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Douglass High School: Legacy of a Changing Era

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By Elaine E. Thompson, with her permission

The days spent at Douglass High School seem distant now. But the memories, the events, and the spirit of that remarkable era endure.

As the last graduating class of Douglass marched forth to meet the world, they did so with hope and a touch of sadness. The year was 1968. That class was representative of a relatively short, often turbulent, but proud history of secondary education for African Americans in Loudoun County. The commemorative graduation ceremony was special because it marked the closing of not just any school, but of one conceived and born with sweat and tears, and most of all, with love.

The Frederick Douglass High School, on what is now Market Street in Leesburg, welcomed its first students in 1941. The school was the pride of the African American community. Its opening marked the culmination of years of sacrifice and commitment to ensure that students shut out of rural white schools were educated in a safe environment. In an era of adamant segregation, resistance often marked the pathway to the construction of Douglass. Reaching the community's goal of having a new county-wide, accredited high school for African Americans was a triumphant first. The road was not easy,

Until schools desegregated in the 1960s, the black community provided all but the bare essentials for the education of its children in Loudoun. For years delegations of parents and patrons met with the school board to request a new high school building, an expanded curriculum and additional teachers. Action was postponed or refused on the grounds that funds were not available. In the absence of progress with an all-white county school board, the consequence was a hardening of attitudes on both sides.

A COALITION OF FORCES

Gertrude Alexander, the first supervisor of African American teachers, recommended that the all groups and delegations, especially the elementary school parent teacher associations, coordinate their efforts and work under the umbrella of a County Wide League. This action resulted in significant progress.

The Loudoun County Wide League organized in the 1930s and elected John Wanzer of Middleburg as president and Eva Clark Sanford of Hamilton as secretary. Trustees were Robert Ambers, Lucketts; Howard W. Clark, Sr., Hamilton; Fred Lewis, Round Hill; Elizabeth Quisenbury, Leesburg; and John Washington, Middleburg. The primary



goals of the League were securing a decent secondary school building, obtaining state accreditation and providing bus transportation. Membership was open to those interested in improving the quality of education for African American students.

The main reason the School Board gave for not building a new high school was the lack of suitable land. One of the first official acts of the League was to locate a site. With money raised by the elementary PTAs and groups such as the Loudoun Training School's Happy Pals Club, plus the \$6.00 yearly membership dues, the trustees purchased eight acres of land just outside Leesburg's then eastern limits. The owner, W. S. Gibbons, met the trustees at night and agreed to keep finalization of the \$4000.00 transaction secret. The trustees feared the school board and the county supervisors, who had twice refused to help with the purchase costs, would learn of the sale and find another road-block.

According to the deed dated November 4, 1939, the trustees paid fourteen hundred dollars as a down payment, with the balance secured by a vendor's lien payable in ten equal installments.

A month later, William Hall, an African American contractor, secured a bank loan of \$2600.00 for the League enabling them to get a clear title.

It is ironic that at the same time the African American community was struggling to purchase this land, the board of education used \$4000 "surplus funds" to purchase land adjacent to the white school in Leesburg to be used for its future expansion.

With the land issue settled, the question of funding the construction came to the forefront. The superintendent, Oscar L. Emerick, and his board, used every tactic, including the infamous "divide and conquer" to stop the movement. The school board normally used loans from the State Literary Fund to finance construction of schools. They told the County Wide League they had applied for a loan when in fact they knew the fund was exhausted, and no new applications were being accepted. To add insult to injury, the board clouded the issue by voting in May 1939, "*that whenever a colored high school will be built, it will be located on the Cook lot in Purcellville.*" After a public hearing attended by so many the meeting was moved to the courthouse, they rescinded this action.

LEGAL INTERVENTION

Its ongoing struggles with the school board prompted members of the African American community to seek legal counsel. Mrs. Alexander, acting on the League's behalf, invited Charles Hamilton Houston, Chief Legal Counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, to visit Loudoun, to speak to the people and to evaluate the educational system. Already familiar with Loudoun, Houston readily agreed and in February 1940 made the first of many trips to the county to assist in resolving the educational problems. As an official of the NAACP, his services were without charge.

Houston believed that the heart of racial inequality in America was its segregated educational system. He was opposed to "the separate but equal" philosophy, and his ultimate goal was to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling that

approved legally enforced segregation. However, the situation in Loudoun was so deplorable that it called for immediate relief. The only solution was to attempt equalization of the dual system.

