

Black History Month – Education in St. Joseph Week 3 – Feb. 15-19, 2021

In 1887, the St. Joseph School Board secured property for a new school that would serve grades one through 12. In 1888, Bartlett School was built at 18th and Angelique Streets. As Missouri schools went, black or white, Bartlett was an architectural marvel, a highly ornamented, two-story brick building with mansard roof, a cupola and a functional basement.

Lincoln School was a low, rectangular building, simple in design, with a flat roof. The interior consisted of four classrooms; a gymnasium was housed in the basement. Lincoln functioned until desegregation, in 1956.

1900 marked the 15th year of operation for the Colored High School in St. Joseph. William H. Jones was the principal and the school enrolled 50 students. The Colored High School had a low enrollment compared to the grammar or elementary schools. The major reason was that black students had to walk 16-20 blocks to get to the school. Many were poor and did not have the proper clothes for winter. Also, the older children were compelled to stay with younger children while their parents worked. The principal noted that the Negro student after completing high school, still could find only those jobs that the uneducated Negro could do. Many dropped out of school before they graduated.

In 1912, the Lincoln High School principals asked for an additional teacher but was refused by the Board of Education. The class sizes numbered 25, 31, 32 and 41 students. The principal even taught classes with 14 students. The superintendent said other schools had much larger averages and the request was denied. That same year, high school graduates numbered 23 at Lincoln High School, only slightly less than the number of white high school graduates that same year.

Sometime around 1920, land was procured on St. Joseph Avenue, to build a new African American school for the black grade school children in that area. A proposed school building program authored by school district directors recommended the previous Lincoln building was obsolete and that a new Lincoln School should be built.

Typically, grade school students at Bartlett received castoff books from the white schools. Students in grades 9-12, however, had to buy their own books. Education was separate and unequal.

In a public school report for 1922-1923, administrators recommended, for both financial and educational reasons, that additional land be purchased adjacent to Bartlett School and that an auditorium/gymnasium be constructed.

In 1929, the gymnasium was erected. The Bartlett School gymnasium was designed by architect William Lettner. Constructed in a simple, neoclassical design, with arched windows, the building features a three-door entrance and elaborate brickwork. It was by and large one of the finest gymnasiums of the period.

Bartlett High developed into a highly respected institution of public education, counting among its graduates, doctors, lawyers, business entrepreneurs and other successful citizens. Their last reunion was held in 2016 in St. Joseph.

When a fire destroyed the black high school in Plattsburg, MO, students were bussed daily to Bartlett High, some 35 miles away.

Source: Gary S. Wilkinson & A Chronological History of the St. Joseph School District

