked favorably upon the publication, James "criticized it severely, stating that Dr. Plecker had gone too far and . . . was using his official position to conduct a campaign of propaganda against the negro."⁷¹

Powell now informed James that "such views and expressions on the part of a State official—especially one connected with the Board of Public Welfare, constituted, in the present delicate and tense situation, a very real

menace to the public." While claiming to recognize James's freedom of speech and thought on a personal level, Powell declared, "I shall not hesitate to criticize the actions and expressed views of public servants whenever they may seem to me unsound or dangerous." Powell subsequently convened a closed meeting of Anglo-Saxon Post No. 1, whose members decided to write James and ask him to explain his opinions. James denied making the statements ascribed to him, but Powell's informants offered to provide signed statements to their accounts. Powell appeared to relish his role as self-appointed judge and told James that he would happily publicize the results once James resolved his differences with his accusers. "If, however, you desire," Powell continued, "to institute against me a suit for slander, I must tell you without any hesitation that I should welcome the opportunity to clear up before the public a matter so deeply affecting the public welfare." Several weeks later, Powell sent James the signed statements of Cox and Burleigh and apparently made his point.⁷²

Although Powell's antics underscored the lengths to which the Anglo-Saxons went to ensure conformity, his threats and intimidation failed to derail James's career. Several years after the incident, James was promoted to commissioner of the Virginia Department of Public Welfare, and he served with distinction in a number of state and federal posts for several decades to come. Nevertheless, the influence of John Powell, Walter Plecker, and Earnest Cox in the deliberations of the Virginia Board of Censors assured not only that any films addressing serious racial issues would not be seen in the Old Dominion, but that white opponents of the ideological extremism of the Anglo-Saxons would find it difficult to express themselves.⁷³

In 1931 northern novelist and essayist George Schuyler published *Black No More*, a brilliant satire in which Junius Crookman, a black medical researcher and doctor, recognized that "if there were no Negroes, there could be no Negro problem. Without a Negro problem, Americans could concentrate their attention on something constructive." Using a new chemical process that he had invented, Crookman offered black men, women, and children an opportunity to become white and therefore to rid themselves of all the barriers that blackness placed in their way. African Americans all over the United States underwent the treatment, causing immense consternation as "one couldn't tell who was who." In response, membership in the Knights of Nordica, a clear reference to the Ku Klux Klan, soared, although it became impossible to ascertain the color of new members.⁷⁴

While Schuyler spared no one—black or white, rich or poor—he saved

his sharpest barbs for two white southerners connected with the Anglo-Saxon Association of America. Headquartered in Richmond, its members were "too highbrow" to join the Knights of Nordica; no one could have mistaken the object of Schuyler's wit or wrath. Arthur Snobbcraft, the group's president and a descendant of one of the First Families of Virginia (FFV), had devoted his life to "white racial integrity and Anglo-Saxon supremacy." Dr. Samuel Buggerie, a statistician, "professional Anglo-Saxon," and FFV, believed that millions of lower-class whites had black ancestors. After an intense investigation, Buggerie stunned Snobbcraft with the unexpected and devastating truth that black blood extended deep into the family tree of most FFVs, the two of them included. When a member of Buggerie's research team, a recipient of Crookman's treatment, released the report that identified thousands of upper-class whites as black, Snobbcraft and Buggerie were forced to flee Richmond. When their plane crash-landed in Mississippi, the pair were caught and identified by a rabid mob that recognized them from the newspapers. Snobbcraft and Buggerie, the fiercest advocates of Anglo-Saxon purity and superiority, were lynched for being black.⁷⁵

John Powell and Walter Plecker avoided such an ending, of course, but Schuyler's keen powers of observation penetrated to the heart of the campaign for racial purity. Despite its absurdity, the determination of the Anglo-Saxons to identify even the slightest trace of black ancestry in white Virginians appealed to elites obsessed with their own bloodlines and convinced of their own superiority. A number of more thoughtful whites, including Douglas Southall Freeman, never felt the imminent danger that so concerned Powell and Plecker. But Freeman, like all elites, did support the essential goals of the Anglo-Saxons, as well as the assumptions that undergirded the movement. Moreover, the realities of white supremacy ensured that whites of "good will" did nothing to protect the racial integrity of African Americans. Deeply cognizant that the management of white supremacy was completely one-sided in this respect, as in all others, *Richmond Planet* editor John Mitchell remarked that a revised racial integrity bill "should be amended so as to read that no person, who may have any perceptible trace of white blood in their veins shall be regarded or classified as a Negro." Mitchell's quip drew the enthusiastic praise of George Schuyler.⁷⁶

Before long, members of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs launched an assault that ultimately led to the passage, in 1926, of Virginia's Public Assemblages Act, a statute that mandated the separation of the races in all public places. The agitation over the proposed measure revealed that John Powell and his supporters were not, in fact, concerned primarily with biological

interracial mixing, but rather with ensuring that blacks remained second-class citizens. The issue placed white paternalists in a difficult bind and left them struggling to negotiate a middle ground between professions of goodwill for their black neighbors and fealty to the dictates of white supremacy. More important, the passage of the measure further revealed to black Virginians the inherent emptiness of white elite paternalism.

4

Educating Citizens or Servants?

HAMPTON INSTITUTE AND THE DIVIDED MIND
OF WHITE VIRGINIANS

It is clear that the numerous laws and regulations enacted to halt associations between the colored and white people on a plane of equality have been written by the few and not the many. It was the "pillars of society" who insisted upon racial segregation. Jim Crow schools, railroad coaches, bus compartments and waiting rooms would not exist if those who are influential in American society had opposed them.

—GEORGE SCHUYLER, 1944

On February 21, 1925, Grace B. Copeland of Newport News attended a dance recital at Hampton Institute's Ogden Hall. Whether or not the 2,000-seat auditorium had sold out because, as one trustee later noted, "the dancers were practically naked and therefore everybody went," Mrs. Copeland arrived late and discovered that the only remaining seats were next to a group of black patrons. Three weeks later her husband, newspaper editor Walter Scott Copeland, wrote a blistering piece in the *Newport News Daily Press* in which he accused the school of teaching and practicing "social equality between the white and negro races." Without mentioning the specific experience of his wife, Copeland noted the school's wealth, fine library and facilities, and the presence of an auditorium that hosted "the highest class" of costly plays, recitals, and concerts. The editor thundered that "there is no pretense of separating the races in the auditorium. To the contrary, the whites are informed that if they attend the entertainments