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Walter Nathaniel Ridley
(1910-1996)
Papers, 1958-1968

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Biographical Note:

Walter Nathaniel Ridley, the first African-American to receive a degree from a traditional Southern white college or university, became the fifth president of Elizabeth City State College on September 1, 1958.

He was one of eight children born to John Hoskins Ridley and Mary Haywood Ridley after the family moved from North Carolina in 1896 Newport News, Virginia. His father was a Louisburg, North Carolina native and the son of an emancipated slave. He spent his career working in the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, where he rose from laborer to Chief Steward. He was one of the founding officers of Crown Savings Bank. His mother, Raleigh native Mary Haywood Ridley, was a musician who taught piano. Their son Walter was born on April 1, 1910.



Walter Ridley was educated in the public schools of Newport News, and earned his bachelor's and Master's degrees in psychology, Cum Laude, from Howard University in 1931 and 1933 respectively. A member of the Kappa Alpha Mu Honor Society at Howard, he later served as its National president for several years. He found work as a case worker for the Federal Emergency Relief Agency in Washington, DC between 1933 and 1934, and then became an educational advisor to the Civilian Conservation Corps in Pennsylvania and Maryland in 1934-1936.

In 1936 Walter Ridley's service as an educator began at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia. He began his career teaching psychology and heading the extension department. After his marriage to Henrietta E. Bonaparte of St. Paul, MN on July 28, 1939, he was determined to earn a doctorate, but the only institution in the State of Virginia which granted such degrees was the University of Virginia. He sought admission more than once and was denied, despite his protestations that, "My father has paid taxes in this state since before I was born and I am entitled to study here".

The state of Virginia eventually paid him a subsidy to leave and study in the North, and he studied at the University of Minnesota during 1939-1940, at Ohio State University in 1941, and assumed the position of head of the Psychology Department at Virginia State in 1943. He returned to classes in Minnesota in 1945-1946. His research for the dissertation focused on the question of whether audio-visual materials used in schools contained content which would be deleterious to black students. After suffering a hemorrhage in his eye, he was advised by doctors to discontinue his research, and he returned to Virginia.

Shortly afterward, he was visited in Petersburg by Dean Stiles of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, which had recently decided to recruit black students who were "highly likely to be successful". Mr. Ridley applied and in 1951 was quickly accepted.

Earning the Doctorate of Education degree from the University of Virginia in 1953, Ridley graduated with high honors and was a member of Kappa Delta Pi honor society at U VA. His pioneering achievement in desegregating the University of Virginia was noted in the national and international press at the time, but his years at UVa were not marked by resistance to his

presence or the violence that occurred some years later when other African-Americans broke color barriers at other Southern institutions. After 21 years, Dr. Ridley left Virginia State in 1957 to become academic dean of St. Paul's Polytechnic Institute in Lawrenceville, Virginia.

In 1958 he began what he regarded as his most significant academic work, that of president of the small, black Elizabeth City State Teachers College. During his 10 years as president, Dr. Ridley presided over a significant growth of the school's enrollment, campus and academic standing, laying the groundwork for its inclusion as a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina General Administration in 1969. Regarding the one major (Elementary Education) offered to the students in 1958, he told Evelyn A. Johnson,

“I feel that Elizabeth City State Teachers College has a reasonably good plan—a nice plan for a small institution of perhaps 600 to 700 students. I see physical education as the best area to begin a major program in secondary education. It has the best equipment, is the best organized in its business operations and support of any other area or curriculum on campus”.*

Between the years of 1959 and 1963, under Ridley's administrative leadership, the institution expanded from the one elementary education major offered to 13 academic majors. The number of faculty Ph.ds increased markedly, and the number of students went from 400 in 1958 to 1,013 in 1965. The school achieved full accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools for the first time in 1961, on the condition that it continued its growth and improvement.

