



# FROM FOSTER TO THE FUTURE

by JENNIFER WALLACE



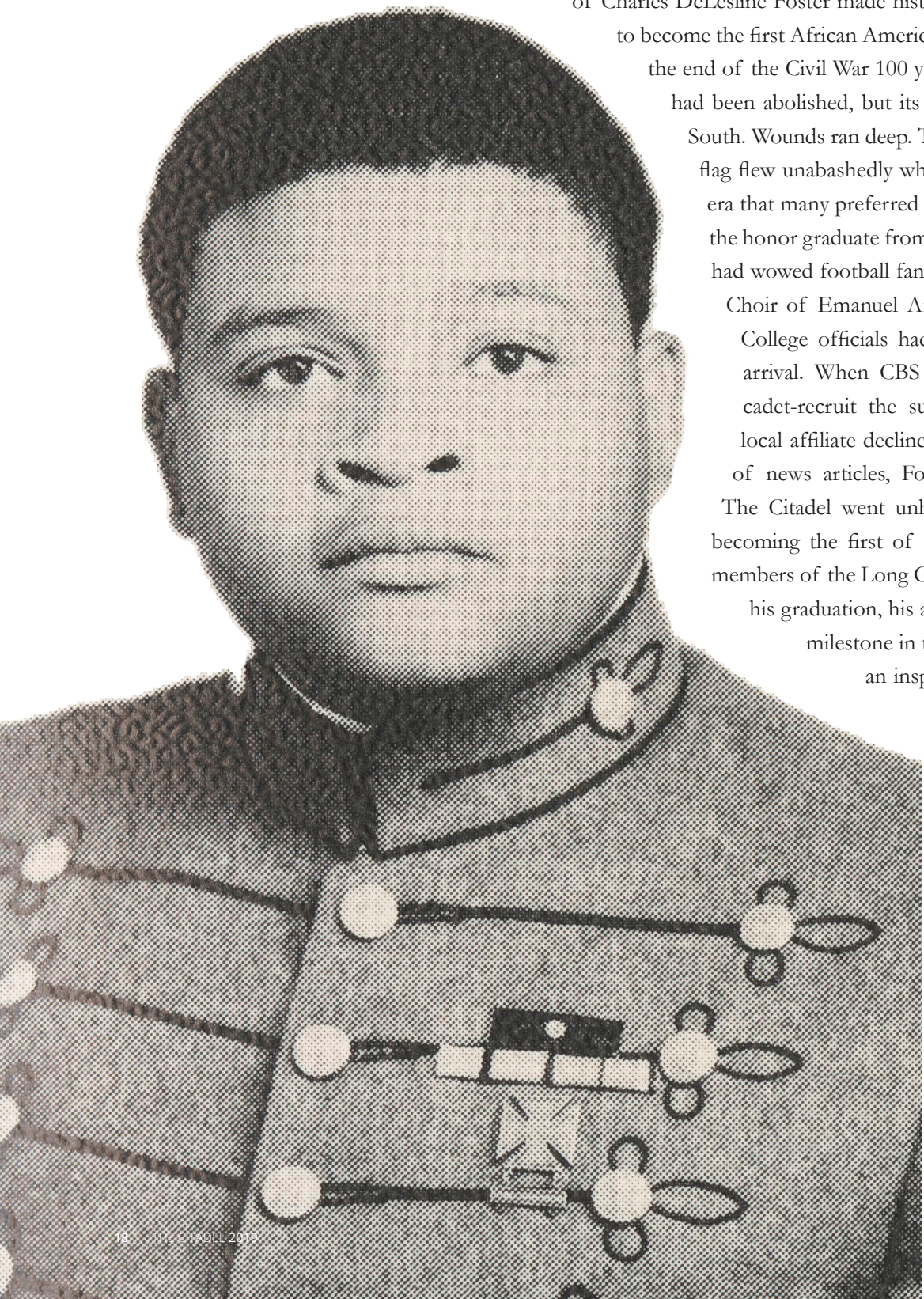
CHANGE DOES NOT ROLL IN ON THE WHEELS OF INEVITABILITY, BUT COMES THROUGH CONTINUOUS STRUGGLE

