

Our Story

Williston Middle School bears the name of Samuel Williston(1795-1874), a manufacturer in Massachusetts who made his fortune making buttons and suspenders. A portrait of Mr. Williston hangs in our main entrance lobby. He supported a number of religious and educational causes through his participation in the American Missionary Society. Prior to the American Civil War, this group worked tirelessly to advocate for the abolition of slavery in America. After the Civil War, the group supported the establishment of churches and schools in the South for the newly freed African-Americans.

With Williston's generosity, a school for the newly freed slaves in Wilmington was opened in 1866 on Seventh Street between Nun and Church Streets and named for him. By 1868 the school had over 200 students and was led by an all-white staff of one teacher and six assistants. In 1873, the American Missionary Society sold the school to the Wilmington Board of Education for \$3000 and it became the city's first public school for African-American children. The all-white staff was replaced by a staff of African-American teachers, including Mary Washington Howe who became principal in 1880. She expanded the school to eight grades and served in that role for twenty years until her death in 1900. Howe Pre-K Center, located at 1020 Meares Street, is named in her honor.

In 1914, the Board of Education began construction of a new Williston School at 10th and Church Streets. It opened on February 1, 1915 and was renamed Williston Primary and Industrial School. The first principal was D.C. Virgo who expanded the school by adding grades up to 12th and as well as an agricultural curriculum. D.C. Virgo School, today operated by the Watson College of Education of the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, is named for him. In 1923, Williston became an accredited high school and by 1929 the school enrolled nearly one thousand students. A new building was constructed to ease overcrowding and it opened in 1933 only to be destroyed by fire in 1936. A new building was commissioned as a replacement and was opened in 1937.

A new and improved building was authorized and opened in 1954 with the old building becoming Gregory Elementary School. The 1954 building is still in use today and houses the 7th and 8th grade classes as well as the auditorium, cafeteria, and gymnasium. Williston was nationally recognized and its students and staff received numerous awards for the excellence of its academic, arts, and vocational programs. It was "the greatest school under the sun" and was a major social center for the African-American community.

In 1968, the New Hanover County Board of Education closed Williston High School as part of its plan to at last desegregate the schools here. While it was reopened as Williston Junior High School, the blow to the community and the loss of the school's proud traditions remains a source of pain for many. In 1988, New Hanover County moved all the junior high schools to the middle school concept and we became Williston Middle School. An addition was added to the building in 2002 and houses the 6th grade, media center, and office areas.

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