

COMMENTS

I was nominated to the temporary position of Historian for Oconee High School National Alumni Association (OSHNAA). I am humbled and honored by the nomination and subsequent approval by the committee. It is important for any group and specifically the African-American group that attended these schools to remember and cherish their history. It is also a time for recognizing those dedicated educators who toiled and labored within a segregated school system that denied many students the equal status accorded to others in the community.

We should study history because it is very important to our posterity. The serious study of history document significant events of the past, correct inequities, and should teach us how to govern ourselves better. There have been many sacrifices for the students to pursue a decent education and never must the recipients forget the parents, guardians, and community members who made this a reality.

Because of this sacrifice, all students must not necessarily “pay back” but more importantly they should “pay forward” which will assure our youth that their welfare is taken into consideration. There are so many community activities that require our attention. We are so diverse and qualified in so many occupations, skills, and expertise until we can make a difference throughout the community.

Robert A. (Bob) Evans, Sr.
Class of 1954

The Origin of Oconee High School

The City of Dublin, Georgia, operating under the dual segregated concept of separate but equal educational opportunities, resulted in inferior education for the African-American students. During this period, whites were educated and colored people were trained which is a vast distinction. I will use the terms African-American, Negro(s), and Colored interchangeably throughout the text, to mean the same thing, but I will apologize in advance to anyone who may be offended by their usage. These were the terms used during this period. The term Black was considered derogatory as well as the N-Word when addressing minorities during this period.

Before we began to talk about Oconee High School, there is so much educational history that must be discussed in order give one a deeper perspective of the achievements of African-Americans during this period. There were numerous feeder schools in the county/community, usually starting in grades 1 through 6. After completion of the sixth grade, students were then enrolled at Washington Street High School where the grades were 7 through 11. It is important to give a brief overview of the schools that comprised the feeder schools. There was Telfair Street School headed by Principal Sofronia Dasher Walker, ably assisted by other teachers viz, Maude Linder, Julia Thomas, Essie Ingram, Sammie Jordan, Melba Bates Baker, Ms. Lester, and several others whom I cannot recall due to personnel changes. There was Decatur Street School located at the intersection of Moore and Decatur Streets in Scottsville. This school was headed by Principal Eula Coney Jackson, ably assisted by Emily Gibson Jackson, Vivian Baker Bullock, Alma Jones, Ms. Cook, and Druzy Perry Little. Unlike Telfair Street School, Decatur Street School was constructed out of pre-fabricated army barracks material. The buildings had one thing in common, there were an absence of in-door plumbing and lunchroom facilities, culminating in the deprivation of students to privacy by gender and hot, nutritious school meals conducive to growth and well-being. The other feeder school in close proximity was Park Street School located across the Oconee River in East Dublin. Mrs. Maybell Parks and Elvenia Jenkins taught at this school and the grades were 1 through 6 and the students were required to enroll at Washington Street High School after completion of grade 6. The other surrounding rural schools such as Fleming Chapel, Mary Grove, Pine Forest, Dudley, Dexter, Buckeye, and Millville as I recall were comprised of grades 1 through 9. There was also Mount Pullen where Mrs. Pauline Hodges and M.D. Lease Pauline Hodges and M. D. Lease taught. Students were then required to attend Washington Street High School. There were many qualified educators working at these schools. I will cite a few names but it is obvious that I cannot remember all of the teachers at these schools. Ms. Lucy Laney Perry was principal at Mary Grove, Rev. R. C. Stinson was principal at Dexter, Rachel Perry Glenn, Mamie Snell, Mr. CoPenny, Mr. James Hunter, Mrs. Nora Dawson, Mrs. Natalie Williams, Mrs. Clara Bell Outler, Mrs. Clemmie Walden and her sister and many others were dedicated educators.

I recall during World War II that overcrowding was prevalent at Washington Street High School. Students, particularly in the fifth and six grades were given the option of attending Telfair Street School or Park Street School. Decatur Street school had not been constructed at that time.

In 1946, one year after the end of World War II, the school board gave authorization for the construction of two pre-fabricated army barracks to be built on the Washington Street campus. One was partitioned for three classrooms, the other served as an assembly hall, lunch room and classroom. Overcrowding was still an issue. I recall in 1948 that we had two sessions of eight grade students (totaling 80) which was large during those times. It was not until 1952 that this problem was alleviated with the building of Oconee High School. The class of 1951 was the last class to graduate from Washington Street High School. There was not a graduating class in 1952 because it was then that the school system added the twelfth grade and Dublin was classified as a Class A high school along with Brunswick, Waycross, Valdosta, Savannah (Woodville High School, exclusive of Alfred E. Beach High School which was classified as AA and in the class with Ballard-Hudson in Macon, Spencer High in Columbus, Lucy Laney in Augusta, Booker Washington, David T. Howard, Turner and Carver in Atlanta) and other schools of equal size.