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

ON SEPTEMBER 6, 1966, a young black man from Charleston by the name of Charles DeLesline Foster made history when he broke the color barrier to become the first African American to join the Corps of Cadets. With the end of the Civil War 100 years earlier, the institution of slavery had been abolished, but its effects reverberated throughout the South. Wounds ran deep. Tensions were high. The Confederate flag flew unabashedly while strains of Dixie evoked a bygone era that many preferred to forget. There was little fanfare for the honor graduate from Charles A. Brown High School who had wowed football fans and who had sung in the Sunbeam Choir of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. College officials had asked the media to downplay his arrival. When CBS asked WCSC-TV to interview the cadet-recruit the summer before he matriculated, the local affiliate declined the offer. Except for a smattering of news articles, Foster's role in the desegregation of The Citadel went unheralded. Foster graduated in 1970, becoming the first of more than 1,200 African American members of the Long Gray Line. In the nearly 50 years since his graduation, his achievement represents an important milestone in the college's history, and he stands as an inspiration to cadets of all colors about the importance of perseverance.

HALCYON DAYS

Foster was born at St. Luke's Hospital in Philadelphia on November 26, 1948, to William C. Foster, Sr., and Blanche DeLesline Foster. He was the second of two boys—his brother, William C. Foster, Jr., was 17 months older. His father was a veteran of the Korean War, and his mother was a graduate of Bennett



Blanche Foster visits her son on campus. Behind them are Foster's grandmother Naomi DeLesline and Blanche's friend, Liz McCray.

College in Greensboro, North Carolina, who would teach high school for 32 years. When Foster was just a toddler, the family moved to Charleston to be near his mother's family.

After renting a house on Warren Street, the Fosters bought a green-and-white three-story house on Wall Street. It had a porch with a swing, and the two Foster brothers shared an attic bedroom. In the small Eastside community, there was a black grocer, a black bus company and a black dentist.

"Everybody knew everybody," said Foster's brother, William, in an oral history interview conducted by The Citadel Archives in June.

The Foster boys played little league baseball and rode their bikes and played marbles with their friends, and like most brothers, they were

competitive. "Charles was always a better athlete than I was," said William. "And when I found out that I was not as good as he was, I turned to music."

At Emanuel AME Church,\* the Foster family had its own pew. After the service, the entire family gathered on Sundays, including the family matriarch, Naomi DeLesline, a graduate of Allen University who, according to William, was reputed to be the first black social worker in Charleston. There was always a big dinner with good food and music, and often the preacher stopped by.

TO THE WEST SIDE OF TOWN AND THE CITADEL

While the Foster brothers were in middle school, their parents separated and their father returned to Philadelphia. And later, as the city of Charleston was undergoing an urban renewal project, the house on Wall Street was commandeered under eminent domain to build the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium, so the family moved to 171 Fishburne Street on the west side of town, just blocks from The Citadel. Despite the family's relocation, Foster stayed in school on the east side of town at Charles A. Brown High School, where he was an honor student and an athlete.

\*The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, commonly referred to as Mother Emanuel, was founded in 1816. The church was thrust into the national spotlight in 2015 when an armed gunman shot and killed nine congregation members. The killings were classified as a hate crime.





## BUT THE ONE THING THAT I CAN SAY ABOUT IT, ONCE HE MADE HIS MIND UP TO DO SOMETHING, HE DID IT.



In the fall of 1965, William was one of only eight black students attending the University of South Carolina, which had been desegregated in the fall of 1963. It was while William was away at school that Foster, a high school senior, began to think about attending The Citadel. The DeLesline women counseled him to pray about his decision. “Nobody planted that seed—no one.... I don’t know where he got the idea from, but that’s something he came up with on his own,” said William, who learned of Foster’s decision during Thanksgiving break. “But the one thing that I can say about it, once he made his mind up to do something, he did it.”

