

History of Education: Asheville's Black Community

Part II

In 1887, Asheville black business leader and former slave Issac Dickson, serving on the Asheville School Committee, cast the deciding vote to bring public schools to Asheville.

At the time, Dickson owned several houses along Velvet Street, known as Dickson Town, as well as a grocery store, coal yard and hack (taxi) service at 133 Valley St.

On Dec. 1887, the school committee decided that the schools would operate under the official title of "The Asheville City Schools."

Meanwhile, on Jan. 16, 1888, after months of repairs on an abandoned building on S. Beaumont Street, Asheville's first public school for black children was opened.

George Henry Stephens, a native of the West Indies, was named principal of the newly opened school. Members of the faculty were E.H. Lipscombe, D.C. Tuggs and Harrison Brown. The teachers were paid \$25 per month.

Although some 800 children showed up on the opening day of school, the school building could only accommodate 300. Many of the children were turned away crying because of the lack of space. The school term lasted 90 days.

The passing of a bond election on May 4, 1891, provided for the purchase of a lot on Catholic Hill, just above Valley Street on which, Catholic Hill School, an elementary-high school institution for black students, was built.

On Sept. 22, 1899, a special committee was appointed to investigate a location for a school to house black students. The committee reported on May 31, 1900 that an available house on Hill Street at Maiden Lane could be used. The school board authorized the subcommittee to purchase the property.

Plans were made and a contract was set for the construction of a brick building on the site.

However, opposition developed to such a degree among white residents of

the Montford neighborhood that it was impossible to secure a building permit from the Asheville Board of Aldermen.

The question of location of Hill Street School was finally settled May 10, 1907 when the school committee, in a special meeting, purchased an adjoining lot on Hill Street. But it was seven years later, June 4, 1914, before a contract was given to construct a building at a cost of \$21,551.

The 1904 school year in Asheville included the extension of the school term to 190 days; the purchase of land at Catholic Hill School; requiring teachers to make daily lesson plans; and by a vote of parents, students were allowed to go home for lunch, returning in the afternoon for the second half of a double day session.

In 1905, a room was rented in a church on Livingston Street where first and second grades were taught with 32 black students enrolled. The school was later known as Livingston Street School. In 1909, the school was moved into another black church on Southside Avenue where most of the children in that area were taught. In later years, a school building was constructed on a site at Livingston and Gaston streets.

By 1906, the population of black students continued to increase in Asheville, causing the school board to rent additional space in an adjacent building for students attending Catholic Hill School.

Mountain Street School for black students was established in 1907 on Mountain Street and a bond issue provided funds for construction of a Mountain Street school building in 1924. Another bond issue allowed for additions to Livingston Street School and construction of Burton Street School for black students in 1926.

Meanwhile, on Nov. 17, 1917, the greatest tragedy in the history of Asheville City Schools occurred when Catholic Hill School was destroyed by fire that caused the death of seven students.

The fire, believed to have started in or close to the furnace room of the school, had gotten well under way before it was discovered. One of the students killed in the fire had reportedly went back into the burning building to recover her new coat. However, the late Miss Lucy Harrison, a student at Catholic Hill School at the time of the fire and later one of the noted

educators at Stephens-Lee High School, said the reports were wrong. She said the rumors caused the child's parents to display the coat on her coffin at the funeral.

Under the leadership of school principal Walter S. Lee, the faculty of Catholic Hill School continued to provide studies in four makeshift classroom buildings scattered around the city.

In April, 1921, a bond issue launched construction of a high school for black students in the Asheville and Buncombe County area. The building was named Stephens-Lee in honor of George Henry Stephens, the city's first black principal and Mrs. Hester Ford Lee, wife school principal W.S. Lee. The 19-room structure, located just above the site of the old Catholic Hill School, was scheduled to open in November, 1922, but heating and plumbing problems delayed the opening until the spring of 1923.

Before its closing in 1965, Stephens-Lee High School gained fame across the state, region and nation in areas of accelerated academics, music, drama and athletics. Most of educators at Stephens-Lee held master's degrees with some studying towards their doctorate.

In the fall of 1965, former students at Stephens-Lee were transferred to the new South French High School on South French Broad Avenue where they remained until school consolidation in the early 1970s.