Because he suspected they would need legal action, Houston recommended organizing a local Branch of the NAACP and forming a broader coalition of forces. Marie Medley of Leesburg was elected its president. At that point, technical leadership on the school initiative shifted from the County Wide League to the NAACP, with the League remaining as the chief fund raising and public relations arm. It encouraged citizens to pay the poll tax and to vote. Churches and other organizations helped get the message to the community. In a letter to Wanzer, Houston requested that meetings be held in some of the smaller villages to take the message to the people.

The Leesburg Parent Teachers Association headed by William C. Harris was another part of the coalition. Because elementary students shared the same unsafe building as the high school students at the Training School on Union Street, these parents had a double interest. Houston asked a delegation of citizens to accompany him to inspect the public minutes of the school board as well as the receipt and disbursement records of the Loudoun schools. Marie Corum, Marie Medley, Elizabeth Quisenbury, and Irene Roberts volunteered for the task.

Houston began building a case to show the inequities that existed in the school system. His point was that separate, but equal was an impossible policy. The school board reacted by hastening repairs to the Training School, but as Houston pointed out to them, *“This action is a mere scratch on the surface of the problem.”* Even the Virginia State Department of Education called the building, *“a very hazardous structure that should be abandoned at the very earliest time possible.”* Belatedly, the School Board asked the Board of Supervisors *“to make supplementary appropriations of \$4,500 for improved Negroeducation.”* They declined.

Instead of condemning both boards, Houston and his clients were the epitome of courtesy. But at the same time, they methodically and incisively analyzed and documented everything. In a letter to the school board dated March 16, 1940, Houston outlined all the violations and the consequences for not correcting them. He concluded, if facilities, curriculum and transportation provided for white children were not provided for Negroes, the board of education was liable and could be sued. *“We seek no favors. We want simple justice, the rights which are ours according to the law of the land.”*

Eventually the school board approved the site for what would become Douglass High School. In a deed dated December 16, 1940, the eight-acre tract was sold for one dollar in cash to the Loudoun School Board with the stipulation that it be *“used for the benefit of the Negro public school children as an athletic field and as the location of a public Negro school and other improvements to be constructed thereon.”*

PRIDE OF OWNERSHIP

By January of 1941, the county solicited bids for building the new school. At the February meeting, they opened the sealed bids. William N. Hall, the contractor who had secured the loan for the County-Wide League, lost out to the Taylor Manufacturing

Company of Farmville, Virginia with a low bid of \$35,438. By March the loans had been approved and the construction contracts signed. The Colonial Revival-style brick building consisted of four classrooms, a library, the principal's office, a combined gym and auditorium and two lavatories.

At the request of the community, the school was named Frederick Douglass in honor of the famous abolitionist. The Board appointed George William Liverpool as principal, and in addition to the standard staff, hired a librarian, and home economics and industrial arts teachers.

Throughout the summer of 1941, African Americans from all over the county made trips to Leesburg to see the fruits of their effort now under construction. Their work, however, was not over. Aside from desks, the school board supplied little else. Again, the County Wide League and other members of the coalition began serious fund raising. They purchased curtains for the stage and front windows, folding chairs for the auditorium, a piano, books for the library, miscellaneous equipment and supplies. Other items and landscaping were donated. Later, the industrial arts students built the shop as part of their class work.

The African American community considered Douglass *their* school, and the pride of ownership was very evident. At the November dedication, they filled the auditorium and adjoining classrooms. A.G. Richardson, supervisor of Negro education in Virginia gave the keynote speech. Principal Liverpool, who also taught Latin and history, presented the new teachers: Gladys Kent, Edith Smith, Elsie Pierce, Florence Carroll, Elizabeth Jones and Moses Knox. Ruby Vaughan, the new supervisor of teachers; John Wanzer; Marie Medley and others brought greetings. The *Afro-American* newspaper of Baltimore covered the event extensively, and clippings of the articles were placed in scrapbooks.

The school year was off to a good start, but it was apparent the building was already too small. Classes were held on the stage, in the library, and in the corners of the gymnasium. (In later years when the concept of open classrooms became popular, students who had attended Douglass chuckled because they had always had wall-less classrooms.) But nothing could dampen the enthusiasm of the students and teachers. Courses that had not been available at the Training School were offered. Clubs and athletic teams were organized.

In January 1942, Douglass High School received its certificate of accreditation for the 1941-1942 school year. In a letter to NAACP president Marie Medley, Liverpool wrote, "*We are justly proud of these great strides in Negro education for Loudoun County, and are ever mindful of the outstanding role played by your Branch of the NAACP...*" No doubt a letter was sent to the County Wide League as well, but the majority of their records have not survived.

