

## THE BROWN SCHOOL

Yesterday's Schools by Lucy Walsh Phinney

The second public school established in the county was in the Manassas School District, as was the first one. Like that one, this second school probably evolved from a private school. In this case however, the school was for black children who previously had been educated privately using funds from white benefactors as well as the black community. The original building was a two-room frame structure located, on a map from 1869, near the intersection of Liberty and Prince William Streets in the Village of Manassas. Not long after it opened, the school building was moved to a nearby lot on Liberty Street where it still stands today, covered in yellow siding and used as a residence.

The new location was an open lot on a muddy street. The building had no porch and no fence but a large stone at its entrance. The "Friends Society for the Aid and Education of the Freedman", a Philadelphia Quaker group, had been sending funds for the education of black children for several years. When the school system became public in 1870, the newly formed Manassas District School Board asked the Friends to transfer their funding to the public schools. That benevolent group agreed to continue to pay \$25 towards the salary of what was then called the Manassas Village Colored School.

That arrangement continued during the next school year also. In July of 1871, the Manassas District School Board agreed to pay the "Colored School teacher" \$35 a month for a five month term. \$25 of that salary would continue to come from the Friends Society of Philadelphia; the remainder would be paid by the School Board. That group, a year later, invited the Friends to name the #2 School of the District since their funds were that school's main support. The name Brown School was chosen, honoring Mary D. Brown of Philadelphia, a member of the Friends Society.

For many years the Brown School was the only educational facility for young black children in Manassas and it served as the feeder school for the Manassas Industrial School. It also served as the center of the black community in the large area of the county for eighty-three years.

The early history of the Brown School is a checkered one. In 1893, the Manassas School Board elected Leonera Joice as principal teacher at a salary of \$25 a month. Mary V. Lucas was appointed as assistant at \$20 a month. (In contrast the principal at the white Ruffner School was paid \$40; his assistant, \$25) From 1897 to 1904, the principal of Brown was Mr. George Harris, who left the school system for a higher salary offered by a career in government service. His place was taken by Mr. Powell W. Gibson who served as principal of the Brown School until 1912. During the early years of his tenure, Mr. Gibson was assisted by Miss Georgia Hannah Bailey who left to marry and then resumed her teaching career at the Manley School. Professor W. C. Taylor took her place to finish the school term. He was a retired Industrial School principal, a veteran educator who nevertheless left Brown in disgust at the condition of the building, the poor equipment it offered and the parents who came into the school to whip teachers who disciplined their children.

Miss Bailey's (now Mrs. Berry) vacancy was finally filled by Mrs. Bessie Loving White at the request of Mr. George C. Round who, in his capacity as trustee of the Manassas Industrial School, was familiar with her ten year record of teaching at that school. Mrs. White was appointed by Superintendent of Schools Clarkson and given a first grade teaching certificate based on that "splendid" record. Then, in 1912, Mr. Gibson left the Brown School to become a public school principal in Winchester where he later retired. Personnel problems were not the only troubles endured by the Brown School. In January of 1907 the District School Board received a report that the Brown schoolhouse had been seriously damaged by fire. School was suspended until repairs could be made.

Finally, in 1924, Mrs. White became principal and thus a new era, with a woman in charge of "a tough spot like the Brown School", began for the troubled school. That year, history records that parents began to cooperate with the school. Mrs. White, along with the students and other faculty, raised money from the school patrons to fence the school lot, move the big rock from the entrance, put up a porch on the front of the old building, and hire "local carpenters of color" to do it all. This cooperation soon led to the formation of the School League, a necessary ingredient for the success of any of the early schoolhouses. When a law was passed requiring running water and sewers, the School Board said that funds just were not available for those things and the school was threatened with closure. One parent of several students at Brown School offered to lend money to the School Board so that the necessary improvements could be made. This offer was accepted and the school stayed open for the rest of the 1924-25 school year.

Then, in 1926, with funds raised by patrons of the Brown School, a lot was purchased for a new school building on Prince William Street just west of South Grant Avenue in Manassas. The property was then deeded by the Brown Colored School League to the Prince William County School Board along with \$1000 in cash raised by the community and a promise of all the unskilled labor necessary to build the new building. Additional funds of \$6500 came from Rosenwald money. In January of 1926 bids were opened for construction of a four-room schoolhouse. The low bidder was the Appomattox Construction Company of Appomattox Va. whose bid came in at \$6631.53. Using some of the \$1000 raised by the community, Dr. John Williams, an alumnus of the Brown School and a prominent black physician in Manassas who was also deeply involved in the education of black children, drove into Washington DC and bought radiators which he and several young men installed in the new school building. In the 90 degree heat of a Manassas summer, they also laid a water line to the school from the town center to provide water for the drinking fountains and for steam heat. Prince William Street was opened to the site, the old schoolhouse was abandoned (and sold in 1928) and the new Brown School opened.

