

# **"Children of the Struggle"**

## **The Desegregation of Burke County, N.C.**

### **Public Schools**

In the 100 years between the end of the U. S. Civil War and the signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, education in Burke County, N.C. changed dramatically. Public schools grew to become one of the county's most important institutions but, **as in most aspects of life following Reconstruction, they were racially segregated.**

### **Burke County Schools: The Early Days**

Prior to the Civil War public education in Burke County was very limited. There was, however, a small system of private schools, beginning in 1783 with Morgan Academy. It was founded by some of Burke's wealthiest citizens for the benefit of their children, not the general populous. In 1839, the State Legislature passed a law in favor of establishing a free public school system. By 1860, around half of Burke County's population (White and Free Blacks) aged 5-21 attended school. The average school session was just two months per year.

**Slaves were excluded from an education in Burke County until after the end of Civil War.** An 1830 act of the North Carolina General Assembly made it punishable by fines or whippings, for anyone to teach an African American and in 1860 about 1 out of 4 people living in Burke County were enslaved.

### **The Emancipation Proclamation**

The Emancipation Proclamation was an executive order issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. **It proclaimed the freedom of more than 3 million slaves living in the 10 states that seceded from the United States during the Civil War.** It did not apply to more than 1 million additional slaves living in areas that were not in rebellion.

Delivered under President Lincoln's authority as Commander-in-Chief, it also changed the legal status of runaway slaves to Free, meaning that those who escaped during the Civil War to Union areas could no longer be enslaved but could be enrolled into the paid service of the Union Army.

The Emancipation Proclamation did not compensate the slave owners, did not outlaw slavery and did not grant citizenship to ex-slaves but it did pave the way for the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. **Ratified by Congress December 6, 1865, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment made slavery and indentured servitude illegal everywhere subject to United States jurisdiction.**

### **Laws and Schools**

After the Civil War (1861-1865) Burke County began a long road to recovery. The pre-war school systems were gone, and the state government in power from 1865 to 1868 ended state funding for public and private schools

The new North Carolina Constitution of 1868 promised to provide “by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of Public Schools, wherein tuition shall be free of charge to all children of the state between the ages of six and twenty-one years.”

An 1875 amendment stated “...the children of the white race and the children of the colored race shall be taught in separate public schools but there shall be no discrimination made in favor of, or to the prejudice of either race.” **This “Separate but Equal” policy was reinforced by the Supreme Court decision in the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896). However, separate did not mean equal in practice and African American schools often lacked proper resources and support.**

### **Burke’s 19<sup>th</sup> Century Schools**

After 1865, several attempts were made to educate African Americans in North Carolina. The Freedman’s Bureau (1865-1872) established around 400 schools statewide before its funding ended.

In Burke County, one of the first schools for African Americans was constructed on land given by Tod Caldwell, North Carolina’s first post-Civil War Governor, who lived in Morganton. It was built around 1877 and was located near Gaston Chapel AME Church (Bouchelle & E. Union St., Morganton). Many other AME churches also supported schools before the advent of publicly funded education.

Other late 19<sup>th</sup> Century African American schools included Waters Academy in Adako (northeastern Burke Co.), Kistler Academy on Valdese Ave. in Morganton and Morganton Graded School for Colored Children. The

Graded School was erected in 1891 on land purchased for \$60 by the City and was Burke's first school built for Black students with public funds.

Education was minimal in Burke County, even more so for African Americans. For example, in 1881, there were approximately 1566 White children but only 342 Black children enrolled.

### **Burke's 20<sup>th</sup> Century Schools**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, North Carolina's education system was just beginning to expand. Under Governor Charles Aycock (1901-1905), the state began to invest large amounts of public funds to create a new network of schools. However, under Aycock's administration, the school system remained segregated. Aycock was a White Supremacist. **African American schools remained separate and unequal to white schools in supplies and funding.**

During the 1910s and 1920s, new public high schools for White students were built in Glen Alpine, Valdese and Drexel. By 1900, Burke County had 56 white and 10 African American schools. In 1903, Burke County received additional state funds. Morganton set up its own separate school district that same year. Glen Alpine established its own school system in 1905.

### **Olive Hill School**

**1924-1965**

In 1924 Olive Hill School replaced Morganton Graded School for Colored Children. Olive Hill contained the only public high school for African Americans in Burke County and served grades 1-11. **Black students from all of the county's lower grade schools came to Olive Hill to attend high school.**

Olive Hill School's original brick building was a single story, six-teacher school with eight rooms on the main floor and two in the basement. The total cost of the new school was \$19,050. Funding for it came from three sources: Negroes, \$1,000; Public Funds, \$16,550; and Rosenwald Fund, \$1,500. By 1935 Olive Hill had 361 students enrolled and employed 10 teachers. Additions to the building were made in 1940 and 1950. Though it never had funding equal to white schools, Olive Hill was known for excellent academics, community involvement, clubs and sports programs.

