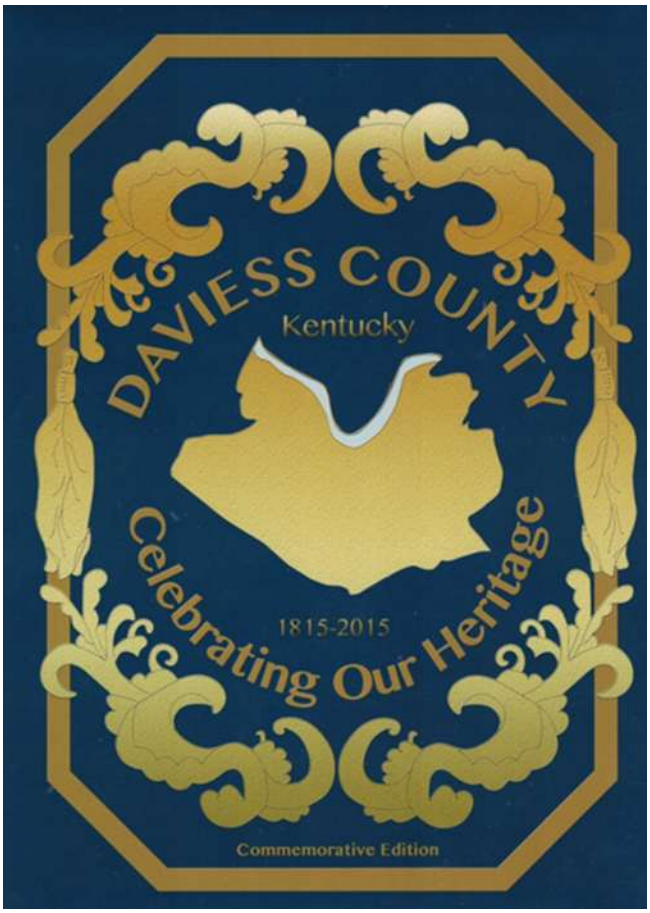
“Colored Schools”

By Ed Allen
Retired superintendent of the Daviess County Schools (1988-1995)

**Part of Chapter 12 (“History of Education in Daviess County, Kentucky”)
from the book, Daviess County, Kentucky, 1815-2015, Celebrating Our Heritage,
Daviess County Bicentennial Committee
(Evansville, IN: M. T. Publishing Company, Inc., 2015) pp.119-121 & 123:**



“Colored Schools”

Education for black children was slow in developing, reflecting Daviess County's ties to the South which strengthened after the Civil War. Educational opportunities for black children

usually lagged by decades those opportunities available to white children. The first mention of "colored schools" in annual reports of the Superintendent of Public Instruction was in 1874. In 1881 we find the first reference to a "colored department" in Kentucky's Department of Education.

The earliest reference to a school for blacks in Daviess County was of a brick school building in Owensboro that was supported by the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, popularly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau to help former slaves and poor whites in the South after the Civil War. The Bureau was short-lived, and the Owensboro school survived only three or four years, 1866-1870.

An 1866 state law provided that financial support for schools for Negroes and Mulattoes would come from revenue generated by property owned by that same population. The amount of money generated was very small. In 1874, the Legislature passed a bill that created "a separately maintained, segregated, unequal system of black public schools." Support for these schools continued to be supported as per the 1866 law. Other interesting provisions of that act, reflecting the post-Civil War cultural environment, was that "black" schools could be located no closer to a "white" school than one mile in rural areas, and in urban districts, no closer than 600 feet. "Colored" school districts were established in the same manner as "white" districts, and the black constituency elected three trustees who reported to the white County Commissioner of Education. The Owensboro City Directory of 1886 has a page showing the "Colored County Schools" There were 20 colored districts. Eighteen of the districts had schools and each trustee chairman was named. When the Owensboro City School District was established, no provisions were made for black students although there were several one-room schools for black children operating in or near the town.

The Kentucky General Assembly in 1880 passed legislation establishing a separate school system for black children. Soon thereafter the city fathers rented a facility on Poplar Street, appointed a group of black men to serve in a supervisory role, and opened a school known as Western Colored School. Due to such a small amount of funds coming from taxes on black property owners, there was enough money to fund only a three-month school term while the white children were attending a nine month school term.