When The United States entered World War II, the Douglass students participated in the war effort. Most male members of the senior class joined the armed services. The school, which had become the hub of community fund raising activities to benefit Douglass, was told to conserve energy by curtailing all programs not directly sponsored by the school. Monthly meetings of the local PTA and the County-Wide League were the only exemptions. All other activities required the approval of Dr. B.

A. Brann, resident member of the school board.

Life at Douglass went on, and the school swiftly built a fine reputation. The Glee Club, Drama Club, New Homemakers of America and the sports teams competed on regional and state levels and brought home trophies. The school formed a chapter of The Lincoln National Honor Society to recognize outstanding students. In February 1944, the students printed their first newspaper, *North Star*, named after Frederick Douglass's 1848 periodical. The newspaper staff changed the name to *The Douglass Comet* in the mid-1950s.

MONUMENTAL EVENTS

The 1950s introduced other monumental events. The first class under the twelve-year plan graduated. In 1953, students published their first yearbook. Among improvements made to the building was a modern science laboratory. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court issued its unanimous ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring state-sponsored segregation in public schools unconstitutional. In addition to the obvious implications, Douglass High School had a personal interest in this ruling. Although he was no longer living, and his protégé Thurgood Marshall had argued the case, Charles Hamilton Houston was, as Marshall said, "*the engineer of it all.*"

Aided and abetted by Virginia's massive resistant laws, some white Loudouners who had supported the building of Douglass High School and the equalization of teachers' pay were adamantly opposed to integration. Unlike other school systems that either obeyed the law or defied it by "standing in the school house door," the Loudoun County School Board took a wait and see approach. They probably discussed it in closed sessions, but a search of their minutes reveals not one mention of the Supreme Court ruling.

While the civil rights movement swirled about them, obvious changes at Douglass were minimal. The board refused the County Wide League's request to have Douglass's graduations held at the much larger Loudoun County High School. A delegation consisting of Lovell Parham, Gladys Bryant, Hester Ramey, Violet Jackson, Charles Turner and Margaret Middleton asked the board to appoint an interracial committee to prepare for integration. The school board postponed action. They also refused to consider after-school bus transportation for students participating in extra-curricular activities. Parents, though more militant in their demands, continued to furnish the "extras". Students, bombarded by television accounts of civil rights protests, busied themselves with minor demonstrations, book reports, exams, college applications, homecoming parades, games, puppy love affairs, proms and graduations. The status quo was alive and well. Or was it?

In June 1962 twelve students, already enrolled or slated to enter Douglass in the fall, applied to the Virginia Pupil Placement Board to attend the county's two white high schools. One student was assigned to Loudoun County High School in Leesburg and three to Loudoun Valley in Purcellville. Eight students were rejected.

The NAACP, on behalf of the students who were denied placement, filed suit in the United States District Court in Alexandria calling for the desegregation of the school system. The court ordered the Board of Education to implement a "Freedom of

Choice” plan to phase out segregated schools. The Board hired Carlton Penn, II, later a commonwealth’s Attorney and circuit court judge, to represent them in the civil suit. Some students enrolled in the previously all white schools, but five years later, little progress had been made. Douglass continued to have an all black student body.

In addition to Liverpool, three other principals, Ulysses Oliver; Stephen Sydnor and James Woodson guided the school through changing times. C. M. Bussinger was now superintendent of schools, and McKinley Jackson was president of the NAACP, but there was no meeting of the minds. The patience of the African American community was wearing thin, and so was that of the Court.

With backing from the NAACP, Samuel Eugene Corbin, et al, Plaintiffs and the United States Justice Department, Plaintiff-Intervenor sued the School Board of Loudoun County. In 1967, Judge Oren Lewis ordered total integration on staff and student levels by the 1968-69 school year. The School Board went down to the wire. Twenty-seven years after its founding, and fourteen years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Douglass closed its doors as a high school.

The Legacy Continues

In recognition of the enormous contributions of the African American community to public education and as a monument to their unique experiences, Douglass High School was designated a Historic Virginia Landmark in 1991. The National Register of Historic Places added it as a site in 1992.

Several years after the closing of Douglass, former students organized the Loudoun-Douglass Alumni Association. One of their major accomplishments was to have the name Douglass restored to the building which had taken on a variety of names depending on its use by the school board since ceasing to be a high school.

Since its founding, the Alumni Association has awarded thousands of dollars in scholarships to the descendants of students who attended Douglass.

[* In the official records, the school is referred to as Loudoun Training. However, diplomas are titled Loudoun County High School or Loudoun County Colored High School.]

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