The new school was a very definite improvement over the old building. The Rosenwald frame structure, with its peaked metal roof, had six rooms, four classrooms and two industrial skill rooms. There was a cafeteria in the basement, a school office and two bathrooms. Cloakrooms were also part of the layout. The walls and ceiling were of lath and plaster; the interior floors were of wood which was oiled once a month. There were shades on all the windows, a furnace to provide steam heat and a janitor to operate the system. The pupils took great pride in their school and, under the supervision of the teachers, took good care of it. The library contained 150 volumes. Students from the Lucasville School and Manley School as well as those children from

Nokesville who lived near enough were consolidated at the Brown School despite opposition from some long time residents who felt that the heritage of the Brown School as the center of the black community of Manassas would be lost. As was the case with most other schools, the Brown School served as a center of community social activities, plays, spelling bees, suppers, May Day celebrations and Christmas pageants were all held there.

In the 1929-30 school year, there were thirty-seven children in the first grade and thirty-one in the second, all under the tutelage of Lutie Irene Lewis, a twenty-two year old high school graduate with only one year of teaching experience. Imagine a classroom of sixty-eight students today. For that she was paid \$55 a month, less than almost all other county teachers that year though her class was certainly the largest. She also had to pay \$20 for room and board in the community. Of her students, forty-four were promoted, eight failed and sixteen dropped out. Miss Lewis noted in her yearend report that in her classroom were two sisters, Kate aged thirteen and eight year old Mary Washington who had to walk four miles to school. They were able to attend for only forty days although the school year lasted from September to May.

That same year, Miss Lucille V. Ford, who was also twenty-two years old high school graduate but with two years experience, taught seventeen pupils in the second grade, thirteen in the third and nine in grade four. The average daily attendance was thirty-three and at the end of the year only two dropped out and no one failed. Like Miss Lewis, Miss Ford was paid only \$55 a month for a yearly (nine months) salary of \$495. Her room and board was \$20 a month.

Louise Smith Brown, as both a student and later a teacher at the Brown School, remembers a curriculum using readers, spellers, math and geography books and handwriting exercises. A school ay began at 9 AM and went until 3:30 in the afternoon with two breaks as well as lunch. Baseball was a favorite outdoor sport with balls being brought from home. Another favorite recess game during good weather was tag.

By 1933-34, according to the report of Superintendent Haydon, the total enrollment of the Brown School was 158 with an average daily attendance of 110. By year's end, 114 students were promoted, seventeen failed and twenty-seven dropped out. The following year, total enrollment had fallen to 136 with an average daily attendance of 122 or 90 percent. Only three of the classrooms were used during those years. One of the teachers was a college graduate with a Normal Professional Certificate and five years of teaching experience. The other two teachers held Elementary Teaching Certificates and took summer courses and extension work at Hampton Institute and Virginia State College. They were both experienced teachers having taught for twenty-six and nine years. All three had musical ability and two were skilled seamstresses. The two lower grades were trying the newly revised curriculum encouraged by the administration.

In 1934, pit style outhouses were still in use. They were "fly-proof" and in fair condition. All the students had desks or tables and chairs depending on their grade level. The school had a piano and more than two hundred books in the library. The younger children had a sand table in their classroom. Maps, charts and globes were available in every room but there was no playground equipment and no electricity.

From 1936 to 1943, Mr. Oswald Robinson taught at the Brown School. He had been a teacher in several of the small schools for black children since 1928. Toward the end of his tenure at Brown, in order to support his family, he also worked from 11PM to 7AM in Washington DC before putting in a full day of teaching. Equal pay for equal work did not apply to blacks and whites in those days.

In 1947, modernization and additional rooms for the Brown School cost the County School Board a total of \$23,990. Seven years later, following the “Brown vs the Board of Education” Supreme Court decision, which declared school segregation unconstitutional, the Regional High School, which occupied the facilities of the Old Manassas Industrial School, was closed because each county was responsible for the education of its own black young people. The students of the Brown Elementary School were moved over to the old Regional High School building in 1954 and the Brown School building was abandoned. In 1960, the Jennie Dean High School for grades 1-12 was built on the site. In 1966 the Jennie Dean Middle School and in 1991, it became the Jennie Dean Elementary School. Although the first Brown School building is still standing, no trace of the second Brown schoolhouse remains and only fragments of the old Industrial School have been recovered.