

Owen Peagler, who grew up in New Milford when horse-drawn wagons drove the streets nearly as often as cars, graduated from Danbury State Teachers College in 1954 and became a thoroughly modern man.

As a leader in higher education, state government and civil rights, Peagler was a contemporary of Martin Luther King Jr. and a colleague of Jackie Robinson, who broke baseball's color barrier.

Peagler credited his alma mater for much of his success, although he would clearly note when the institution — and his professors and fellow students — failed him.

Some of Peagler's experiences from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may seem antique today, but as a member of a prominent Black family in New Milford, and one of the few Black students at the college in the middle of the century, he continues to stand out. The crusades he engaged in, and disappointments he faced, continue to be relevant to today's politics, workplaces and societal conversations.

Peagler's stoic presence was noticed recently in a yearbook photo from 1951 that was being cataloged by WCSU Archivist Brian Stevens and his assistant Stacy Haponik. What made them take notice was not only that Peagler was one of only two Black students on the pages, but surrounding photos showed many students performing at a show in blackface, the practice of white people portraying African Americans while dressed in exaggerated makeup, often along with racist words and actions.

How, Stevens wondered, did Peagler manage to put up with that type of treatment while using the college as a springboard to a long and heralded career?

With the help of Peagler's autobiography, and interviews with the two women he married, we can tell his story.

Peagler's parents were respected and well-known in New Milford. His father died when Owen, the youngest of 10 children, was three months old. His mother raised them all as a seamstress and cook and with help from the church and friends in town.

Throughout his life, Peagler insisted his days as a child and young adult in New Milford were idyllic, even though he was growing up at the end of the Great Depression and through World War II, when five of his brothers served in the military. (One, Robert Peagler, Jr., was killed in battle and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Purple Heart, now on display in the New Milford Historical Society.) Even when he mentioned instances of discrimination and blatant racial hatred by townspeople, he emphasized the supportive nature of most of his neighbors during those years.

"That was his life, that was his heart," said Dr. Teresa Balough, who was married to Peagler for 33 years. In an interview she described Peagler's fondness for his hometown and neighbors, and his general gentle and kind nature. "He tried his best to help everyone he met and to be kind. He was very concerned with everyone getting a good education, including youngsters but also others who were out of education for awhile."

Peagler described his decision to enroll in college as happenstance, prompted by a meeting with a high school classmate in downtown New Milford one day.

"He told me that he was accepted to Danbury State Teachers College for the fall. I decided to make an effort to apply. It was well into August and almost too late, but I went down to Danbury and enrolled. I was accepted immediately and met the college president Dr. Ruth Haas, whose sister had been a

teacher in New Milford and taught my older brothers.” Tuition was \$10 a semester. Peagler had a scholarship from the New Milford Teacher’s Association and \$75 saved from working on a local farm to pay his way.

As Peagler described it in his memoir, he quickly immersed himself in college activities as president of the sophomore class and treasurer of the Men's Athletic Association. He said he felt like he knew almost everyone on campus.

Balough said Peagler never mentioned the fellow students posing in blackface, but he did talk about his disappointment in a Sociology professor during his time at the Teachers College.

“This was the status of my life at Danbury when I was shocked back to the real world to face my own naivety,” Peagler wrote of one day in his Sociology class. “Out of the blue, with no introduction, the professor distributed a questionnaire to the class about racial attitudes. In a later class he read the results to the class. The questions were: Would you marry a Negro? Results of the poll: All No. Would you live next door to a Negro? Results: All No. Would you be friends with a Negro? Results: All No. I was physically shocked! I looked back into the faces of my classmates. They were all my friends. How could they hold onto such negative views and look me in the face and claim to be my friend?! Not one of them then or later exhibited any sense of the contradiction of their beliefs to their relationship to the Negro sitting in class with them. I thought deeply about the significance of this knowledge in the weeks ahead. I examined closely every friendship and questioned every statement of my classmates and finally came to believe those attitudes reflected the widespread beliefs of society as a whole. They were unaware that their attitudes were as damaging and cruel as the overt actions of racists currently being faced down by Negroes in the South.”

Peagler added: “I often berate myself for not speaking individually to each classmate in that sociology class and forcing them to verbally express the feelings that they expressed in the questionnaire. I believe that had I the courage to do so, the learning experience would be as deep and lasting for them as it has been for me.”

Overall, though, Peagler was happy at college. He met a fellow student, Joyce Hancock ,class of 1955, and they would marry in 1957 and raise two children, Catherine and Robert, before divorcing after 20 years. Joyce Peagler today lives in White Plains where she taught as a reading specialist for many years, after receiving her master’s degree from City University of New York. After graduating in 1954, Owen returned to New Milford to teach but after three years listened to an inner voice that suggested he explore a more cosmopolitan life.

“I felt that I needed to get out into the world and see if I could make it in a town that wasn't so comfortable for me, if I could make it in the bigger world,” Peagler wrote.

He took a job as a teacher in White Plains, N.Y., and soon after earning a master’s degree and sixth-year diploma at New York University, became a school counselor. At the same time, he joined the boards of directors of the Urban League of Westchester and the Carver Center for Black Teenagers, while he and Joyce looked for a house to buy. That’s when, Peagler wrote, they “ran headlong into rigid segregated housing.”

After months of individual Realtors denying them access to houses for sale, they did succeed in buying a home in Hartsdale. About four months later, Peagler wrote, “we awoke to find the words “N-----, Go”

and “N-----, We Don’t Want You” painted on our garage door and on our mailbox. I was so angry that I refused to paint over any of the signs. I wanted the world to see and the neighbors to be embarrassed. Finally, after three days, one of our neighbors came over, painted our garage and painted the mailbox and apologized for the incident having happened in the neighborhood. That was the last of the racist experiences. Many of our neighbors became close friends; and our children became friends with the neighbor children.”