The registration of students from the county school caused this increase in student population. Oconee officially began operating in September of 1952 and the first graduating class was in June of 1953. Unlike the previous schools, Oconee was considered modern and equal with the White school at least structurally because we had oil heat and modern plumbing, a cafeteria, auditorium, and a French Language class added to the curriculum for the juniors and seniors. I would like to regress for a moment and while this history is not necessarily in chronological order, it is only proper that former teachers be recognized along with their talents and contributions. As a bit of information and history, I was born in 1934 directly across the street from Washington Street High School and lived there until I moved to a different area in 1947. I started kindergarten in 1939. The kindergarten was operated by Mrs. Robinson (wife of Reverend Robinson, Pastor of First AB Church) in the old fairground of what is now Katie Dudley Village. Professor Marcus Ingram was the first principal that I remembered. He was succeeded by Professor Lucius T. "Big Luke" Bacote in 1946. My teachers at Washington Street in grades 1 through 7 were Rosie Bell Smith, Essie Ingram, Nell Mathis Tolbert, Jessie Bell Simmons, Malvolia Thomas, Rebecca Hughes Myles, Emily Gibson, and Marine C. Bacote respectively. Subsequent years found teachers such as Annie Mae Coates, Petrola Mootry, Eddie Mathis, Ms. Thomas, Ms. Odessa Shanks, Reliford O. Glenn, Eartherline Manigault, Nuerdine Johnson, Donnette Lawrence Thomas, Gladys Ingram, Tranas Long, Leander Turner, Joe Briscoe, H. T. Jones, Richard A. Johnson, Ursher Toler, Katherine Toler, Ms. Moreland, Professors Bailey, Saunders and Jolly, Nellie Coleman, Ms. Hay, Dorothy Dunn Whitehead, Doris Jolly, Phreddye Grant, Cleopatra Jenkins Hollingsworth, Agnes Goler, Lillian Benjamin and Dazell Williams. These are only a few that I remembered at Washington Street High School. Ms. Smith and Myles were the music teachers and they also were excellent art teachers. I have often heard my late mother and others talk of Principals Hall, Isom and Huffman who were considered strong stern educators along with Mrs. Rupert Hudson. It was not uncommon for individuals to teach without a teaching certificate or a college degree. Many teachers taught and later matriculated to college in order to maintain their certification. Numerous other individuals taught night classes in their homes to help many semi-illiterate citizens. Some individuals attended Fort Valley State on Saturdays and during the summer in order to earn their college degree. This

indicates how serious people were about learning and there were many positive results. In later years the requirement to teach became more technical and a college degree was mandatory. All teachers (substitutes excluded) were required to have a college degree and certificate in their field of study. There were many graduates who enrolled in college and although it required them longer than usual to complete college due to financial, military and family obligations, they were successful in doing so.

It is significant to note that Washington Street High School purchased a school bus nicknamed the "Trojan Horse". The bus was purchased in 1951. It was formerly owned by the Greyhound Lines. It was painted our school colors of "blue and gold" and to my knowledge we were the only school in the state (black or white) that had our own school bus. The bus was initially used exclusively to transport the football, basketball, and track teams around. Later it was used to transport the choir as far away as New York City on several occasions. Periodically, parents and other senior citizens were given tours on the bus. The school was able to purchase this bus by holding various events to raise funds, receiving contributions from businesses throughout the city and the sacrifice of hardworking parents who contributed financially toward purchasing the bus. Positive community involvement and cooperation made this possible even though many thought it to be impossible.

The name Oconee was taken from the Oconee River, but not without opposition. Many students wanted the school to be named after a famous African-American. Personally, I wanted it named after Crispus Attucks. A group of parents and other community leaders gathered and the school was named by Mrs. Marine C. Bacote, so that is how Oconee got its name. Since that time much progress in terms of academic excellence has happened. We were shortchanged by not having a gymnasium built along with the original school and it was not until many, many, years later that a gymnasium was built. Several new teachers joined Oconee during 1952-1955, among them were Timothy U. Ryals, Mary Foster, Roscoe Brower, Isiah H. McLinton, James White, and others that I did not have an opportunity to meet. The land on which Oconee was built was donated by W. H. Lovett, however, it is important to note that much of the land was once owned by Mrs. Pearl Murray (Black African-American Female Entrepreneur) who had other business establishments in the community. Susie Dasher Elementary School was built adjacent to Oconee High School to accommodate the many grades 1-7 from the other schools. Susie Dasher was named in honor of Mrs. Sofronia Dasher Walker's Mother. Mrs. Eula Coney Jackson was the first principal of Susie Dasher and many of the teachers from the Telfair, Decatur, and Park street schools joined the faculty.

Prior to the opening of Oconee High School there were no public bus transportation for the black students, except one bus driven by a Mr. Tom Davis for the students residing in the county. Students residing within the city limits were required to walk long distances through inclement weather conditions, unless they were fortunate enough to have parents with vehicles. However, during the school year of 1954 Mr. George Oliver Wyche purchased a bus to pick up students for their commute to school. The fare was 15 cents per trip and this greatly assisted students who had

to walk a long distance to school. There were no paved streets in the Colored sections of town. Despite all of the obstacles, the teachers actively sought to ensure that a comprehensive academic and support program was active as well as character-building, sports, arts, music and other extracurricular activities. One can evaluate qualifications of the teachers by the amount of positive progress made by the graduates which have been expanded exponentially in terms of success.

I will conclude by stating that there has been a lot of progress made since that time, but we cannot become complacent in our quest for a better society. When we think of the many sacrifices that our parents and community made, we are obligated to do more. Therefore, I am challenging all alumni to generously join the alumni association and contribute to the education fund.

I graduated from Oconee High school in the class of 1954. Subsequent to that period, I did not have very much contact with the school because my career in the United States Air Force took me to many exotic places throughout the world. I do know that the graduation rate increased and the majority of students attended college and have been successful, educationally, financially and otherwise. I would strongly recommend that student(s) from classes from 1955-1970 be contacted to provide historical data. Lastly, I would like to expound upon the loyalty demonstrated by members of the Colored community during World War II. Specifically, all students at Washington Street High School assisted in the war effort participating in buying and selling war bonds, collecting various scrap material for the war effort, soliciting contributions for the March of Dimes and participating in air raid drills. There were many young men who served with distinction in all branches of the military. Some families like the Golars, Shines, HARRISES, McKinnons, Seeds, Lawrences, and Driskells had 3-4 sons serving at one time. The tribute to the many teachers named in this report is well-deserved along with the commitments made by the parents, grandparents and guardians.