

Pardon

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The Wilmington 10, with the Rev. Benjamin Chavis at left front, were eventually pardoned by the governor of North Carolina.

When Gov. Hunt first took office in 1977, the Wilmington Ten – nine young black males and one white female led by the fiery Rev. Benjamin Chavis – had already been tried, convicted and sentenced to a combined 282 years in prison in 1972. Defense attorneys were unsuccessful appealing those convictions to state courts, and an appeal to the US Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals was pending.

Upon taking office, Hunt indicated that he wanted to review the historic case, and once all of the state appeals ran out, he would step in if needed.

It was during this time that letters from literally all over

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the country and the world began pouring in to Gov. Hunt’s office, both pro and con.

One of them was from Dean Smith. Addressed to “The Honorable James B. Hunt, Jr. – Governor,” Coach Smith wrote:

“Lee Upperman, our former basketball manager and now one of the attorneys for the Wilmington 10, has allowed me to read the Petition for Pardon of these ten people,” Coach Smith wrote to Hunt. “Without knowing the full details, other than what I have carefully examined in the Petition for Pardon, I would still urge you as a citizen to truly pardon these ten who have already served what many would consider a just sentence for what they had been determined guilty.”

Smith continued, “Apparently there is no chance for a new trial and for them to serve the number of years given them in a rather strange way, would seem to be excessive.”

Coach Smith concluded his letter to the governor with, “As a citizen who supported you for Governor in the November election, I would urge you to pardon the Wilm-

ington 10 if you do have that right.” “Most sincerely, Dean E. Smith.” The coach signed it simply “Dean.”

But the letter didn’t finish there. In what apparently was Dean Smith’s handwriting, he adds a postscript:

“Bob Seymour has provided me with some additional material on these 10 people which would lead one to believe injustice was done.”

Smith then initialed the handwritten notation. The significance of Smith’s July 1977 letter is the fact that he marked the envelope “PERSONAL & CONFIDENTIAL” meaning that he wanted his request to be seen, and considered, only by the governor, and not be made public.

Given the raging national and worldwide controversy about the Wilmington Ten case, and how they were falsely convicted for the arson destruction of a white-owned grocery store in Wilmington

during the height of racial tensions there in February 1971, Smith would have found himself in the crossfire between civil rights and law enforcement groups who were bitterly divided.

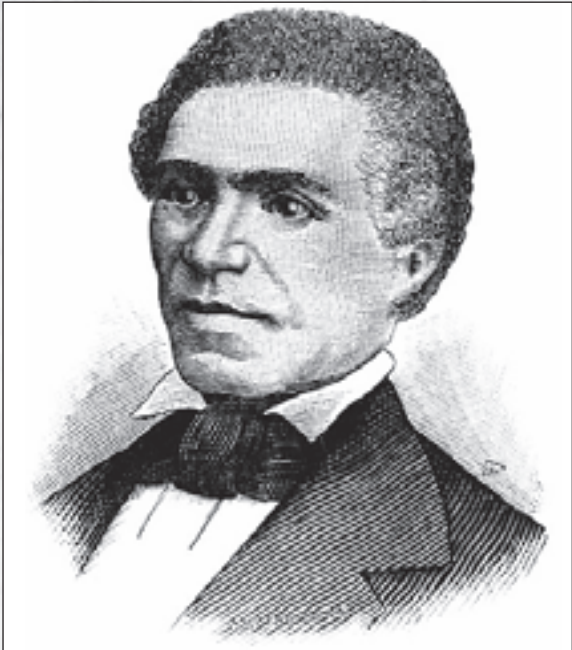
While African-Americans and white liberals would have welcomed someone of Coach Smith’s stature and high profile in support of their worldwide movement to free the “freedom fighters” Wilmington Ten, Smith would have been instantly vilified by members of the NC judiciary, North Carolina’s business community, and even conservative US Sen. Jesse Helms – all of whom who considered the Ten to be dangerous radicals – and wrote numerous letters to Gov. Hunt opposing freeing them.

His controversial involvement would have undoubtedly put an unwanted cloud over his basketball program at UNC if word ever leaked at that time, and his judgement on race would have once again been questioned.

Because of a recent change in policy, letters sent to the Governor’s Office of Executive Clemency in the past ten years to be considered during pardons cases are no longer considered public record, in an effort to protect those who communicate with the governor, who has the sole discretion in issuing pardons.

In the State Archives, an unsigned drafted letter dated Sept. 1, 1977 apparently from Gov. James Hunt, responds to Coach Smith, thanking him for his missive, and telling Smith that until all of the state courts considering appeals in the case have decided, he will abide by a policy of not stepping in.

John Russwurm



John Brown Russwurm (1799–1851) was an American abolitionist from Jamaica, known for his newspaper, Freedom’s Journal. He was born in Jamaica to an English merchant father and an enslaved mother. He spent much of his life in close relationships with his father and his father’s wife, who adopted him into the family and sent him to school. At his graduation from Bowdoin College in 1824, he became just the third African American to graduate from college in the United States. Moving to New York City in 1827, he and his partner Samuel Cornish published the first edition of Freedom’s Journal, an abolitionist newspaper dedicated to opposition of slavery. Freedom’s Journal was the first newspaper in the United States to be owned, operated, published and edited by African Americans. Upon becoming senior editor in September 1827, Russwurm used his position to change the paper’s initially negative stance on the colonialization of Africa by African Americans to a positive advocacy for this position. These strong views alienated many of the readers and ultimately resulted in Russwurm’s resignation in March 1829, after which he immigrated to Liberia.

Pioneers

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although it was anti-slavery and anti-black all at the same time.”

Throughout the exhibition’s run, community members will be invited to participate in special conversations with leaders and elders from Portland’s African American community. These community conversations will take place throughout Portland, and a full list of these programs as well as other associated events can be found at www.oregonblackpioneers.org and www.ohs.org.

The last panel in the exhibit is about the emerging Black Panther party; it’s called “Rumblings of the Future”

“This is where we start kind of teasing about the next time period,” Carr says. That’s the 60’s and 70’s – and Carr says it’ll be ready in about two years.

A Community on the Move will be on display through June 28. Oregon Historical Society museum hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and Noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday. General admission is \$11, and discounts are available for students, seniors, and youth. Admission is free every day to residents of Multnomah County and members of the Oregon Historical Society.

The Oregon Historical Society is located at 1200 SW Park Avenue. Find out more at www.ohs.org.

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