African American Schools

of

Allegany County, Maryland

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The history of African American schools in Allegany County has not been fully researched and documented. Primary reasons for this gap in the historical record are ones created by past practices, policies, and customs that have limited the amount of information that is readily available. To overcome these challenges, researchers interested in the story of Allegany County's African American experience must diligently research public and private resources.

The Maryland General Assembly passed a law in 1872 requiring counties to establish free public schools for black children. Until this official act, the relatively few African American children residing in Allegany County were probably not a priority for local officials and therefore did not figure prominently in educational planning. Even after school construction for the benefit of African Americans began, newspaper accounts of their establishment and subsequent student accomplishments were typically brief. In a related way the lack of resources available to African American schools also contributed to the scant written record. Traditional school publications such as yearbooks and newspapers were not consistently offered as educational opportunities for black pupils. Furthermore, scholastic athletic competitions which made for popular reading in Cumberland newspapers (and a source of anecdotal information) were not scheduled between the local African American high school and other county schools. The columns referencing Frederick Street/Carver athletic events that did appear in print were abbreviated when compared to the more detailed coverage of the Allegany and Pennsylvania Avenue/Fort Hill High contests. Academic competitions and social events were similarly scheduled and reported. Despite these challenges it is possible to provide a summary of African American schools in Allegany County; Board of Education records, oral histories, newspaper articles, and church records are available for the historical record.

The years of exclusive black education in Allegany County spanned the 1865 – 1959 time period when land for Mary Hoye School was provided and Carver School closed. Additional African American schools included Mechanic Street in Cumberland, Lincoln in Frostburg, smaller elementary schools in Westernport and Lonaconing, and churches that provided temporary facilities.

Hopefully the following summary will shed additional light on the historical record of African Americans in Allegany County, Maryland.

Cumberland

Locally sponsored initiatives for educating African American students in Allegany County occurred soon after the Civil War. Mary Hoye, Washington Street resident and philanthropist, in 1865 offered the Allegany County school commissioner's property "on the west side of Will's Creek in the town of Cumberland for school purposes for the benefit of colored pupils."

Spokespersons for the local African American community formally requested permission to act upon Mrs. Hoye's donation of property in May 1865, approximately seven years before the state law required counties to establish such schools. After discussions and delays, Mary Hoye School was built on Independence Street, directly opposite Johnson's Alley. While there is no detailed accounting of the school's progress, anecdotal information suggests that it fared well in the early years. An August 1876 entry to Board of Education minutes stated, "The board paid a visit to the colored school held in the Mary Hoye school house and were pleased with the general appearance of the school and pupils." A later notation indicated that the school population had likely increased by June 1883. "Trustees of the city colored schools to make Mary Hoye a graded school and (permission to hire) another teacher was granted."

Evidence suggests that not all African American pupils were attending Mary Hoye School during the 1870-1880 time period. While no photographs of the school house are known to exist, map drawings show the building was probably no more than a four room facility. Possibly crowded conditions at Mary Hoye School and transportation issues contributed to the formal requests from African American ministers to establish additional classes in their churches.

While free public education for African American pupils was formally established early in Allegany County through a philanthropist and the board of school commissioners, the role of African American churches must be noted as contributing factors in the pursuit of equal educational opportunities. Churches actively sought teachers and facilities for members during a time when formal public education was generally restricted for African American children. Board of Education records provide evidence of church intercession on behalf of members, including one entry stating "Mr. Wildernman presented a certificate from the Trustees of Ebenezer School showing they were desirous of securing the services of Mr. Wilderman (a teacher)."

Reverend Lewis Hicks in 1876, speaking on behalf of African American residents, appeared before the school commission to request that an additional school be constructed on the west side of Will's Creek. The Reverend offered the basement of his church as a temporary site for the pupils to meet. Although Rev. Hick's church was not identified, historian Thomas Scharf recorded that in 1875 the Reverend's church was "at Reynolds Block, on Baltimore Street." Reverend Hicks apparently merged his congregation in 1877 with that of Ebenezer Baptist Church located on Cumberland Street.

In 1877, Reverend Chandler "of the colored Baptist Church called Ebenezer," also requested an additional African American school be built on the south side of Will's Creek. He, too, offered church facilities for educational purposes. Confirmation that classes were subsequently held in the church during 1877 is revealed by Board of Education minutes stating that suspending "school at Ebenezer on account of the prevalence of scarlet fever and small pox" had occurred. The records also noted the church was being paid a $5.00 rental fee by the commission in 1877 and a $30.00 fee in May of 1880.

