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A Brief History of Huntsville Schools

by Dr. Frances Roberts and Dr. H. D. Nelson



(EDITOR'S NOTE: This article, originally published in the *Commemorative Album - Sesquicentennial, Huntsville, Alabama*, was written in 1955 by Dr. Frances Roberts of the University of Alabama in Huntsville and Dr. H. D. Nelson, who was then Superintendent of Huntsville City Schools; Dr. Roberts updated the information in 1986.)



One of Huntsville's earliest and most enduring interests has been a deep concern for the education of its children and youth. According to tradition, there was a school established in the community by Wyatt Bishop as early as 1807. Col. and Mrs. J. L. Posey also tutored a number of pupils in the early period when the town was known as Hunt's Spring. On November 25, 1812, Green Academy was chartered by the Mississippi Territorial Legislature, the second of its kind, in what is now Alabama. Little is known of its early sessions, but by 1822 it was established in its permanent brick quarters on what is now the site of East Clinton Avenue School. This institution for boys, the most highly recognized of its type in antebellum North Alabama, was reduced to ashes by the Federal Forces during the War Between the States.

Following the pattern of most southern towns of the Old South, Huntsville's schools were private and segregated according to sex. Among the outstanding of these institutions were Mrs. Sara McKay's School, organized in 1819; the Monte Sano Female Academy, opened on February 18, 1830 by the Rev. and Mrs. Rowe; the Huntsville Female Seminary on Randolph Avenue, opened on January 5, 1831; and the Huntsville Female College, chartered and opened by the Methodist Church in 1851. Under the guidance of the Presbyterian Church, a boy's school was built on what is now Longwood Drive in South Huntsville, but it never opened because of the beginning of the War between the States.

In 1854, the state legislature provided the necessary acts for creating the first public school system in Alabama. There is some evidence that public funds were used to support the school under the terms of this general act in the City of Huntsville prior to the War Between the States. This early beginning in the field of public education was interrupted by the war, but during the Reconstruction period, a public school was established under the jurisdiction of the County Superintendent of Instruction.

Left: An unidentified early photograph taken on the steps of the 1882 East Clinton Avenue School, Huntsville's first public school building.

In January of 1873, the City Council made an appropriation of \$1,200 to the public schools for whites and Negroes. On January 21, 1873, this body also moved to prepare the necessary memorials to the state legislature. "To have enacted such laws as may be necessary to have public schools of this district transferred to the city authorities and to provide for the support of the schools and to build school houses for the same." By 1875, the City Council achieved this authority; for in that year the principals and teachers were named by this body and appropriations were made, as they had been since 1873, to supplement state funds. Councilmen John T. Patterson, John Reed, and George Warwick were appointed as members of a school committee whose function it was to report on school matters.

From this time forward until 1905, the public schools of Huntsville remained under the direct supervision of the City Council. At first, rented buildings were used for school sessions. These included a house near the Catholic Church on Jefferson; the Russell home on Madison Street, where the parking garage is now located at the corner of Madison and Fountain Row; and the Calhoun home, which was located on the northeast corner of Eustis and Green streets.

Principals and teachers rendering service at this formative period of public education were Matt McClung Robinson, C. D. Watkins, Daniel B. Young, J. J. Pleasant, Mrs. V. A. Wallace, Mrs. Kate Farris, Mrs. Mary Newman, Mrs. Marie Pleasant, and Miss Sally Ready.

The Freedman's Bureau helped to establish a Negro school on Townsend Street at the close of the War Between the States. Later in 1873, the City Council began its active support of the school which at that time was under state jurisdiction. Thomas Townsend, Daniel Brandon, S. L. Carter, William Council, Charles Hendley, and Henry Binford were among the early teachers in this school. Other locations of the Negro school were in the basement of the Lakeside Methodist Church and the Negro Masonic Temple. The Rev. W. H. Gaston also operated a Negro school in a one-room structure behind St. Bartley's Primitive Baptist Church.

In 1882, while the Rev. J. L. Lovett was principal, the first white public school building was erected on the former site of Green Academy by the City Council. The trustees of this institution, which had not been rebuilt after the war, leased their property to the City officials for twenty years, with the provision that the instrument could be renewed at the end of that time. J. W. Hutchens contracted with the City Council to build the frame structure for \$4,000.