With his brother, his mother and his grandmother at his side and the staunch support of the black community behind him, Foster reported to The Citadel in September of 1966. Two other African American students had been accepted, but Foster was the only one to report. The fourth-class system under normal circumstances is daunting. As the only black cadet, Foster faced an even greater challenge.

Former Board of Visitors chairman Billy Jenkinson, ’68, a trial lawyer from Kingstree, was a junior serving as the Golf Company first sergeant when Foster matriculated. According to Jenkinson, Lt. Col. Thomas Nugent Courvoisier, the assistant commandant of cadets who would later be immortalized as “the Boo” in Pat Conroy’s novel, was determined that Foster would succeed.

“The Boo chose a balanced company for Charles Foster,” said Jenkinson, “and I remember him saying to me, ‘Bubba, you’ve got three instructions: one, give him an ordinary plebe system like he was anybody else; two, make sure that he is not hazed; and, three, if he leaves, you’re gone.’”

David Hooper, ’70, remembers that Foster was sometimes singled out because of the color of his skin. Hooper was Foster’s roommate for part of their freshman year. “He was quiet, but strong—physically strong, but he must have been emotionally strong to go through what he went through,” said Hooper. “There were people who didn’t want him there. He had been accepted, so I accepted him.”

Hooper, who was from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, said that it was not a coincidence that he and Foster were roommates. “I was told that I was

selected to be Charlie’s roommate because I was a Yankee, and it would be easier for him to live with a Yankee.”

Dick Bagnal, ’70, roomed with Foster later their freshman year. “He went through the same rigors that we all went through,” said Bagnal. “I’m sure it was more intense. I was a wrestler, and I think that one of the reasons they had me room with him was so that other people wouldn’t mess with him.”

In the middle of his sophomore year, Foster was paired with his final roommate. David Dawson was the son of an Air Force officer whose career had taken his family around the globe. Half a lifetime later, Dawson described an affable relationship with Foster—trips to Dawson’s home in Alexandria, Virginia, and dinners with Foster’s mother at their home on Fishburne Street, where they ate rice, okra and fried chicken or pork chops. There was even an introduction to the black social scene in Charleston. “Charlie would take me to the bars on the Eastside,” said Dawson, “and I can honestly say that was probably my first real exposure to racial conflict, when we would go into these bars, and I was with Charlie, and I was only white person in those bars. I could tell that there were people who did not want me there.”

While Dawson was with Foster, whom he describes as a “tank,” no one bothered him. Foster was “quiet” with “an easygoing disposition.” In the long evening hours, when

the two cadets were supposed to be sitting at their desks studying, they sometimes turned the radio on low and listened to beach music—the Tams, the Temptations, the Drifters—and sometimes they talked. “He never really came right out and bragged about it or anything like that. He just said that he had been talked to by the NAACP, some black leaders of the community and The Citadel administration, and he said they convinced him that he would be OK if he came to The Citadel.”

If Foster’s experience was different because he was black, Dawson did not see it. “Charlie never said anything through two-and-a-half years of rooming with me—he never said anything about anybody having a problem of a racial nature.... In retrospect, I would have asked a whole lot more out of curiosity than I did at the time.”

### A THORN IN THE SIDE OF THE ADMINISTRATION

In a June 8, 1967, *Charleston Evening Post* article, Foster said of his first year, “I wouldn’t take anything in the world for it now. [As] I look back, I can say I enjoyed it. It’s like that competition, you know. You look at the other man and you say, ‘If he can take it, so can I.’ Seems like hard work produces good memories.”

