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JULY 2021





Towering over the crowded street below, a lone Confederate soldier stands sentinel over the American hall of “justice.” Musket by his side, the stony visage of white supremacy casts his ugly gaze across a line of brave souls slowly trudging into the open mouth of Pasquotank County Courthouse. Four Elizabeth City defendants brace themselves against the reckless wind of injustice as they begin a campaign in defense of their right to protest, assemble, and speak.

A few months before this June day, the defendants had been arrested on obstruction of traffic charges while protesting the murder of Andrew Brown. Mr. Brown, a 42-year old Black man, was gunned down by Sheriff's Deputies in the Shepard-Street Road Historic District, the historically Black neighborhood he called home. Residents of the city took to the streets in response to this heinous, state-sanctioned killing, expressing their righteous anger at a system that excused the execution of a fellow inhabitant of the Pasquotank County seat as “justified” (in the words of DA Womble), despite the fact that Mr. Brown was fleeing, unarmed, and died as the result of a bullet to the back of his head. Protests continued daily in the face of militarized riot police; an arguably unlawful curfew; and numerous arrests, including of journalists and legal observers.

These daily protests were not the city’s first interaction with the endless struggle for freedom and racial justice. In fact, the streets of this “Harbor of Hospitality” have seen many a clash that, together, provide historical context for the city’s continuing fight for racial justice. Prior to the Civil War, the Great Dismal Swamp, located on the edge of Elizabeth City, was utilized as a way-station on the Underground Railroad and a common hiding place for fugitive slaves. In the 1860s, regiments of the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT), including some who had escaped slavery in the very same region, raided plantations and freed their fellow man from the reprehensible bondage of enslavement. The streets near the former USCT encampment have since been utilized for a very different purpose: the staging ground for law enforcement efforts to encroach on the freedoms of the city’s Black residents to protest racial injustice and police bias.



In the 1960s, pickets and sit-ins became a key tool in the battle against segregation. Hundreds of marchers, ranging from local residents to students at the nearby Elizabeth City State Teachers College, protested en masse in an effort to desegregate downtown businesses. The March for Freedom, organized in coordination with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), became a key moment in Elizabeth City's history. Today, a new wave of activists proudly continues the work of freedom fighters before them. Like many who participated in the March for Freedom, the successors of the students and residents who battled desegregation find themselves stuck inside the tilted scales of the "justice" system facing an unjust attack on their rights.

Inside the courtroom, tall, domed windows cast the resolute defendants in a glowing light, as Judge Foster, the visiting Judge from Greensboro, took his place at the head of the room. A hush fell over the congregation as court was called to order. One by one, the defendants rose to state their pleas: "Not Guilty!"

As the morning progressed, the two Black defendants (the other two are white) were informed that they had to be fingerprinted at the police station nearby. One of the white defendants, confused, questioned the officers why only the Black protestors were facing this additional repression. Leaving his questions unanswered, armed law official escorted the Black individuals from the room. Walked down the baking sidewalk with no shield from cameras and no explanation for why they were being fingerprinted after minor traffic charges, the two were ordered into the station. Emancipate NC staff arrived quickly, expressing dismay at this shocking disregard for equity and arrestee privacy. After a confrontation with local law enforcement officials, by the end of which one protestor was fingerprinted and one was not, Emancipate NC staff returned to the courtroom to share their concerns with Judge Foster.



Attorney Dawn Blagrove spoke clearly and firmly to the passive room, rebuking the disparate treatment of her clients by government officials. As she began to reach her point, the Judge cut in, angrily attempting to block Blagrove from speaking: “I don’t want to get involved in the politics of Pasquotank County!”

Attorney Blagrove spoke again, resolutely stating that this act of discrimination needed to be read into the record. Judge Foster blocked her expression once more, in a clear disregard for what had just occurred within his courtroom. The defendants and their advocates marched from the chamber, joining the growing crowd outside.

A few hours later, the mass of local residents reassembled outside the courthouse doors for their daily march. The group huddled together, discussing the events of the morning, before beginning down the scenic city streets. Chants calling for justice radiated through the air above flowing “Black Lives Matter” flags as following cars honked their horns in support. With heads held high, the marchers, including the morning defendants, made their way across the bridge separating Pasquotank and Camden counties.

As the sun began its descent, the assembly returned to the courthouse. Red rays of light bathed the street in a warm hue as the congregation slowly mingled and dispersed. High atop his lavish base, the Confederate soldier continued his vigil over the Courthouse, standing in opposition to the equity and fair treatment the “justice” system so often claims to represent. With stony eyes closed to the principle of fairness, the soldier represents a promise of a system still steeped in racial bias and punitive pain. One day, the twisted ideals that keep this statute standing tall will crumble, making way for a just world devoid of the carceral system that continues to block out the light of liberation. Until then, the brave people of Elizabeth City, and so many other municipalities, will continue their march for freedom.

# We thank you for your ongoing support of our programs

## Acknowledgements

This work was made possible by our generous  
funders and our incredible Emancipate NC team:

**Executive Director Dawn Blagrove**  
**Associate Director Elizabeth Simpson**  
**Organizer Kerwin Pittman**  
**Attorney Ian Mance**  
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**Law Student Fellow J Hallen**  
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