Two federal court cases in the 1880s ended Kentucky's unequal funding formula that was based on race. One case, "Claybrook vs. Owensboro," originated in Owensboro. A group of black men including Edward Claybrook, a former slave, formed a committee and raised enough money to file suit challenging the funding formula in place under Kentucky law. (There is a historical plaque in Owensboro's Kendall-Perkins Park honoring Claybrook.) The courts cited the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in ruling the formula discriminatory Although the schools for black and white children continued to be separate, the funding on a per capita basis became the same. In 1884, the schools for black children inside the town limits were incorporated into the Owensboro Independent system, but the schools remained separate.

Many of the early school houses for black children were crudely built structures and were poorly maintained; however, the equalization of funding as mandated by the courts led to improved facilities for both black and white children. Daviess County Board of Education meeting minutes include many accounts in the early twentieth century and as late as the 1930's where new one-room or two-room school houses—son for blacks and some for whites—were built replacing older ones Superintendent R.L. McFarland, 1910-1918, wrote that 34 new one-, two-, or three-room school buildings were built during his tenure.

In the 1890's there were as many as twenty-two colored one-room schools around the county. Early in the twentieth century the Board of Education employed L.L. Coleman to serve as

supervisor of the colored schools. By the mid-1920s, the number had decreased to ten, and it remained that way until the mid-thirties. The black population was divided into sub-districts in the same manner as the white population. The black sub-districts were assigned letters, A-J; the white sub-districts were assigned numbers. County Board of Education minutes refer to the black trustees as "visitors" rather than "trustees." In 1937, the count board built a consolidated school for black children at 7th and Sycamore Streets in Owensboro. It was known as the Carver School, and it replaced the f lowing schools: Crump, Stanley, Sorgho, Pettit, Utica, Pleasant Ridge, Whitesville, Maceo, Reid and Green's Chapel. When the Carver School opened, black elementary students from all over rural Daviess County were bussed to Carver. The Pleasant Ridge School was classified as a high school, and some of those high school students were bussed to Hartford while others were bussed to Owensboro's Western High School to complete their high school education. Carver only operated for a few years closing in 1945 at which time the county board contracted with the Owensboro Board for the education of rural black students in the city schools. The county board paid the city board $25.00 per pupil for the first two years, then increasing the amount to $30.00. By the mid-fifties, the county board paid to the city board $70.00 per elementary pupil and $100.00 for each high school pupil. The Carver school building was sold in 1945 to the Catholic diocese which operated an elementary school there, Blessed Sacrament, serving black Catholics until 1960.

In 1935, there was some discussion among the county board members about building a county high school for colored students, they chose to continue contracting with the city school board for the education of black high school students.

Kentucky's constitutional requirement of separate schools for black and white students became null and void in 1954 with the ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the case labeled "Brown vs. Board of Education." Since all African-American students, both city and county residents, were attending school in the Owensboro district, Superintendent Estes and his board members felt great responsibility for implementing the greatest social change of the twentieth century. An "Integration Committee" composed of four African-American citizens and four white citizens along with Supt. Estes was formed to advise the Board of Education. Estes was the only committee member employed by the district. In September of 1955 any African American student could take classes at OHS if that class was not offered at Western High School. About a dozen students chose to do so. The next school year saw OHS, Western, or Tech High open to any student. In 1957 grades 7-12 were open to all students; and, in 1958, all grades were open to any student regardless of race. The city black schools continued to operate, so a dual system functioned through school year 1962-63 when all of the black schools were closed. The Owensboro District was fully integrated in September 1963.

The Daviess County Board of Education also acted quickly to move forward with integration making county schools open to black students. Grades 1-4 were open to black students in 1956-57 and all grades in 1957-58. Superintendent Burns reported to the county board that there were 75 black school-age children living in the county district. Half of them were in grades 1-4. So 50% of the African-American children could choose to attend Daviess County Schools the first year of integration, and all could attend the second year at the beginning of the '56-'57 school year, nine African-American students from the Pleasant Ridge area enrolled in Masonville Elementary School. The district continued to provide bus transportation to city black schools giving black families a choice through the '58-'59 school year. This writer graduated from DCHS in 1959. There were no black students enrolled in DCHS that year.

Pleasant Ridge School, one of Daviess County's Rosenwald Schools, built in 1919. It was moved to Yellow Creek Park where it is used as an education center.

Former "colored" school building in Stanley

Carver School, the first consolidated school for African-American students, was a great improvement over earlier facilities.

The Western High School class of 1911. In front is Lucille Hunter, Principal O. A. Guthrie, Delphene Moseley, and Edith Hall Stand. Second row, Theresa Wilhite, Levi Jones, Rida Virginia McMickens, Emma Edwards, Elmo Brown, and Esther Richardson.