## **1925 School Consolidation**

In 1925, under the direction of Burke County School Superintendent, Robert L. Patton, the county school system was reorganized. Its 62 schools were consolidated into 15. The new system aimed to raise the educational level of its teachers as well as the students. The 1925 consolidation did not, however, affect the school systems of Morganton and Glen Alpine which continued to operate independently.

## **The Rosenwald Schools**

Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) was the president of Sears, Roebuck & Co. Rosenwald was also a philanthropist who utilized his fame and fortune to benefit many causes. One such cause was to improve educational conditions for African Americans in rural areas of the Southern United States.

**In 1917, Julius Rosenwald began a fund which partially financed the construction of approximately 5,000 schools in the segregated South.** Local communities and governments were tasked with raising the remaining funds. **In North Carolina around 800 Rosenwald schools were built, 5 of which were in Burke County.** Their original names and construction dates, as listed in the Rosenwald Fund database at Fisk University, are: Morganton (Olive Hill) 1923-24, Willow Tree 1925-26, McElrath Chapel (McAlpine) 1925-26, Rock Hill 1926-27, Canal (Bridgewater or Corpening) 1926-27. Their commonly used names are in parentheses.

## **Brown vs Board of Education: Burke's Reaction**

On May 17, 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a verdict in a case known as **Brown vs. Board of Education. The unanimous decision ruled that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional.**

However, the laws stemming from that verdict took years to implement in North Carolina. Desegregation in Burke County's schools was a complex series of events.

County officials largely wished to maintain segregation, but feared conflict. All three Boards of Education, aiming to preserve Burke's reputation as a growing progressive industrial area, kept the schools segregated but spent money improving African American schools throughout the 1950s and early

1960s. However, in the mid-1960s frustration with the status quo led to bold actions, new laws and rapid changes.

### **The Seven Mothers**

In September of 1961, seven Black women presented a petition before the Morganton City Council. They requested transportation for their young children to Mountain View Elementary School, the only African American elementary school in the city. Because they lived on West Concord Street the distance to Mountain View Elementary was too great to travel easily on foot and school buses were not available.

If unsuccessful, the West Concord Mothers were fully prepared to escort their children to the much closer all-white school, Forest Hill Elementary.

After lengthy discussions, an agreement was reached to provide reduced-rate transportation for the children to Mountain View Elementary via the Suburban Carriage Company. **This event was the first challenge to Burke Count's segregated school systems. Although segregation remained, further challenges to that system were quickly on their way.**

### **A New Era**

In June 1963, the Morganton School Board authorized a pilot program to desegregate its schools. The News Herald reported that 30 students were to be reassigned for the 1963-64 school year. Two African American students from Olive Hill High School would attend Morganton High School. The other 28 were to be transferred from Mountain View Elementary School to Forest Hill Elementary and Morganton Junior High School.

Most of the reassigned students lived on West Concord Street. Their parents had requested a change based on the location of the schools and the availability of courses which had previously been unavailable to African American students.

### **The Civil Rights Act and Burke County's Compliance**

The Civil Rights Act (1964) passed Congress and was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, July 2, 1964. This historic piece of Civil Rights legislation outlawed segregation in businesses such as theaters, restaurants and hotels. **It banned discriminatory practices in employment and**

**ended segregation in public places such as swimming pools and public schools.**

Burke County's three school systems began discussing compliance with the new law in January 1965. On April 9, 1965 a resolution to dissolve all existing school district lines and form one Administrative School District was passed by all of the school boards, thus enabling the newly formed, unified board to proceed with their desegregation plan for the 1965-1966 school year.

### **Integration**

**1965-66 was the first fully integrated school year in Burke Co.**

The first African American students attending integrated schools faced major difficulties during the early stages of desegregation. On February 5, 2012 a News Herald article featuring Lucille Rutherford, one of the West Concord Mothers, recorded that:

“These women and their children faced heckling, taunting, and threats once it came time to walk into the previously “whites only” schools at Forest Hill and Morganton Junior and Senior high schools. Rutherford said white students would rip pages out of black students’ textbooks, put their coats in the toilet and tear their clothes.”

Also interviewed was mental health counselor and former Burke County Board of Education member, Artie McKesson Logan, who remembered integration this way:

“I experienced a lot of emotional turmoil and humiliation, specifically because I could not do anything at that time to change the situation. I chose not to allow this feeling of frustration and helplessness make me bitter but instead it was a motivation for me to excel in life.”

Despite adversity, the dream for a better education and equal opportunity continued. **Those who worked towards desegregation later spoke proudly of the progress that had been made but also cautioned that there was still much to do.**