

Raleigh

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Some Facts Pertaining To Washington School

J. W. YEARGIN

The original Washington School was located on South Street at the place now occupied by the 7-Up Bottling Plant. It was a rambling framed building - a vertible fire trap with no modern conveniences in which was taught only elementary grades, as this was the end of public education for Negroes in Raleigh. Its first principal was Attorney E. A. Johnson who was appointed in 1885. He was succeeded by the Rev. Alfred Davis, a Presbyterian minister. Dr. L. B. Capehart was the next principal and was succeeded by Professor _____ Branch who served until his death. Professor J. L. Levister was appointed principal in 1916 and served there until the old school was abolished. Much credit is due him for his untiring efforts in securing a new plant and a high school building and program for the Negro children of Raleigh.

Following much agitation by Negro citizens of Raleigh (because there was at that time a public high school for white children) the city school board in 1921 paid the tuition of Raleigh students to attend Shaw and St. Augustine for high school work and this practice was continued until the completion of the present Washington High School. It was at this time that Supt. S. M. Underwood and the Mayor, Culberth, chairman of the school board, asked a number of colored men to assist in the selection of a site. This place was selected, As is usual, there was much opposition to this location but it was finally selected because at that time it was centrally located for our people and is the only Negro public school in the country located on the main street in the capital of a state.

The school building was begun under Supt. Underwood and completed under Supt. Shygley in 1924. Professor J. L. Levister was the first principal of the combined elementary and high schools, and served in this capacity for 2 years. The 2 schools

were then divided and Prof. Levister became principal of the elementary department in which dept. he served for many years. Mr. L. S. Cozart served as principal of the high school for 2 years and under his administration (in 1927) that the first graduation class received diplomas from the high school.

Mr. M. W. Akins who was a science teacher in the school succeeded Mr. Cozart and served as principal of the high school and later of the combined school with a total of 20 years. He was succeeded by our present principal Mr. C. H. McLendon.

I have lived in this neighborhood for more than 30 years and have passed this place daily. As I recall, this location was a beautiful hillside with a few trees and a growth of shrubs and wild flowers. An old mill-house known as the Holeman's Mill was located on the lower end of the property, and a stone dam crossed the branch. At one time, there was a considerable mill pond covering part of what is known now as the athletic field.

The Washington school building when completed, was left with no regard for its appearance from the standpoint of landscaping, yet every penny of the building fund had been exhausted. It looked like a structure set on one side of a miniature mountain with the hill bisecting the front half of the building. This condition presented such a huge financial problem that, in desperation, the school board turned to landscape gardeners at State College who advised them to plant trees and shrubbery on this unsightly hillside to beautify it.

As president of the Washington School's first PTA Association and having influence with the Public Works Administration, I was able to secure sufficient labor (of more than 100 men at 75¢ and \$1.00 a day) from the PWA with horses and scoops to move this unsightly mountain and make it into these beautiful terraces you see today. For the many weeks that this was being done, I gave much of my time to assist with its outlay and planning. Nothing could be started however, until some way was found for

securing materials for building the steps and walks which included sand, gravel, and cement. The PTA under my administration raised the money to buy cement and I gave to this school all the gravel and sand from a gravel pit which I then owned on the South Saunders Street Highway. This landscaping has given to the building a beauty and dignity which is unmatched by any school building in this city or anywhere- which is attested to by visitors from throughout the country.

It was from the Washington PTA that the idea and plans for the first State-wide PTA was germinated under the leadership of the late Mrs. Anna W. Holland, and it was here that Raleigh was made the permanent meeting place of this organization.

One of the outstanding events of the school was the fact that it was burned in the fall of 1939 suffering loss of many thousands of dollars. The fact that it was not a complete loss was due to the fact that my wife who was sitting in the living room looking in that direction, discovered the first blaze of fire and smoke and called the fire dept. immediately, saving the building.

As a businessman and civic community organizer, I look at any institution and judge it by the merits of its products. The Washington School has achieved some notable successes as groups and as individuals. It is entitled to fame because its football team "The Little Blues" who are and have been throughout its history, the champions of the school on the gridiron fields; and many other organizations of the school who have become champions in their fields.

I am sure you are aware of and are compiling as part of the history of your school a list of the large numbers of outstanding graduates who have achieved notable successes in the fields of medicine, law, business, and the trades. They should give you inspiration to go forward and achieve.

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