The next phase of school construction occurred when the county school commissioners purchased property along North Mechanic Street in 1896. A subsequent report on June 16, 1897, stated that the commissioners budgeted $6,000 for constructing the school building; those plans, however, sparked a public controversy with racial overtones.

The school's location was chosen in cooperation with representatives of the African American community. Located on North Mechanic Street at the Iron Bridge (present day Market Street

Bridge), the property became bitterly contested. In question was whether a school would be erected or a new street (later to be known as Market Street) would be extended through the property toward an intersection with North Centre Street. Residents expressed their views during a July 1897 city council meeting, which the Cumberland ***Evening Times*** called "more than ordinary" and "heated." Several citizens spoke favorably about the commercial benefits a new street would offer. Proponents of the street were contested, however, by businessman Thomas Footer who pointedly charged "the Market Street scheme was to beat out the colored school."

City officials seemed to favor the Market Street option, thus placing them at odds with African American residents and the county school commissioners, who contracted with "Samuel D. Young . . . low bidder in the sum of $3,200." According to the Cumberland ***Evening Times,*** the dispute became more heated when laborers began laying the building's foundation in November 1897, and the mayor arrived on the scene to order "laborers and mechanics to stop work under the threat of injunction. They at once quit work." The dispute was promptly argued in Circuit Court where Judge Sloane decided against the city, stating that it had no power to condemn the property appropriated by the school commissioners for use of a public school.

The controversy extended into December 1897 when a public meeting was held at Union Street School "for adjusting between the county and school board regarding the opening of Market Street and the creation of a colored school." Prominent businessmen strongly advocated the extension of Market Street; their position was summarized by Mr. Shriver. The newspaper reported Shriver's remarks. "By putting up a school house you make an improvement to the disadvantage of thousands while an open street would be a benefit to the city." While county officials had won a court decision to build the school on Mechanic Street, it was evident that commercial and political interests favored opening Market Street.

On January 27, 1898, an alternative site for the school was proposed; county officials announced their intention to acquire property on North Centre Street from Henry Glick. The arrangement among Mr. Glick, the school commissioners, and the city of Cumberland called for the transfer of the county-owned lot on Market Street for the Glick property on North Centre Street. The city was to pay Mr. Glick the amount of condemnation for his property. Apparently not everyone was fully informed of the proposal prior to the announcement because several councilmen argued against it. According to a Cumberland ***Evening Times*** report, "Mr. Glick has made a deal with

the county commissioners by which he is to furnish them a lot, but the city has no part in the deal."

The Glick proposal and Market Street controversy evoked comments from African American residents in February 1898. William Cooper stated, "I think the manner in which the school board has acted toward my people is very disgraceful. The school board led us to believe that a building would be erected on Mechanic Street." George Anderson commented, "There is not a colored school in Allegany County for the Negro. The school we have now (Mary Hoye) is not fit for a horse stable. I don't think the opposition to its location there (Mechanic Street) was caused by a decision on the part of the city to cut a street through but because of the class of people that would occupy it." C.T. Harris also expressed outrage over the failure to build the school as originally planned. "It seems as if they want to keep us 'moving along.' They might as well push the colored people off the face of the earth." C.J. Mallard added, "In all fairness and justice, as a citizen . . . the Negro is entitled to see that his children are educated as other children are in the community where he was born. . . The Negro cannot be so objectionable as some pretend that he is and if so it is God-like and manly to allow him to have a school house in an orderly and good locality. If not, I as one man will vote for no man who will accede to the wishes of a few uncharitable thinking people. To them the Negro can only say in his pity; 'Dislike me not for my dark complexion; it is but the burnishing hue of my native sun." Notice was also provided that a meeting of African American citizens would occur in a few days to protest the decision to move the proposed school from Mechanic Street.

A delegation of African American residents subsequently appeared before the school commissioners on February 16, 1898, "to request a location for a colored school." The commissioners acted again to resolve the ongoing issue by purchasing the property of Dr. McCormick located on North Mechanic Street, just above Bedford Street. Reports indicated "the location seems entirely satisfactory to the colored people and the price is within reach . . . The location will be extremely convenient." Board of Education minutes dated April 29, 1898, state, "The secretary was instructed to issue a check in the sum of twenty-six dollars to Dr. W.H. McCormick. Amount in full for purchase of property on Mechanic Street."

