Friends of the Thomas Balch Library

Friends of the Thomas Balch Library Home
Chronology of African American History
National Underground Railroad Network: Loudoun County Locations
Black Laws of Virginia Introduction
Black Laws of Virginia Excerpts
Essential Understandings: Supporting Documents
Relevant Passages from the Constitution
Relevant SC Cases and Legislation
Loudoun County SOLs
Bibliography

Home > Black History > Essential Understandings

Friendly Version | PDF

Elizabeth Johnson Quisenbury

from

Essence of a People:
African Americans Who Made a
Difference in Loudoun County , Virginia

"Warm, intelligent, iron-willed, witty, and possessed of a wonderful smile," are some of the adjectives her family members use when they remember Elizabeth Johnson Quisenbury.

She was born the daughter of George and Nancy Johnson. Her parents died when she was very young. Her grandparents, Hiram and Elizabeth Buchanan Valentine, raised her and her two brothers. (Her grandmother had been a slave of George Carter at Oatlands.) As schools in the county were poor, she was first sent to be educated in Pennsylvania and later attended Dunbar High School in Washington, D. C. After graduating, she returned to Loudoun County to become a teacher at the Mountain Gap Colored School .

In 1921 Elizabeth Johnson married Alan Quisenbury and moved to Washington, D. C. Within a few years, however, her husband died, and she returned to Leesburg with her two small children. When her children attended the school on Union Street , she became reacquainted with the deplorable conditions that black children and their teachers faced in the schools. Quisenbury became a tireless fighter to improve education. When the County-Wide League was formed, she became one of its leaders. The League continued to press the school board for an accredited high school for the community, but the board claimed that no suitable land was available. When in 1939 the league found land and bought it, Quisenbury became one of the trustees who signed the deed. She also donated money to help make the purchase possible. The school board declared that it did not at this time have the necessary funds to build the school, but would build one as soon as funds became available. The League decided to wait and see if the board would take action.

Although her own sons had by then finished high school, Quisenbury, like others in the community, did not want to wait to see if the board would take steps. She joined with others from the Parent-Teacher Association to keep the pressure on the school board. In 1940, she and three women accompanied Charles Houston, the prominent Washington lawyer, to the school board's offices and studied its receipts and disbursements going back to 1930. They were able to document the disparities in spending between education for whites and blacks. At this time she also became a charter member and first secretary of the NAACP.

As a result of all of the pressure from these activities and from individuals, church

groups, and other organizations, the school board finally promised to build a new high school if the African American community provided the land. When the new school (Douglass High) was built, the school board would not provide funds for furnishings beyond the basic desks. Again, Quisenbury threw herself into raising funds for, among other things, chairs in the auditorium and curtains for the stage.

In addition to her work in the struggle for education, Quisenbury was also a long time member of Mt. Olive Methodist Church at Gleedsville and a delegate to its Annual Conference.

Quisenbury moved back to Washington in 1942 but kept her love for Loudoun County alive by sharing with her family the oral histories of her ancestors—during Slavery, Reconstruction, the Migration, and the Great Depression. Her niece, Elizabeth Johnson Francis, writes that "She delighted in welcoming each new generation to the family and because of her long life, was the bridge that linked six generations of the family."

This niece also provided a story that exemplifies Quisenbury's strength and her sense of fairness. "Her younger son, George, who had served in the Navy, became gravely ill and was transported to Walter Reed Medical Center . Personnel there said that he could not be treated. I do not remember now whether the initial refusal to treat him stemmed from issues of color or from issues of class. In any case, she said that he had served honorably in the military, that he was in dire need of medical care at that moment, that she was a taxpayer and entitled to the benefits of her taxes, and that she would not remove him from the hospital. He was treated there!"

Quisenbury was indestructible. Although various physical ailments had plagued her since adolescence, she survived at least three serious heart attacks and other serious illnesses and lived to be a hundred years old.