Of the more than 800 white children listed in the school census for the year 1882, only 133 enrolled in the public school, thus indicating that private education in Huntsville was still the order of the day.

Following the Rev. J. L. Lovett's administration, A. N. Esham served as principal of the public school until 1894 when Professor Sam R. Butler was elected to that position. So rapidly did the enrollment grow under his guidance that in 1902, the City Council contracted with A. M. Booth to construct a three story brick building to house the school. Some of the classroom teachers during this period who performed outstanding service and who were long remembered by their pupils were Miss Fannis Taliaferro, Miss Florence Hardie, Miss Mamie Mastin, Miss Laura Bassett, and Miss Annie Merts.

In 1905, due to a controversy in the school system, two public schools were conducted: one under the City Council with W. J. Humphrey as principal, and the other under a newly created superintendent of City Schools, headed by James Pride with S. R. Butler as principal. By 1907, the matter was resolved, and from that date until the present, the public schools have remained under the direct jurisdiction of a five-member board of education appointed by the City Council until 1972, when these positions became subject to election by the people. Members of this first board appointed in 1907 included J. D. Humphrey, President; W. T. Hutchens; Lawrence Cooper; David Grayson; and Oliver Goldsmith. After Professor Butler declined the appointment as principal offered to him by this group, George Goddard was employed to head the school for the year 1907-08.

Meanwhile many private schools for boys and girls continued to flourish in the City. Some of the institutions of note during the period from 1865-1920 were the Carlos D. Smith School on Adams Street, the Charles O. Shepherd School for Boys on Holmes Street, the S. R. Butler School on Eustis Street, and the Williams School on McCullough Avenue. The Huntsville Female Seminary continued until 1874 when it was forced to close due to financial difficulties. Later others operated private schools in this building from time to time. The Huntsville Female College continued until 1895 when the main building burned.

As the public schools came to be more popular, the private schools were discontinued one by one. Under the administration of R. E. Sessions, who became superintendent of the city schools in 1908, a separate four-year high school was organized. In 1911 the Williams Building on McCullough Avenue was rented to house the new school and R. C. Johnson became its first principal. When this structure was destroyed by fire in 1914, the high school grades were returned to the East Clinton building where the elementary grades were still located.

After the resignation of Mr. Sessions in 1913, Mr. Johnson was elevated to the superintendency, a position which he held until 1920. In 1916, a new three-story brick high school was completed on West Clinton Avenue.



Council High School, 609 Pelham Street, now serves as the Council Center for the city school system. The two-story portion of the brick building at left (now demolished) was completed in 1927 for the city's Negro students, the same year as the old Huntsville High School on Randolph Avenue was completed for the white students.

As the Negro enrollment grew, the City Council made provision for the construction of a new frame building in 1896 on a Pelham Street site donated by the Nicholas Davis family. The State of Alabama, through legislative enactment, made provision in 1873 for a Negro normal school to be located in Huntsville. This institution graduated its first class in 1878, and in 1891, its site was changed from West Clinton Avenue to its present location at Normal, Alabama. In 1895, the Seventh Day Adventists also organized Oakwood Junior College for the training of Negroes. Later this school, located four miles northwest of Huntsville, was converted into a four year college in 1945. In 1950, the University of Alabama opened an Extension Center in what was then West Huntsville

High School (now Stone Middle School). From this meager beginning has grown the present University of Alabama in Huntsville, now located on a 335 acre campus in the western part of the city.

In 1920, Frank W. Williams was employed by the Board of Education as superintendent. Under his leadership, the school facilities were expanded to take care of rapid increases in enrollment occasioned by the almost universal acceptance of public education by the community. In 1927, two new brick schools were completed, a white high school on Randolph Avenue and a Negro school now known as Council High. At this time, the West Clinton Avenue building became an elementary school to serve the needs of that area of the city.

Upon the death of Mr. Williams in 1928, Mr. W. G. Hamm became superintendent of the public schools and remained in this capacity until 1948. The Wills Taylor building on Eustis Avenue was purchased in 1929 by the Board of Education to house part of the junior high school grades, and in 1938 the old East Clinton School was replaced by the present structure. In that same year a Negro elementary school was built on Winston Street.