Evelyn A. Johnson further described the Ridley years at Elizabeth City State College:

As the leader of the institution, it was Dr. Ridley's job to determine the direction which the college would take and steer it toward established goals. Using his analytical mind, he conferred with department heads and administrative personnel to talk about the assets and liabilities of the school....The challenge to move forward was there. This strong, courageous, fearless man began planning, driving, and pushing obstacles aside with alacrity, as if every moment could not and should not be lost. A perfectionist at heart, he was admired by some and disliked by others”.*

The man who had been kept out of school because of his skin color did not measure his success at Elizabeth City strictly by the numbers of students, books, teachers and buildings he added. He also made sure during his years as president that the traditionally black college admitted its first white student, an event documented by Walter Cronkite and Mike Wallace in a televised CBS documentary, “Integration in Reverse”. Ridley's tenure at the school coincided with a turbulent period of social unrest and the ignition of the civil rights movement in America. He moved the school forward in an atmosphere of, for the times, comparative calm. Evelyn A. Johnson summarized Dr. Ridley's management style:

“Directives from the office of the president were respected by the faculty and students as being of the utmost importance. Delays and procrastination in carrying out an assigned duty were not tolerated. A chairman of a committee was expected to call and hold meetings within a reasonable time and to submit his minutes to the office of the dean

within 48 hours after the meeting...all persons working in the institution were knowledgeable about its inner operation and current happenings.”*

Named “Tar Heel of the Week” by the Raleigh News and Observer in 1964, he took that opportunity to observe that North Carolina had “...a racial climate with more problems and more possibilities” than anywhere else in the south. On February 13, 1967 told student body in a Sunday Vespers service, “Schools are not equal in a democracy. Southern schools are not equal to Northern schools; rural schools are not equal to city schools; and Negro schools are not equal to white schools...we must catch up to the other schools, and all students must have the opportunity to take responsibilities because this is a part of a democracy”.

After resigning the presidency of Elizabeth City State College in 1968, Dr. Ridley returned to the classroom as a professor and department chair at Pennsylvania’s West Chester University. He earned the designation of “Professor Emeritus” at the end of his service to West Chester, and was honored with the designation of President Emeritus of Elizabeth City State University in 1988.

The breadth of Walter Ridley’s educational service is indicated by his affiliations, honors and publications. He was a charter member of the United States Commission on UNESCO in 1946. He served on the Antioch (Ohio) College Board of Trustees, and was a member of the corporation of the Save the Children Federation. He was a ten-year member of the CIAA Presidents Council and held the office of president of that organization for four years. His affiliations include the American Teachers Association (president and treasurer); the National Education Association; Joint NEA-ATA committee of which he was secretary; Council on Psychological Resources in the South; Junior Town Meeting of America; Alpha Kappa Mu, national president; Virginia Association of Mental Health; Virginia Academy of Science; American Psychological Association; and Association of University Professors. In addition to his membership in Alpha Kappa Mu, he held membership in Phi Delta Kappa, Kappa Delta Pi and Kappa Mu and Omega Psi Phi honor societies. Dr. Ridley’s publications include articles on Salary Equalization, Radio in Education, Audio-Visual Aids, Mental Health, and Prediction of Academic Success, appearing in *Mental Health in Virginia*, *NEA Journal*; *Journal of Negro Education*, *Measured Abilities*, and the *Virginia Journal of Science*. Dr. Ridley was a 22 year member of the Board of Directors of Chester Memorial Hospital.

Dr. Walter N. Ridley died on April 1, 1996.

Additional Biographical Essay:

“Innovator”; “Father of Today’s University” ; “Civil Rights Giant”; “Stubborn”; “Difficult” “Brash”; All of these descriptors were used at various times to describe the character and demeanor of Walter Nathaniel Ridley, fifth president of Elizabeth City State University.

When the Board of Trustees of Elizabeth City State Teachers College inaugurated Dr. Ridley on September 1, 1958, they chose a man who was known for his vision, innovation, commanding personality, affinity for hard work and concern for others. As opposed to a chief executive who maintained the educational vision and social mores put in place by founding Principal Peter W. Moore and upheld by President John Henry Bias (assistant principal of Elizabeth City State Normal School under Dr. Moore), President Harold L. Trigg (state inspector of high schools in

North Carolina for 11 years), and President Sidney D. Williams (Dean of State Teachers College under President Trigg), President Ridley's vision did not include staying this course.

Unlike his predecessors, who were brought up through the ranks of "the system" and were content or at least silent about the status of higher education for blacks, President Ridley expressed clear demands for change, to both the administration in Raleigh and to faculty and students on campus. He demanded perfection: progress should be made *full speed ahead*, to lift the school out of the post-Civil War, "boarding school" era. His intention was that ECSC should take its place among the elite four-year schools of North Carolina, offering a variety of majors and faculty who held graduate degrees, and preferably terminal degrees.