On April 12, 1898, the ***Evening Times*** reported that "work on the colored public school building to be erected on North Mechanic Street will commence about May 1. Work on the site started when Dr. McCormick, owner of the property, indicated that he intended to "tear them (buildings) down and remove them. . . . in a day or two." The Mechanic Street School, a brick facility, was finally built near the present day location of John F. Kennedy Apartments. The principal was G.E. Moore.

The Mechanic Street School initially provided instruction for students in grades one through eight. Reports of graduation remarks made in 1906 suggest the curriculum stressed vocational education, or as Principal Charles Simpson stated, "Teaching our boys and girls how to do something with their hands."

There were four teachers at Mechanic Street School and later one additional instructor at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church on the Frederick Street. Apparently the Mechanic Street School was not large enough to accommodate an increasing student population at the beginning of the 20th century and became a primary factor in the drawing of school boundaries. Children in grades one through three who lived east of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad tracks attended classes in the church basement and subsequently transferred to the Mechanic Street School in grade four to complete their education. Children living west of the B&O railroad tracks attended the Mechanic Street School for the entire eight grade program. Crowded conditions persisted until 1918 when the Board of Education agreed to employ another teacher at Mechanic Street and subdivide the original four classrooms into smaller ones. Henry Louis Gates, Sr., who lived on Greene Street and attended Mechanic Street School, confirmed the crowded conditions that existed in the facility during a 2009 interview.

Even though crowded conditions prevailed, a two year high school program was instituted in 1918 by Principal B.H. Smith at the Mechanic Street School; two teachers assisted the principal. The curriculum included algebra, rhetoric, literature, history, science, and home economics. In 1919 the first high school graduation inclusive of a two year program of study occurred when five girls received diplomas. The following year a new principal, Edwin Gibson, instituted a four year high school program that increased course offerings for the thirty students enrolled at the school. Allegany County's first African American high school graduation inclusive of a four

year program of study was subsequently held in 1923, when eight girls graduated from "Cumberland High School" which by that time was relocated to Frederick Street.

Trustees for the Mechanic Street School included Robert Trent, A.G. Washington, A.R.W. Banks, R.D. Banks, George Jackson, and Frederick Burgee. Principals who later served included O.B. Overton, Benjamin Smith, and C.F. Simpson.

The Mechanic Street School served elementary and high students until increased enrollment required a larger brick facility to be constructed on Frederick Street. At that point the school house was abandoned and offered for sale. A published report in April 1927 stated that E.K. Magruder purchased the school building with the intention of demolishing it. On the location would be built a new theatre designed by architect George Sansbury. The theatre originally called the Howard and intended for "colored only" opened in July 1927. Apparently, there was insufficient patronage for the business to succeed because the name was changed to the Garden Theatre in October 1927 and advertised for "white only" customers.

Plans for a new and larger school house were initiated in 1920 when the county issued bonds that included $5,000 earmarked for that purpose. A site on Frederick Street was chosen in July 1921 and the Allegany County Superintendent was directed to proceed on construction of the facility. The Cumberland School (a continuation of the name given to the high school department of the Mechanic Street School) opened in 1922 and, as stated previously, awarded diplomas to the first graduating class in 1923.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the new school created discussion within the Cumberland community. Local historian Michael Mudge reported in a 1979 study of the event that opposition existed within the Frederick Street neighborhood. Secondly, Edwin F. Webb, Superintendent of Schools, ordered that Mechanic Street students assemble and march from their home school to the new facility on Frederick Street "without having had previous notice of when the move would be made." Furthermore, a Frederick Street neighborhood delegation represented by an attorney appeared before the Board of Education to request the building be used for white students. The request was denied. Conspicuous by its absence was the general lack of news coverage surrounding the new school. Unlike traditional high school openings that are

accompanied with fanfare, Cumberland High School's debut remained absent from the newspaper.

The new Cumberland School was generally not referred to by its official title but rather a popular name, the "Frederick Street School." The school's name was formally changed in 1941 through the efforts of Principal Earle Bracey, who wanted to name the school in honor of a historically significant person. Students voted to honor George Washington Carver, winning out over Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. The program of study was also revised by Principal Bracey, who apparently supported a vocational curriculum as recommended by Booker T. Washington.

The emphasis on vocational skills caused Carver graduates to have mixed opinions about the education offered at the school. When interviewed in 2002 and 2009, some graduates expressed pride in the skill programs, while others believed that Carver's academic curriculum (and lack of resources) limited opportunities. While differences of opinion exist concerning the curriculum, there was general agreement that Carver School successfully attracted African American students. Enrollment figures support the conclusion. In 1925 there were 242 students enrolled in K-12, and by 1936 the numbers had increased to 312 students. The Carver School quickly developed into a regional facility serving students from outlying areas, including Mineral County, West Virginia. Many out-of-county students boarded with local African American residents to attend Carver.

