

A Brief History of Early African American Schools in Walker County

Episode 49: Feb. 15, 2010

Adapted from: "Two Negro Schools Established in Walker County," *Huntsville Item*, [date?].

With additional information from: "[Huntsville, Texas](#)," *Handbook of Texas Online*; "[Naomi Lede: Paving the way to literacy](#)," *Huntsville Item*, 12 June 2006; Pruitt, Bernadette, "[Houston, Joshua](#)," BlackPast.org.

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During the Reconstruction period after the Civil War and emancipation, the expansion of the educational system was an essential step in bridging the gap between slavery and freedom and supporting the rights of African Americans. There was some prejudice in the white community against African American education; reports from the Freedman's Bureau documented the whipping and persecution of teachers who taught blacks, as well as the burning of classroom buildings. However, even such setbacks as these did not prevent some brave enterprising members of the community from taking steps to educate African Americans. Today we will look at some examples in Huntsville and Walker County.

In Huntsville, the first primary education for black children was established in 1867, just two years after the end of the Civil War.

In 1883, the African Methodist Church of Huntsville had purchased a tract of land from the S. R. Smith family for a black college. It was named the Bishop Ward Normal and Collegiate Institute. Many fund raising efforts were made for this school. "Jug breaking" was a means of the fund raising. A jug was filled with money and taken to Uncle Memphis Allen and others who would match the amount in the jug. Joshua Houston, a prosperous former slave of General Sam Houston, also helped secure funding for the building of Bishop Ward.

The site of this college was on "Smith Hill" in a two-story brick residence of the S. R. Smith family. Dormitories were to be constructed from the funds raised, and subjects taught ranged from Latin and Greek to math and grammar. The first text books were privately owned by the teachers. It is thought that an enrollment of between 100 and 200 was reached during the first term. The fifth of the black colleges established in the state, Bishop Ward operated for seven years.

In 1906, a committee was organized by Professor Samuel Walker Houston, the son of Joshua Houston, to help develop plans for a school for the African Americans of Walker County. The committee was composed of concerned citizens such as Milton Jones, Bill Williams, Henderson Naylor, and others. They were able to obtain a one-acre tract of land from the Sanford Williams family in Galilee, five miles west of Huntsville on State Highway 30 at Williams Road.

The Sam Houston Industrial and Training School became a reality when a small wooden structure was completed in 1914. The classrooms and dormitories on the site were built with the help of the students, most of whom were men from the local community. Subjects such as music, domestic science, manual training, and agriculture were taught. Houston's initial focus was on industrial training, and liberal arts education was added to the curriculum gradually. By 1919, there were 217 students enrolled and a faculty of 6. This faculty had been trained at Atlanta University, Tuskegee Institute, and Prairie View Normal.

Most of the students lived on the school premises, in a boarding school atmosphere with very crowded conditions, or else boarded with families nearby. There were more students applying than could be taken at the school. The school produced outstanding graduates who went on to earn degrees from many prestigious universities and become distinguished members of their fields.

A committee of concerned Huntsville businessmen surveyed the school. Following is a part of their report: "The committee felt the principle of the school (Samuel Walker Houston) was to be commended for his vision along the lines of education. However, he was greatly hampered in his endeavors due to the lack of funds. People in the community help in supporting this worthwhile endeavor."

There were more than 400 students in the school in 1928, and it was incorporated into the Huntsville school district in 1930 as Sam Houston High School. The institution was closed in 1968 after desegregation, but it remains an important part of Walker County black history.

The Alumni Association of the Samuel Walker Houston High School meets every two years, and they have been instrumental in supporting the Samuel Walker Houston Culture Center. The current president of that association is Dr. Naomi Williams Lede.