

LIVING HISTORY / SMALL SCHOOL HAS BIG HISTORY

BY LORRAINE AHEARN Staff Writer; Oct 11, 1994 Updated Jan 24, 2015

https://greensboro.com/living-history-small-school-has-big-history/article_5d7903f3-57d1-5ab9-921f-8da795fa5417.html

A generation ago, Florence Elementary School turned a crucial page in Guilford County history.

Hard to believe, in a way, that it would have started here - a little red brick school tucked out of sight from the road between High Point and Greensboro. But 27 years ago this month, one of the most important social experiments in local history began in the small black community of Florence. On an October day in 1967, the morning school bell rang on the first integrated kindergarten class to bring white students into an all-black school in Guilford County. And looking back on how it went,

Florence was the logical place to start a generation of children on a clean slate. It was a low-profile, country place, where families held reunions and neighbors shared Brunswick stew.

"We always got along, white and black," said Oscar Cole, 77. "We just grew up that way."

From the dry, neat woodpile behind his house, built on land where his grandmother was a slave 150 years ago, Cole can point to where the whole thing unfolded.

Part of the old school was still standing at the time, a warm-looking building of rose-colored brick that housed an all-black school for grades 1-12. The community persuaded the county to build it in 1928, replacing a two-room schoolhouse. But if they wanted a cafeteria, the parents had to donate the cinder blocks and the labor themselves.

There wasn't much to Florence - near West Wendover Avenue and Penny Road - but more than there is now. There was the older two-room school that later became a "teacherage" where the young teachers lived during the week. There was a country store where Carl Charles sold things like ale, sardines and cigarettes. And there was a Masonic lodge and an A.M.E. church with a small graveyard off to the side.

Nevertheless, the black educator who was Florence Elementary's principal in the decade after the Supreme Court's Brown desegregation case sensed an opportunity at that country crossroads.

Principal S.R. McLendon recognized that the anti-poverty programs in Washington, D.C. were offering money to help children in disadvantaged socioeconomic groups - in other words, at that time, black children. Meanwhile there was pressure to find a way to get white children to attend black

schools, but no guidance on how to do it.

McLendon had an idea.

"I told the superintendent that to get that shoe going on the other foot, we need something to attract white kids to a black school," McLendon, 80, recalled. "What we needed was a kindergarten. If we had that, everybody would want to put their children in Florence."

The idea worked.

By late fall of 1967, when the grant finally came through, the school had knocked out the wall between two classrooms, put down carpet, and hired a racially mixed staff to teach its newly integrated student body.

The kindergartners, occupied with building blocks and finger-paints, were oblivious to the significance of the moment. Parents and teachers were not.

"The groundwork had been laid so carefully, and the (white) parents had had to choose where (their children) were," said Jodie Monroe, a retired High Point resident who taught kindergarten at Florence in 1967.

"We had a very warm relationship, and it may be because everybody was trying so hard to make it work. Everybody was committed."

"The teacher is the key to the way these kids were going to treat and act toward each other," McLendon said.

"But I also began to think that the parents of those children at Florence must have done something special. I think they came from parents who were pretty smart people."

Within five years, Florence was no longer that unusual. Junior high and high schools across Guilford County were integrating. A fourth generation would enter Florence, with no memory of how things were when it was an all-black, 12-year school, with a basketball team that played on a hard dirt court.

Oscar Cole's sons went on to Atlanta and Washington, D.C. - one an executive for a corporation, the other an associate dean at Howard University. His granddaughter is on a full scholarship at Stanford.

Back in Florence, the old school was finally torn down more than a decade ago, replaced by a modern building as unfamiliar as the names on the subdivisions the bulldozers are clearing out on the main road.

"Ever since they tore the old school down, it doesn't seem quite as special," said Beatrice Reddick, a lifelong Florence resident who has worked in the school cafeteria for 20 years.

"Florence was always the prettiest school with the prettiest brick, and the big, long windows. Everything now is so flat."

For a short time, there was a plan to change the name of the school, but the community objected. Earline Boyd, another longtime resident who has worked at the school for 20 years as an aide, said the school represents not only a touchstone for integration, but also represents generations of self-reliance and pride within the black community.

"I wanted the younger generation to look back and remember that they had parents and grandparents in that school," said Boyd, who is retiring this year but may come back to volunteer.

"My memories will always be centered around here at Florence School."

Outside on the crisp October afternoon, Oscar Cole looked past his podded okra vines and black peanut plants and saw a class of children out in the churchyard with their teacher, pinks and yellows and blues among the gray stones.

With everything else from old Florence gone - the old school, the teacherage, the original church, the Masonic hall, even Carl Charles' country store - the grave markers are really the only thing left.

Cole watched the schoolchildren, using big sheets of paper, tracing the family names off the headstones. They stepped carefully beneath the tall oak trees, another year of acorns crunching under their feet.