One unusual practice in the school program during the later years of Mechanic Street School and the early years of Cumberland High School was the elimination of grade eight. Several reports confirm this sequence, although it was apparently never formally adopted or documented.

Carver School remained a segregated facility for five years following the United States Supreme Court's Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education decision in 1954. The end came in the spring of 1959, as 44 elementary students and 47 junior high students were still attending classes in the building. A formal motion to close Carver as a segregated school was made (and subsequently adopted) by the Board of Education in March, 1959. Carver teachers and students were subsequently transferred to other county schools the following school year.

Frostburg

Educational programs for Frostburg's African-American students were first led by Tamar Brown, a freed slave. According to Frostburg historian Betty Van Newkirk, Tamar Brown built a one room school house at the intersection of Lonaconing Road now called Park Avenue in 1869. Apparently, information about this school has been handed down through oral legacy because Board of Education records from that date do not identify schools or teachers, thereby complicating efforts to definitively document the building. Brief remarks in the county records do mention a colored school in 1873, thus establishing its presence in the town and allowing for a reasonable assumption that it existed prior to that date. Apparently the school building was in poor condition. A July 1873 entry revealed, "The school house for colored children in Frostburg is being reported uncomfortable for the purposes intended." The school was replaced by a two room building in 1880's.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the small building was moved on Park Avenue; it offered two classrooms and a cupola, thus providing a typical school house appearance that reflected the architectural style of the time period. The Lincoln School, as it was called, was located near the present day Frostburg State University's campus. Like Cumberland's Mary Hoye School, land for the facility was donated; Nelson and Catherine Beall provided the plot of land for a nominal fee of one dollar.

The Lincoln School location became of interest to Frostburg State Teacher's College, forerunner of Frostburg State University. In order to expand the college school, officials decided that Lincoln School should be relocated. College President Dunkle proposed that Lincoln School property be traded for the Frostburg Baseball Park the college had recently purchased. An ***Evening Times*** story dated January 18, 1936, reported, "After closing the deal, the college gave the land to the Allegany County Board of Education in exchange for the lot now occupied by the Lincoln colored school." Board of Education minutes explained the acquired property was for a "two room colored school that (would) replace the present colored school." While a deal was struck in early 1936, delays continued for months as the Board of Education contemplated what to do with the Lincoln school house. The board finally decided to move the building (for a fee of $ 412.00) and place it on a newly constructed foundation located at Park Avenue extended (University Drive). In the meantime students were without permanent facilities. Board minutes

noted in September 1936 that the superintendent provided "temporary housing of the colored school of Frostburg in a store building on the corner of Main Street and Broadway and that the children were in regular attendance at this place."

Simply moving an old building down the street to a new foundation did not adequately address the needs of Lincoln students. The relocated building lacked basic facilities and hook-ups, including toilets and electricity. The students, with parental support, refused to attend classes. A newspaper report of February 28, 1937, stated, "The 40 students at the school have been out on strike since February 1. A delegation will appeal to the Mayor and City Council Monday night and seek their cooperation in having steps taken to make the school building fit for housing the children." Richard Edwards subsequently appeared as a spokesperson for the Lincoln students and parents in March 1937, and he pleaded with the Frostburg Mayor and City Council to address the issue with the county school board. Deficiencies in the Lincoln School were finally addressed in early March when toilets were installed, walls painted, and other improvements finalized.

The re-located Lincoln School was once again in the way as the college campus expanded and plans for Compton Hall and a new Lincoln School were contemplated. Newspaper reports provide a glimpse into the chronology of the process

December 1, 1950, Superintendent of Schools Kopp was reported to be planning for the erection of a new Lincoln School and estimated it would cost $17,000.

On November 18, 1952, a report indicated that Lillian Compton, president of the college, hoped to break ground on a new Lincoln School the following spring. In March 1953, the Board of Education prioritized their construction projects and included Lincoln at a cost estimated at $10,000.

Eventually, the old Lincoln School was razed and a new brick building constructed on Park Lane. There was speculation in the Frostburg community that when a new school was constructed, African American families would be satisfied with the improved facilities and make decisions to keep their children enrolled in a segregated school. If speculation was a plan of action, it certainly failed because the new building was abandoned, as Lincoln students transferred to other county schools.