But in 1969, Foster told Larry Ferguson, a fellow Charles A. Brown graduate and a black Citadel freshman, a different story. In high school, Ferguson said that Foster was a big man on campus. He had an easy smile, and he was idolized by the student body. But four years later at The Citadel, Foster, once more a senior, was not the same person. When Foster called Ferguson into his room, the smile was gone. “Don’t let them break you,” Foster told Ferguson. “Don’t let them break you, Larry, because that’s what they tried to do to me. Promise me that.”

Foster’s brother agreed that Foster was changed by his four years at The Citadel. “He was a different person when he got out,” William said. “Charles was kind of a fun-loving—most of the time happy—person. He wasn’t as happy anymore. He was different.... That experience changed him.”





Foster is no longer around to share his story. Sixteen years after he graduated from The Citadel, he died in a house fire in Garland, Texas, so his experience can only be pieced together from archival materials and the accounts of others. Ferguson's own experience, however, sheds some light on the social climate of those years.

Ferguson matriculated with eight other African American students. "There was a major change going on, and we were part of making that change happen, and we were focused on the fact that we were finally going to have an opportunity to show that we could compete in an integrated environment because our high school was all black. The civil rights movement was coming to a tremendous peak at that time, and Dr. King had just recently been assassinated in 1968, and we just all knew that we were a part of something bigger than us."

One of the top clarinet players in the state, Ferguson had not planned to attend The Citadel, but when Cornell University offered him a partial scholarship and The Citadel offered him a full scholarship, his father urged him to stay in town and take advantage of the opportunity. Ferguson remembers standing at attention on his first day. He heard racial slurs and the voices of upper-class cadets he could not see ringing out, "There goes another one. Look, there goes another one."

It was a year full of challenges—challenges because he was a freshman and challenges because he was black. "Every time the football team scored a touchdown, *Dixie* was played and the rebel flag was waved," said

Ferguson, a member of the regimental band who had no choice but to play the song. As a sophomore, however, Ferguson refused to conform. When he told the band director that he would no longer play *Dixie*, the band director asked him to pretend to play. Ferguson refused. To pretend would be a lie—an honor violation. And so Ferguson found himself called to the president's

office and moving from Band Company to Charlie Company.

Ferguson's nonconformist behavior did not stop in Charlie Company. Administrators balked when he and Joe Shine, who matriculated in 1967, asked to form a cadet African American club on campus. But the two black cadets persevered, and the club became a reality, with Ferguson serving as its first president. "In most of my history with The Citadel," he said, "I was like a rebel, or a thorn in the side of the administration, which I was, but I wasn't doing it for that purpose."

Ferguson graduated in 1973, realizing his father's dream that his son become a Citadel man. While he was working as a chemist in the automotive industry, Ferguson decided that he wanted to become a dentist, so he returned to The Citadel to take undergraduate classes in biology. The biology department helped him with his application to dental school. After graduating from the Medical University of South Carolina, he began sharing his Citadel story with prospective African American students around the state. In 1983, just 10 years after he graduated, the Alumni Association named him Citadel Man of the Year. "I went from being a senior private, who, like Foster, The Citadel was glad to get rid of, to being celebrated."

In 1989, 20 years after he matriculated, Ferguson was appointed to the Board of Visitors, and it was then that his tenuous relationship with the college began to crumble. As young women fought to gain admission to the military college, old wounds from a segregated era were reopened, and Ferguson found himself at odds with the board and

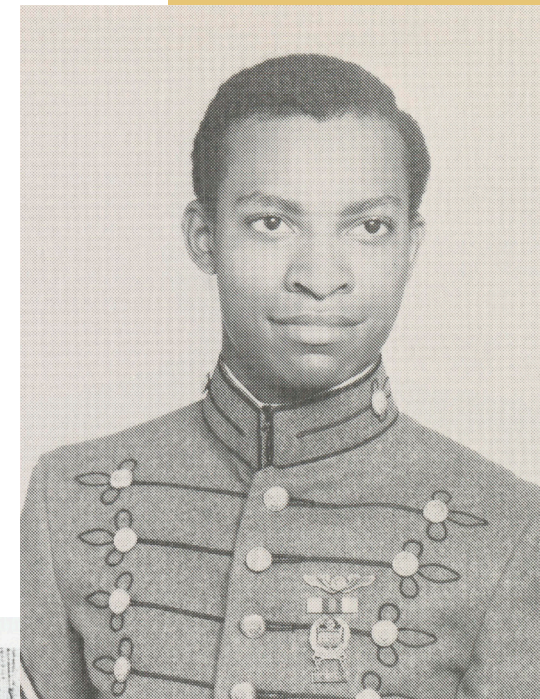
the college. "My mind was going back to a time when I knew the same board was having the same arguments about why black people shouldn't be there.... And so I walked away."