With the coming of two arsenals to Huntsville during World War II, the Fifth Avenue Elementary School (corner of



Located at the southwest corner of Governors Drive (formerly Fifth Avenue) and Gallatin Street, Fifth Avenue Elementary School has been remodeled since this c. 1955 view. The building is now part of the Ambulatory Care Center of the School of Primary Medical Care, University of Alabama at Huntsville.

Governors Drive and Gallatin Street) was constructed in 1944 to take care of the city's expansions to the south.

Dr. Harvey D. Nelson became superintendent of the City Schools in 1948 and remained in that post until he resigned to take the job of superintendent at Tuscaloosa. Because of the rapid expansion of the city's population during this period, additions were made to the existing elementary schools, two new elementary schools were built, and a new Huntsville High School, located on Billie Watkins Avenue, was dedicated on August 22, 1954. A modern annex also was added to Councill High School. When the city limits were expanded in 1956 to encompass all of the mill villages, the schools in these areas were transferred from county jurisdiction to the city system, thus bringing the total number of schools to thirteen.

The most rapid expansion of the city schools to date came during the administrations of Dr. Raymond Christian (1956-1965), Dr. Alton Crews (1966-1967), and Dr. Joseph Stowers (1967-1970). Between 1956 and 1970, the size of Huntsville jumped from four and one half square miles to more than 114 square miles, and its population rose from 72,365 to 139,282. Because of the expanded activities at Redstone Arsenal and the space effort carried on at Marshall Space Flight Center, Huntsville began to expand in all directions and new schools were built in all parts of the city. By 1972, five senior high schools, nine junior high schools (now called middle schools), and twenty-six elementary schools were in operation with a total enrollment of 34,937 students.

With the aid of federal, state, and local funds, the school system expanded its academic offerings and services to regular, special, and adult students. Desegregation of the schools, which began in 1963, was accomplished with a minimum of disruption by 1974. The fact that Sonnie Hereford (a black student), who entered the first grade at Fifth Avenue Elementary School in 1963, became president of the student body at Butler High School during his senior year illustrates the progress made in race relations during the intervening time span.

Even though Huntsville's growth had slowed after man was landed on the moon successfully in 1969, the city continued to thrive because it took steps to diversify its economic base.

After the sudden death of Dr. Joseph Stowers in 1970, Dr. V. M. Burkett became superintendent, a post he held during the next six years. In 1974, the school system became the first in Alabama to achieve accreditation for all of its elementary schools from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Huntsville High had become one of the first high schools in the South to receive this status as early as 1912. During 1974-1975, the centennial of the city schools was celebrated by a variety of activities.

In 1976, Dr. Shelby Counts became superintendent and remained in this position until illness forced his retirement in 1983. Currently Dr. Mary Jane Caylor began her third year as superintendent in June of 1986. Over the past ten years, the city schools have managed to meet the challenges of changing times and to keep abreast of the trends in education.



Huntsville Middle School on Adams Street is the last city school building to be constructed. Completed in 1977, the building's design was influenced by the requirements for team-teaching "pod" areas plus individual classrooms. The many huge trees on the building site were also a factor in the school's design, with only five or six trees having to be removed for construction.



The 1930 Football Team of Huntsville High School. A notation with the picture states that the names were obtained by James Record from six different people. **Front Row from left:** C. D. Howard, "Bonehead" Cartch, Walton Fleming, "Sonny" McCaleb, Bill Hopper, Charles Crute, Joe Fleming, Jeff Darwin, Dorsey Uptain. **Middle Row from left:** Dudley Smith, Carl Walker, William Thomas, C. M. McClure, John McCord, Ogden McAnally, Charles O'Reilly, Dickey Walker, Bruce Hovis, Joe Whitt. **Back Row from left:** Robert Hopper, John McDonald, Merle Earl, Tracey Priest, Country Bailey, Bradley Baker, Coach Jess Keene, Anderson Douglass, Tom Earl, Doug Martinson, Alex Mitchell.