Westernport and Lonaconing

African Americans in Westernport and Lonaconing petitioned the commissioners for schools in their respective towns, following the lead of Cumberland and Frostburg citizens. The existence of African American schools along George's Creek has been questioned in recent times, but Board of Education records and supporting historical evidence are evident.

African Americans were employed as coal miners in the George's Creek region. Lester Clifford of Piedmont confirmed that many African Americans, including family members, worked the coal fields of the valley into the 1920's-1930's. Furthermore, according to state requirements, African American schools could not be established unless the average daily attendance was greater than 15 students, thereby suggesting that sufficient numbers of students were present in both communities.

Westernport residents formally petitioned for a school house in 1880. Similar to the situation of African American students in Cumberland, a Baptist church offered to temporarily host the students. Minutes indicated a fee of 30 dollars was to be paid for students' use of the church basement. One could assume that students attended classes at the church, but unfortunately, the Board records do not provide sufficient information to confirm how the arrangement was implemented. The minutes do state that on September 1, 1896, "a contract to erect a colored school building in Westernport was awarded to John M. Fazenbaker in the sum of four hundred dollars." The facility served African American pupils from the lower George's Creek region until being closed during the 1920's.

Lonaconing's educational plans began in 1883 with a petition to the school commissioners. "The petition for a colored school in Lonaconing was granted provided a house could be rented and a sufficient number of scholars obtained." Subsequently, a room was rented for the students in 1887. The rented facility burned in 1895, and "The Board decided not to open the colored school at Lonaconing during the school year (February 15, 1895)."

On September 1, 1896, "The contract to erect a colored school in Lonaconing in the sum of twelve hundred and thirty five dollars not including painting" was let. The new building was located on an unnamed street behind the Presbyterian church on Scotch Hill; one teacher was employed. Lonaconing resident Elizabeth Myers taught at the school and in later years enjoyed

telling stories of her pupils bringing homemade treats for her benefit. Board of Education records confirm the school operated into the first decade of the twentieth century but declining enrollment caused it to close.

The United States Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka decision in 1954 marked the beginning of the end for segregated educational facilities in the United States. Allegany County operated two segregated schools at that time (Carver and Lincoln) and made plans to close them. An Allegany County Public Schools report dated June 30, 1954, completed for the benefit of the Maryland State Department of Education, indicated the numerical status of African American students at that time.

163 Negro elementary (1-6)

117 Negro secondary (7-12)

Negro elementary teachers 4

Negro secondary teachers 6

1 elementary principal and 1 secondary principal.

Allegany County Superintendent of Schools Ralph Webster summarized salient dates of the county's integration plans on February 3, 1963, in response to a request from the Maryland State Department of Education. The following are key points from Mr. Webster's letter.

1) July 1955, the Board of Education issued a policy statement affirming plans to integrate schools.
2) September 1955, a choice was given to black students to transfer to other local schools. Specifically, grades 10, 11, and 12 were assigned to Beall, Allegany, and Fort Hill.
3) September 1956, 30 students and one teacher were transferred from Carver Elementary to West Side Elementary.
4) 1957-1959, the status quo prevailed while additional facilities were being constructed.
5) September 1959, integration was completed for students and teachers.

Additional entries contained in official reports show that the faculties of Carver and Lincoln Schools had been collaborating with other county schools at the staff level prior to integration; instructional meetings, the teacher's association meetings, curriculum writing activities, and textbook selection were considered in concert. Exceptions to cooperation were inter scholastic athletic programs, music festivals, and similar student events.

Segregated schools in Allegany County closed more than five decades ago, thus ending an era of unequal educational opportunities for African American children. As time passes, personal memories of those schools will fade and eventually disappear. Additional research is necessary to create a more complete historical record of African American schools in Allegany County.

The fate of African American school buildings:

Mary Hoye School was closed for educational purposes and designated as a "Colored YMCA." The building remained on maps into the 1920's, was sold in 1927 and later razed. No remains of the building are present.

Mechanic Street School was demolished to make way for the Garden Theatre. The Garden Theatre was later demolished for the purpose of building the John F. Kennedy Apartments which now occupy the site.

Carver School currently serves as the Carver Community Center.

Lincoln School is the office of Frostburg State University campus police.

The A.M.E. Church continues to serve worshippers at its Frederick Street location.

The Ebenezer Baptist Church building on Cumberland Street is now a private residence. The congregation moved to Columbia Street in North Cumberland.

The Lonaconing School was razed leaving no traces of its existence. The Lonaconing site is now occupied by a private residence.

The author was unable to determine the fate of Westernport's school.

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