## OPENING DOORS

While Ferguson was working to go to dental school, Bruce Alexander, a black athlete from Columbus, Georgia, was matriculating. The year was 1978, only eight years after Charles Foster's graduation. Foster's name had already been forgotten. "Most of us didn't even realize that the first black graduate was in 1970," said Alexander, who is the vice president of communications for a nonprofit organization that provides transitional housing for military families. "It wasn't a part of our history classes or anything."

## JOE SHINE AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SOCIETY

In 1967 when Foster was a sophomore, another African American cadet arrived—Joe Shine, '71. Like Foster, Shine was a Charles A. Brown graduate. A history major and an honors student, Shine had an Air Force ROTC scholarship and was on regimental staff his senior year. In 1974, he graduated from Harvard Law School. He was an attorney in Columbia and a member of The Citadel Board of Visitors when he passed away suddenly from a heart attack in 2003. In 1968, Shine was followed by another African American cadet who did not graduate, and in 1969 when Foster was a senior, nine young black men matriculated—among them, Larry Ferguson. Together Shine and Ferguson founded the cadet Afro American Society, now known as the African American Society.



Larry Ferguson, '73, matriculates in 1969 with eight other African American cadets.





In 1982, when Alexander graduated, he became the 76th African American alumnus. A year later, African American alumni numbered 100. Change was slow to come, but doors were beginning to open, and in 1998 an African American alumni reunion committee was trying to put together an event in Charles Foster's name. That's when Alexander learned of Foster and his importance in Citadel history. Through the committee's efforts, the first Charles D. Foster Scholarship was endowed. Today Alexander is the president of The Citadel African American Alumni Association, and African Americans number more than 1,200 in the ranks of Citadel alumni.

"It speaks volumes when you go from not even acknowledging your black cadets and graduates to raising them up and recognizing them and their accomplishments. And the fact that the college is supportive of the programs and kids that are attending means the world not only to the alumni but to the parents."

### A NEW DAY

Fifty years after Charles Foster matriculated, Larry Ferguson sat at his desk in his dental office reading the morning news, just like any other morning. When he flipped to the sports section, a headline stopped him in his tracks. "Citadel to honor Charles Foster, first black graduate, at homecoming"

Ferguson picked up the phone and made a call. Three days later, he walked through the doors of the Greater Issues Room, where The Citadel African American Alumni Association was holding a special homecoming meeting. Foster's legacy stood proudly before him—a

shining sea of African American alumni, their energy and their enthusiasm palpable. Foster's struggles—and Ferguson's own struggles—had paid off. It was a new day at The Citadel. Tears filled his eyes.

As Ferguson entered the room, Bruce Alexander stopped the meeting. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I'd like to introduce you to someone very special."

### A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Charles Foster's contribution to the success of The Citadel cannot be overstated. His untimely death in 1986, the scant news coverage and the limited archival records from that time made this a challenging piece to write. We interviewed more than a dozen people to piece together his life and his legacy. This is an important story for The Citadel, and the search for stories and photographs continues through the Archives and Museum at [citadel.edu/CharlesFosterProject](http://citadel.edu/CharlesFosterProject).

Read more about Charles Foster's legacy in a complementary online article at [magazine.citadel.edu](http://magazine.citadel.edu).