This man, who was unlike any chief executive who had come before him, often ruffled feathers on campus and in Raleigh by rejecting what was literally handed down by state administrators. After his 3.5 million dollar capital improvement 1963 request for funding a dormitory, library, and classroom space, was reduced to 1.6 million, 1.1 million of which would have to be repaid, he declared in the April 21st Virginia Pilot: "We are to repay through hikes in student fees of over \$100. That's where the rub is. We can't do it...No place or opportunity should be denied any American citizen. My efforts are bent toward preparing American citizens so there will be no question about their deserving any place or opportunity".

In 1966, he replied to state auditor Henry Bridges' comments which were contained in a negative audit report that students had been paid for participation in a "non-working retreat" in Virginia: He stated flatly, "Evaluation, thinking, and planning are work. It was not making beds, nor washing dishes, nor cutting wood, nor drawing water, but it was work of the highest type". He further told the Virginia Pilot in the same October 19th article: " This project was designed to focus on problems of living and learning together on campus...and arrive at solutions together." Throughout this and other conflicts, he generally had the ongoing support of the Board of Trustees.

Two years later, upset because the school would not accept the bid to represent the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) District 29 in the Kansas City, Missouri 1968 tournament, students demonstrated after faculty attempted to leave a meeting with the president. Dr. Ridley's attempts to explain that the NAIA districts were segregated were hooted down, according to the March 6th Daily Advance. Despite emphatic opposition from the faculty athletic committee and ECSC's Athletic Director, President Ridley would not budge, and ECSC sat the tournament out.

A non-conformist, President Ridley passionately pursued his goal of integrating ECSC totally and successfully into all facets of the North Carolina higher education system. His intensity often brought him into conflict with key members of the North Carolina Board of Higher Education, and he ultimately paid the price with political pressure which led to his resignation.

By Robert L. Vaughan and Jean B. Bischoff July 2011

Scope and Content Note:**Timeline:**

- 1910 Born in Newport News, Virginia on April 1st to John Hoskins and Mary Haywood Ridley
- 1927 Graduated Huntington High School, Newport News Virginia
- 1927 Enrolled in Howard University
- 1931 Awarded A.B. degree in Psychology (Cum Laude) from Howard University
- 1933 A.M. degree from Howard, Educational Administration and Mental Hygiene
- 1933 Employed as caseworker, Federal Emergency Relief Agency, Washington DC
- 1934 Employed as educational advisor, Civilian Conservation Corps, Renovo, PA and Brandywine, PA
- 1936 Began service at Virginia State College, Petersburg VA as Director of Extension and professor of psychology
- 1939 Married Henrietta Bonaparte, graduate of Macalester College where she was the only black student, of St. Paul, Minnesota on July 28th
- 1943 Ascends to chairmanship of Department of Psychology, Virginia State University
- 1946 Appointed to U.S. Commission on UNESCO
- 1946 Daughter Yolanda born
- 1948 Son Don LeRoy born
- 1957 Appointed Academic Dean of St. Paul's College, Lawrenceville, VA.
- 1958 Became fifth president of Elizabeth City State Teachers College, Elizabeth City, NC
- 1959 Launched courses for incoming freshmen leading to majors in Physical Education, Science, Fine Arts and other fields, departing from the sole elementary education major previously offered
- 1959 Introduced and taught "Contemporary Living" course with goal of acclimating students to banking and other aspects of adult living

- 1960 Appointed to Citizens Committee for 1960 White House Conference on the U.S. Commission on UNESCO
- 1961 Led school to full accreditation by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)
- 1962 Hosted Governor Terry Sanford on campus to deliver major speech on education.
- 1962 Submitted Three and a half million dollar budget request for capital improvements on July 30th
- 1963 Received \$656,000 appropriation for capital improvements on May 22.
- 1963 General Assembly changed name of School changed from Elizabeth City State Teachers College to Elizabeth City State College
- 1964 Travels to Pakistan for four weeks with American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education under sponsorship of U.S. State Department, observing teacher education programs
- 1964 Named “Tarheel of the Week” by Raleigh News and Observer, February 28th.
- 1967 In response to negative assessment from a North Carolina Board of Governors-appointed review team, Ridley given a vote of confidence by Board of Trustees on April 6.
- 1968 Resigned on January 9, 1968. Attended final commencement as President on May 26th.
- 1969 Joined faculty of West Chester (PA) State College as Chairperson of the Department of Secondary Education and Professional Studies
- 1988 Named President Emeritus of ECSU at March 3rd Founders Day celebration
- 1996 Died in West Chester PA on September 26th

