

ROBERT SMALLS SCHOOL HISTORY

In 1861 when Federal troops occupied the Beaufort area, ninety-five percent of the Negro inhabitants were illiterate. State Legislature of 1834 prohibited teaching slaves to read and write. This prohibition regarding teaching was not always obeyed. Northern missionaries sent by churches and religious societies to open schools and teach children and adults were able to call on several black teachers to help them.

On February 28, 1867, the Beaufort County School District Board purchased Block 31 for school purposes. The block was bounded by Carteret, Greene, New and Washington Streets. Members of the board were: Captain Robert Smalls, Jonathan J. Wright, William J. Whipper, Richard H. Gleanes, Landon S. Langley, Walter Fuller, Isaac Simmons, Prince Rivers, R. F. Bythewood, Reverend Arthur Waddell, I. J. Cohen, George Waddell and J. C. Rivers.

Block 31 and its premises were leased on June 23, 1884 to the Board of Missions for Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church for a period of ninety-nine years upon the express condition that it be used for school purposes.

In 1893, the Beaufort County School Board, assuming entire responsibility for Negro education, took over the black school on Block 31. The Board continued to use the building for the education of black students until 1924. Records indicated that on November 17, 1925, the South Carolina School Board sold School District #1, Beaufort County, South Carolina all of Block 31 for \$4,000 and gave them permission to remove the building from the grounds.

Names of the Beaufort Board members were: Proctor Glover, Chairman, Reverend D. W. Bythewood, Dr. N. J. Kennedy, C. S. Simpson, J. I. Washington, H. G. Fisher, S. S. Grayson, C. H. Heyward, George A. Reed, Benjamin Singleton, A. Dingle, P. A. Roper and J. A. Dickson.

The reasons for this transaction was that the school for black children was in need of repairs while the old Beaufort College building was too small for the number of white students. The school Board decided to raze the school for blacks and build a new elementary school with playground space for white students on its site.

At the same time, the decision was made to build a new school for black students at the western edge of Beaufort in the area bounded by Ribaut Road and Boundary Street, just north of what was then known as "Dixon Village." Thus, Robert Smalls High School was opened in September 1925 and named for the wartime hero who delivered the Confederate Streamer Planter to the union Fleet on May 13, 1862. For this feat, he received freedom for himself and others and a monetary reward.

General Robert Smalls, a political leader during the Reconstruction years, is remembered by a sculpture and historical marker at Tabernacle Baptist Church on Craven Street. He and family members are buried in the churchyard.

The first principal of Robert Smalls School was the Reverend Daniel W. Bythewood, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church, who served one year. The first teachers were: First Grade - Martha Simmons and Mabel Saxon, Second Grade - Elizabeth Mixon, Third Grade - Minnie Farr Lawton, Fourth Grade - Laurretta Frazier, Fifth Grade - Addie B. Haynes, Sixth Grade - Mabel Williams, Seventh Grade - Maudie Ford, Eighth Grade - Etta Washington, Tenth Grade - Helen Scheper and Custodian - Edward Roach.

The second principal was the Reverend James Alfred Wilson, pastor of First African Baptist Church. Reverend Wilson was principal of the school for four years.

In September 1930, the Reverend Edward E. Cornwell, Tabernacle's pastor became the third principal and served for one year, after which Ralph W. McGirt became principal serving for seven years.

The wood framed school burned in 1932. Elementary classes were held in various churches throughout the Beaufort area and a residence on the corner of Duke and New Castle Streets was used for high school students. A brick structure was erected on the former Robert Smalls site and the eleventh grade was added to the curriculum.

In 1939, W. Kent Alston of Summerville, South Carolina became principal of Robert Smalls. Alston was described as a man who was always looking for something else to do. During Alston's administration, typewriters, various kinds of equipment, a piano and organ were purchased. The teacherage, gymnasium and walkways were constructed and the first school bus was bought so that students from Port Royal and Burton wouldn't have to walk the distance to Robert Smalls as many had to do in all kinds of weather. The high school was extended to include twelfth grade.

Alston brought to the school outstanding artists, musicians and educators over the years, such as: Dr. Mordecai Johnson, Wings Over Jordan Choir, Clara Ward Singers, Lionel Hampton Orchestra, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Roland Hayes, Paul Roberson, Joe Louis, The Harlem Globetrotters, Dr. Benjamin Mays and Marion Anderson.

In 1952, the Robert Smalls Elementary became a separate school with Robbie Goodloe Wright principal of grades one through six.

The old brick structure and the Scheper Building (named for one of the teachers) formerly the home economics classroom, housed the elementary school. The student body consisted of students

from Beaufort, Port Royal, Burton and Seabrook areas. The high school occupied a newly constructed building on the same tract.

In 1955, the Robert Smalls High School band traveled to Washington, D. C. to participate in the Cherry Blossom parade to which it had been invited.

The school was divided again in 1958 with the formation of the junior high with Muriel Washington Smalley as principal of grades seven and eight. Junior high classes were held in the basement of the new high school building, the old brick structure and the Scheper Building. A new elementary school had been built, which is now the Arthur Horne County Office Building.

On April 2, 1965, the Robert Smalls Junior High School was destroyed by fire. Students were bused to Lady's Island Elementary and the U.S.O. on Prince and Wilmington Streets were the Beaufort County Health Department is now located.

After twenty-four years of faithful service to the school and community, W. Kent Alston retired in June 1962.

Jacob R. Richardson, a Beaufort native, became principal of the senior high school. While he was on administrative leave in 1968-69, Albert Jackson served as acting principal for one year.

In August 1970, Robert Smalls experienced a significant change from a senior to a junior high school serving grades seven, eight and nine with an integrated faculty and student body. Grades ten to twelve attended Beaufort High School.

Maurice Waddell of Clio, South Carolina became principal of Robert Smalls in 1973, followed by Lawrence Miller in 1974.

In 1984, after fifty-nine years at the Beaufort site, Robert Smalls Junior High School moved to a new school building constructed in the Burton area. It is now a middle school serving grades six, seven and eight.

The highway leading to the school has been named Robert Smalls Parkway, and the road on which the school is located has been named W. K. Alston Road. A historical commemorative marker has been erected at the county government complex which occupies the area where the original Robert Smalls School was built.

The Robert Smalls Association, composed of persons who attended the school prior to 1970, was organized by Ms. Vivian V. Pigler in 1976. The Association awards two scholarships annually and meets every three years in July to reminisce and continue the proud kinship, which exists among the Robert Smalls alumni.

History prepared by Muriel Washington Smalley, Adalee Brown Roberts (deceased) and James N. Brown (deceased) with assistance from Gerhard Spieler, local historian.

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