

Recounting the proud heritage of **BLACK EDUCATION** in Mecklenburg County

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In 1869, Virginia's constitution mandated the provision of free public education for students of all races. Of course, it took Virginia more than a century to live up to the ideal of an equal education for all its citizens. But in the intervening decades, African-Americans in Mecklenburg County and elsewhere carved out a proud heritage of educational progress despite all obstacles.

By 1871 there were 20 schools for black students in Mecklenburg County. The United Presbyterian Church was active in starting many schools, including the Thyne Institute in Chase City.

In April of 1868, a young teacher from Bushland, N.Y. came to Clarksville to teach black students. Her name was Elizabeth (Lizzie) Colter. Miss Colter proved to be popular among the black families of the area as she was a very friendly, ladylike person. The school was located at 201 Market Street in the "Old Academy" building, today the home of Mt. Zion Baptist Church.

In July 1868, she had 104 black students and two white students in attendance at the school. She also held classes at night for students who had to work during the day. It is believed that she stayed at the Grace Hotel on Third Street and Virginia Avenue in Clarksville — where Wells Fargo is now. She found the climate uncomfortably hot and dry, almost every day and night. Lizzie became very hoarse to the point where she was forced to leave Clarksville by the end of August to return to cooler weather in upstate New York. One of her black students, Ann Smith, returned with her to attend school there, later becoming a school teacher. Her former students would often write to her. She married Mr. Henry S. Murray and they had three sons. She died in 1907 at age 68.

A pivotal figure in history

Matilda V. Mosley was another pivotal figure in the history of black education in Mecklenburg County. At the age of 13, she was sent to live with a relative in Chase City to attend the renowned Thyne Institute. Matilda later attended Virginia Normal Institute (now known as Virginia State University) and graduated in 1911. For several years she taught in Chesterfield County public schools. She became supervisor in charge of 23 black schools. She spoke at churches and other places to rally public support for the schools.

Miss Mosley married Mr. Samuel Glover Booker on May 24, 1916. In 1920 she took a supervisor position in Mecklenburg County. Her home was in Cumberland. She drove the fifty miles (one way) for 35 years, to and fro, every day during the school week.

Upon finding no high school in Mecklenburg County for black students, she began speaking at churches and before various organizations, asking for money and support from outside sources to pay for the construction of such a facility.

Mrs. Booker worked with Mecklenburg school superintendents C.B. Green and A.B. Haga during hard times when big things were seemingly impossible to accomplish. In that period of our history, there were poll taxes and other obstacles that prevented many black people from voting, robbing the community of its voice on equal education. Progress seemed very slow at first. Yet once parents and people of the community understood the need, and fixed their hearts and minds on the vision set forth by Mrs. Booker and others, things began to improve. Mrs. Booker met with numerous county and state officials and worked for black and white teachers for equal pay and facilities. With the help of like-minded white citizens, money was raised, lumber and other materials were donated as well as hard labor, and eventually the county's first black high school was opened in South Hill. It was known as Mecklenburg Training School.

Mrs. Booker retired at the young age of 68 after developing heart disease. Sadly, she never got to see her ultimate dream — school integration and equal educational opportunity for all — come to pass. She was born September 18, 1887. She passed away in June of 1957.

Shortly after Mecklenburg Training School opened in South Hill, the other end of the county got its own high school for blacks. In September 1935, West End High School officially opened with an enrollment of more than 100 students, ages 13 to 22. Mr. Robert O. Harris was the principal and only teacher that first school year. The school was located in the town of Clarksville at Eighth and Old Caroline streets. Improvements to the building continued for years as parents and students worked together to add more classrooms and an auditorium; they dug the foundations themselves. Senior Leagues and the churches of Antioch, Averette (Wharton Memorial), Bluestone, Cedar Grove II, Cherry Hill, Holly Rock, Island Hill, Mooresville, Mt. Ararat, Oak Level, St. John, St. Mark, St. Matthews and others made large donations to the project. Other Clarksville churches and local elementary schools also donated. More than 50 parents gave \$10.00, which in those days represented a week's salary in most households!