Collection Inventory:

Folder Title	Notes
Box 1	
Ridley Biographical, 1910-1996	Printed biographical sketches, Who's Who, speeches
Writings	Academic writing; Human Relations; Higher Education
Personal Matters	Correspondence; Obituaries, family matters
Post Retirement Activities, 1980-1996	Family newsletters, Speaking engagements, editorials, 1980-

	1996
Henrietta B. Ridley Award and Trust Fund	Correspondence, Pennsylvania Light and Power shareholder statement, 1978-1982
President Ridley, Death of-, 1996	Funeral Programs, News articles, 1996
North Carolina Joint Council on Health & Citizenship	Educators seeking Anti-Poverty measures, 1961-1964
North Carolina Commission on Goals for Higher Education in the South	Reports relating to Integration, Southern Regional Council; Southern Teaching Program Incorporated (STP) 1964
Professional Associations-Education	American Teachers Association; Virginia Conference of Colored Parents and Teachers
Professional Associations-Boy Scouts, 1963	District Council materials
North Carolina Council on Human Relations, 1960-1970	Bulletins; Press releases relating to impact of passage, 1964 Civil Rights Act
Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, 1960-1964	Correspondence, Announcements, Programs
Hammers Beach Corporation, 1961	Board members listing, agenda
Box 2	
Budget and Capital Improvement Requests, 1957-1963	Copies of reports
Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges, 1958-1968	Correspondence and listings
Report: Activities and Accomplishments, 1960-1961	Report and recommendations
Governor Terry Sanford visit to ECSU, 1962	Memo, press release
ECSC Faculty Data and Evaluations, 1963	Completed forms
Vespers Services, 1963	Correspondence
Ridley Trip to Pakistan, 1964	Releases and programs relating to US State Department/AACTE trip
Roosevelt Wright Jr., 1964	Correspondence
Speaking Engagements, 1960-1965	Correspondence and event programs
Report to the North Carolina Board of Higher Education, 1964	Findings of State-appointed five member team
Board of Trustees Report in Response to NCATE visit, 1966	Visit agenda and report
State Board of Higher Education Audit Report & Response, 1967	Statements of planning and support; anonymous letter
ECSC Personnel matters, 1962-1963	Correspondence
Resignation of Walter N. Ridley, 1968	Announcements, honors, search committee
Undated Papers of Walter n. Ridley	Correspondence
Box 3	
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1958-1959	Correspondence, Memos, listings
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1959-1960	Correspondence, Memos, statements
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1960-1961	Correspondence, Memos, statements, Alma Mater: Do we sing it enough?
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1961-1962	Correspondence, Memos, statements Old West Lodge, Women smoking in Lighthouse
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1962-1963	Correspondence, Memos, statements
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1963-1964	Correspondence, State Vehicles for protest, Fallout Shelter

	Permit, Negro Mother Goose Stories Manuscript
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1964-1965	Correspondence Public Television, Staff Retreat, Ebony Magazine
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1965-1966	Personnel roster, Public Television documentary, Pay scale
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1966-1967	Accreditation by NCATE, telegram, Willard Wirtz, student costs
Correspondence and Memoranda, 1967-1968	Utah NAACP questionnaire, freshman welcome, response to audit
Box 4	
Chronologically Arranged 1958-1968	from Norfolk Journal and Guide, Daily Advance, Raleigh News & Observer, ECSC Compass
Box 5	
Oversized Scrapbook	Ridley Career
Correspondence Choir 1960-1963	Planning documents, correspondence
Box 6	
Plaques & Awards	Various Formatted and Framed items
Box 7	
American Teachers Association Papers	"The Bulletin" Minutes
Box 8	
American Teachers Association Papers	Correspondence 1946-1965