

# The Adkin High School Walkout

---

**“ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO COME AFTER”**

**A LEGACY OF COURAGE AND DARING**

**(REMEMBERING OUR HERITAGE)**

In mid-November of 1951, in a social studies class at Adkin High School here in Kinston, North Carolina, some students were challenged by an article in “The Weekly Reader,” a national newspaper written for students. The article focused on quality education and educational physical facilities.

These students were satisfied with the quality of education at Adkin, for we had some very dedicated and competent instructors and an excellent administrator. However, we were not satisfied with the physical facilities on our campus. We needed more quality space. There was a particular need for an entirely new gymnasium to meet the health and recreation needs of the student population. The Industrial Arts students of Adkin constructed our gymnasium with World War II used materials. It was heated by two exposed wood and coal stove ovens in two corners. We affectionately called the gym, “The Barn.”

In the discussion, the question arose as to how we could get the results that we needed. There evolved a strategy bringing together the junior and senior classes. A part of this strategy was the implementation of a strike. The idea had been suggested to this group of students by someone who had listened to the initial discussion and concern in that classroom setting.

An ad hoc committee was formed and a plan was devised to seek a meeting with the Kinston Graded School Board, whereby the committee could present its concerns and press for action. The Board of Education was contacted and the board members agreed to meet with the ad hoc committee.

Judging by past neglect of the Board of Education, the committee prepared itself for negative results that may come from the board’s meeting. The entire student body of Adkin was convened in the school’s auditorium without the presence of the administration or faculty members. This meeting was held prior to the scheduled meeting of the Board of Education. A discussion was held and a plan of action was put in place.

The plan of action was that the entire Adkin student body would go out on strike if the ad hoc committee was rebuffed by the Board of Education. An announcement was to come over the public address system that, *“Carolyn Coefield has lost her red pocket book. If anyone has found it please return it to the office.”*

On November 19, 1951 the school board received the committee with a degree of courtesy and surprise. For Black students to appear before a White school board was, at that time,

unprecedented in Kinston or in the state of North Carolina. Nevertheless, the school board, whose chairman was Mr. George Carter, heard the concerns of the ad hoc committee. Students who went to the board meeting included: Calvin Thompson, Carolyn Coefield, Paul Frederick Thompson, John Dudley and Thomas Loftin. The end result was that the committee was told that the school board's budget did not allow for the building improvements and construction that was requested. In short, the board's answer to the request was negative.

The ad hoc committee--composed of Paul Frederick Thompson, John Dudley, Edna Jones, Calvin Thompson, Levon Coefield, Thomas Loftin and Carolyn Coefield—met briefly after the board's meeting. They agreed to go forward with their contingency plans and institute the strike plan in the next meeting.

True to the prearrangements, the announcement went forth from the office of the school's secretary, Ms. Bonnie D. Lawson, that "*Carolyn Coefield has lost her red pocket book...*" With that announcement, the entire student body of over 700, orderly, quietly, and without incident poured out of the building. In straight lines and columns, the students marched from the school through the main street of the city carrying banners and placards they had made. By prearrangement, the students gathered at the Old Carver Theater on Washington St. in east Kinston, across from the Mitchell Wooten Court Apartments.

The City of Kinston was startled. The white power structure of this southeastern town was confused and baffled. The smoothly organized and implementation of the walkout plan was unknown to parents, or the teachers and administration at Adkin. There were no incidents accompanying the walkout.

The strike went on for several days. The student committee sought advice from Mrs. J.J. Hannibal and the local NAACP. PTA meetings ensued. Board of Education personnel, the superintendent of schools, Mr. J.P. Booth, and the editor of the Kinston Daily Free Press, Mr. H. Galt Braxton, all publicly declared that the walkout was ill-advised. The entire establishment was caught off guard by the courageous and daring Adkin students who could take the benign neglect no longer. Their minds were made up.

Feeling that the point was well made, and not wanting to further disrupt the education process, the students returned to classes after the Thanksgiving holidays.

The Kinston Graded School Board subsequently found the money they initially claimed they did not have and erected a new and modern addition to Adkin. It was completed in the fall of 1953. The new facility contained the largest gymnasium floor space in eastern North Carolina, with adequate seating for the entire student body and more. Additionally, the new building had industrial arts shops for carpentry, bricklaying, and auto mechanics. A modern home economics teaching suite, a band practice room, an auxiliary class room, male and female dressing rooms, and coach's suites were all in the package. In its time, there was no equal in the state.

Generations to come will be grateful for those brave souls who took part in that unprecedented strike on November 20 of 1951. Many students benefitted from the new facilities. The brave and courageous students of Adkin demonstrated the power of tenacity,

teamwork and thorough planning. They garnered the support of their parents and the Black community while they awoke the conscience of the erstwhile status quo mindset of the White power structure.

In 1994, the Adkin High School Alumni and Friends, Inc. acquired the former gymnasium complex from the city of Kinston. At that time it was a run down, underused facility being run by the Kinston Recreation Department. This neglected building was in dire need of rehabilitation.

Hard work by the alumni, friends, and their generous contributions, along with grants by the State of North Carolina, this building has been remodeled and established as the Charles B. Stewart Alumni Center. It stands as a legacy to those students that acted en masse to the clarion call that, "*Carolyn Coefield has lost her red pocket book...*"

authentication was taken from the *Kinston Daily Free Press* and was edited by Reginald J. Stewart, '54.