Mr. Charlie L. Watkins (father of Mrs. Shirley Watkins Hester) purchased, on his own, school buses to transport students to and from West End High School. Other contributors and drivers were: the Rev. Walter Day, Mr. Willie Hargrove, Mr. Allen Hughes, Mr. Erastus Manning, Mr. Sandy Harden, Mr. Hamilton Jones and others.

In 1938, the Rev. George Yancey became West End High School's next principal. The curriculum included agriculture and home economics. By this time a large cafeteria had been

added to serve hot meals for the students and staff.

In June 1939, the state Department of Education accredited the school just in time for the first graduating class. Five of those graduates are still with us today: Mr. George Sizemore, Mr. Thomas Adams, Miss Minnie Mae Sizemore, Mrs. Helen Wood Ray and Mrs. Cordella Pines Shaw. They have an honored place in the history of Mecklenburg County education.

In 1940, Mr. Phillip Walker became WEHS Principal for four years. In 1944, Mr. George Wood became principal for a few years.

Until integration in 1970, Mrs. Dorothy Jones Harris served as the school's principal, her long tenure interrupted only twice for maternity leave. The great music instructor Mr. James Cary served as interim principal during those times.

After the old West End High School was destroyed by a fire of unknown origin in the early fifties, the students were divided up by grades and taught in a warehouse on that same street. Some were transferred to Boydton and some went all the way over to Chase City to attend Thyne.

The replacement West End High School was dedicated September 1953 on School Road off Highway 49. Today we know this building as Bluestone Middle School. The construction of a brand new high school heralded an era of change for black education in Mecklenburg. At the time, most elementary schools for black children were located in the vicinity of black churches. Cherry Hill students attended school at St. John. Students who lived in the town of Clarksville were bused to Mooresville and St. Matthew off Highway 49. All of these schools were one- to three-room buildings. Some had small cafeterias; a carton of white milk cost 5 cents, chocolate milk was 6 cents.

Another school built

In 1961, a beautiful new school was built for black students (Hillcrest Elementary) located on Noblin Farm Road (722) off Highway 15. Today this building houses Clarksville Elementary. This school replaced all the one- to three-room schools for black children in the southern part of Mecklenburg County. Its first principal was Mr. W.P. Hudgins, who later in life served as chairman of the Mecklenburg County Board of Supervisors. The alumni shall always remember the wonderful staff there; two who come immediately to mind are Miss Mildred Moore and Mr. De Forrest Booker.

1968 and 1969 were "freedom of choice" years, a period in Virginia history when black students were free to attend white schools if they chose to. In 1970, Virginia schools were fully integrated under court order. Sadly, all the county's black schools were renamed. The beloved West End

High School, with its rich history, was now called Bluestone Middle. But for most students who went there from 1939-1969, it will always be West End High School!

In making the transition from longtime school segregation to full integration, Mecklenburg witnessed few problems compared to other places. A small community, Mecklenburg benefited from the leadership of white and black educators and civic leaders who knew and respected each other, and often shared close friendships.

1967 was the last year of all-black schools. In the final semester that year at WEHS, four female students got married, as did two male students. This was a close-knit, fun-loving class, and the largest ever at WEHS, with 150 students. 125 are pictured on the class photo. In the opinion of this writer, this class, and the first class at WEHS, should always be remembered because they marked the beginning and the end of an era that will never be again.

West End High School has a proud heritage: it has produced judges, lawyers, corporate C.E.Os, detectives, factory workers, police officers, nurses and health care workers, utility workers, airplane pilots, publishers, university professors, school superintendents, refuse collectors, space shuttle technicians, scientists, food service workers, pastors, clerks, supervisors, teachers, rail and bus operators, freedom fighters, soldiers and servicemen, and many other successful graduates, including owners of businesses small and large.

This is what the African-American community has achieved through education — by working together, when times were truly hard.