During that time, in the late 1950s, Black leaders in the United States were calling for changes in the Jim Crow South, and it fueled Peagler’s natural optimism for a better world.

“The Civil Rights Movement really brought home to me the importance of providing equal opportunity for everybody,” Peagler wrote. “I grew up in a very different kind of experience for a Black person, and I didn’t realize the harsh reality of segregation. I understood that Black people were going through hardships, but I never experienced it. The Civil Rights Movement brought me closer to the problems of my people.”

After writing a proposal to fund Head Start and a neighborhood center through the Economic Opportunity Act, Peagler left teaching to join the staff of the New York State Office of Economic Opportunity. He was named director of the New York Metropolitan Area in 1967 and was able to provide not only educational opportunities but also summer camp to thousands of students. As a direct result of his activities, Peagler was named Young Man of the Year by the New York State Junior Chamber of Commerce in 1964.

In 1969 The president of Pace University invited Peagler to fill the new position of Dean of Evening Administration and later also Dean of Continuing Education. At the same time, he served as special assistant for urban affairs to the Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee.

One of Peagler’s proudest accomplishments was as founding member also in 1969 of a nonprofit foundation to help high school dropouts finish school and find jobs. He ended his 30-year tenure with the group as chairman of the board of directors.

In 1970 Pace University granted him a leave of absence to work with Jackie Robinson, assistant to New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, on Rockefeller’s 1970 reelection campaign.

President Richard Nixon in 1972 appointed him to the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children. Peagler was named chair of the council by President Gerald Ford in 1974.

Peagler joined Eastern Connecticut State College, now University, in 1978 as foundation Dean of the School of Continuing Education. He took a one-year leave in 1982 to serve as Secretary of Community Affairs for the state of Delaware, before returning to Eastern, where he retired as dean in 1998. While at Eastern, he developed and implemented innovative programs such as winter intersession classes and credit for life experience; offered courses at work places, with the Connecticut National Guard, and at sea with the Groton Naval Base; instituted a Bachelor of General Studies degree; and served as president of the Connecticut Association of Deans of Continuing Education. Following his retirement, he served as a counselor for Mitchell College and as Education Advisor for the Education Department of the Mohegan Indian Tribe.

During this eventful career, he continued to remember his alma mater, as he related in a 1975 letter to Ruth Haas upon her retirement as president of what was then Western Connecticut State College.

"It is difficult to put into words all that cascades through my mind on the occasion of your retirement from higher education," Peagler wrote. "You have profoundly influenced my life as did your sister Hilda who taught and inspired most of my seven brothers also. Had it not been for the Danbury State Teachers College and the opportunities provided under your leadership, I might never have discovered and used my true potential, or to view the world with a wider vision."

Along with caring for students and working to provide more opportunities for them, two themes ran through the rest of Peagler's life. He met Balough and they married in 1988; and the Civil Rights Movement occupied more of his thoughts and writing.

Peagler was visiting a favorite uncle in Virginia when he met Balough, who was a friend of Uncle Charles Gary and his wife Zelda.

"She sat on a stool near the kitchen table holding her three-legged dog that she had rescued from the side of the road and took home and nursed back to health," Peagler wrote. "I watched this beautiful woman lavish affection on the dog who lay contented in her lap. I was strongly moved by her quiet, gentle, affectionate demeanor, intelligence and beauty."

Balough remembered those early meetings, too.

"I noticed his gentleness," she said. "He had the nicest voice and he was kind to everyone, but he was strong within himself. There was nothing obsequious about him. He had a sense of humor. He was fond of puns, I'm sorry to say."

She eventually joined the teaching staff at Eastern as a professor of Music, where she continues as an adjunct.

Peagler was frequently asked to speak to educational, political and social justice groups, and he often emphasized the importance of voting, parental involvement in children's education, and the difficult work of moving toward equality in the U.S.

In a talk in the 1960s to the Alumni Association of Carver Community Center in Port Chester, New York, Peagler lamented the lack of accurate history education in American schools.

"The story of the Negro is rich in pageantry, valor, suffering, creativity, pathos, poverty, accomplishment, failure, gallantry, patriotism, and honor," Peagler said, as he recorded in his memoir. "The story of the American Negro spans close to 350 years — from complete servitude to full (?) citizenship. I do not yet know the whole story, but I do know how important it is that every citizen, both White and Negro, at least know some of the major contributions that Negroes have made to the growth of our country."

Years later, his youngest daughter, Kirin, interviewed him for a school project and asked him what his involvement in civil rights meant to him.

"The Civil Rights Movement gave me the opportunity to witness and participate in one of the most significant social and political changes in American history," Peagler said. "These were changes that I had not expected to see in my lifetime. Because of the actions of a relatively small number of people led by

Blacks, the whole country was forced to face the moral, social, and political inequalities that were deeply buried in American culture. The moral conscience of the country was aroused by the just cause of the Civil Rights Movement, and segregation and its accompanying evils could not withstand the national moral uprising.”

Peagler’s journeys had taken him a long way from New Milford, where he remembered happily working on a horse farm as a teenager, but also recalled how he was refused entrance at the downtown barbershop, and the time the town librarian wouldn’t let him borrow books because of his skin color.

Peagler died in 2015 at age 83, having enjoyed years of travel and intellectual diversions after retirement, including the writing of his memoir. An electronic copy of his book, as well as historical documents related to his life and the accomplishments of his family, can be found in the WCSU [archives](#).