

# Paul Dunbar School (1922-1963)

By Jerry Long  
c.2026



The Paul Dunbar School, 721 Jackson Street, in Owensboro, KY, was opened in 1922. The school was named for Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a celebrated African-American poet, of Dayton, Ohio, whose parents had been enslaved in Kentucky.



Paul Laurence Dunbar

The school was generally referred to as the Dunbar School. The school replaced the Upper Ward Colored School, also called the Eastern Colored School, that in 1885-86 had been erected on the same site at the corner of Jackson and Eighth Streets. The latter served the black children in the eastern part of Owensboro until a new school was warranted due to over-crowding. The old school was removed from the lot in June 1922. The Dunbar School was erected at a cost of \$26,922. The all black elementary school was closed in 1963 when all Owensboro city schools were integrated. The Opportunity Center School for the mentally retarded was housed in the building until the deteriorated building was razed in 1979.



**A Pictorial History of Owensboro – Daviess County, Messenger-Inquirer**  
**(Owensboro, KY: Owensboro Publishing Company, 1994) pp.120 & 123:**



The Upper Ward (Eastern) Colored School circa 1900



Paul Dunbar School, 721 Jackson St.



**Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 25 June 1922, p.1B:**

At a meeting of the Owensboro Board of Education on 24 June 1922 the name of the former Eastern Colored School on Jackson Street was changed to Paul Dunbar School.



**Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 2 July 1922, p.1B:**



Contracts for the building of Paul Dunbar Eastern Colored School were awarded Owensboro contractors at a meeting of the building committee of the Board of Education late Saturday afternoon. The bids which aggregate \$26,992.18 are as follows: General work, \$22,460, William Davis; heating, \$2,311.50, Owensboro Plumbing and Heating Company; plumbing and sewerage. \$1,878.58, Roby Plumbing and Heating Company; electrical work, \$342.10, Hitt Electric Company.

The work will begin promptly Monday morning, and the contract for the completion of the building October 15, with some rooms in condition to use when school opens September 5.

Twenty-four bids were made on building, 15 from out of town and nine from Owensboro contractors. The local bidders were the lowest, and highest bid made was \$38,000. The board held two sessions Friday considering the bids and the building committee was in conference practically all Saturday figuring and weighing small changes in details make the bids conform to city ordinances and members were well pleased when it was found that local contractors had the lowest and best bids.

The bunding committee included President Buckner, J. R. Laswell, D. C. Stimson, W. A. Steele Superintendent J. L Foust....

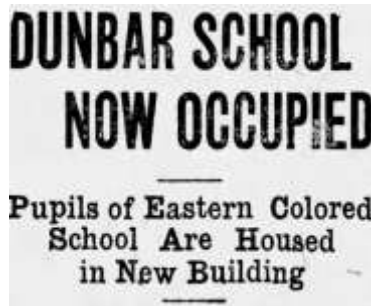
.... The new building will be erected on site of the old Eastern Colored School on Jackson street, between Seventh and Eighth, the grounds being enlarged by the purchase of a lot to the north. The building will be of brick with stone trimmings, and will contain six class rooms, a small

assembly room, principal's office and teachers' rest room and will be modern and sanitary in every detail. The plans have been highly commended by out-of town contractors who studied them.

Architect F. Hussander, who was conference with the Board of Education and building committee all day Friday and Saturday, left for Chicago last night. He stated that he would have the plans and specifications for new the [Owensboro] high school building ready to submit for bids between the middle and last of July.



**Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 22 January 1923, p.2:**



The opening of the Paul Dunbar school to the use of the Eastern Colored school this morning was the chief feature of the first day of the second term of the school year in Owensboro Public Schools.

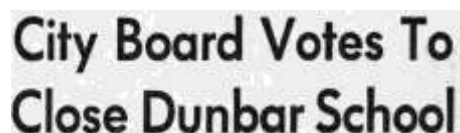
Only four rooms are completed, the entire school being housed in these for the present at least. Twenty-five children and one teacher, Emma Edwards, was transferred from the Western Colored school, this making an enrollment of 170 pupils at this school with four teachers. All children from the sixth grade down living east of Allen street were transferred to the Paul Dunbar building.

The school, whose completion in February will mark a forward step in the board's building program, was planned to meet needs beyond the present time, so two rooms, which will later be used for teaching, will be taken for community reading room and manual training. Some time in February when the small assembly room and other parts of the building are finished, dedicatory exercises will be held by the colored people.

All of the teaching corps were on hand at the different buildings, and the enrollment following promotions went on without delaying the work. No reports were available this afternoon to show whether there was any increase in the enrollment. These will probably be made by the principals at their weekly conference with Superintendent Foust at 4 o'clock.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 10 August 1963, pp.1A & 3A:**



The Owensboro School Board Friday evening voted to close the six-room Paul Dunbar Elementary School. The action came on recommendation of Superintendent Kenneth Estes who cited the high comparative cost of operation.

Estes told the board that there were only 79 students scheduled to attend the 40-year-old structure on the Aug. 26, opening date this school year, and that the school's four teachers were too many to support continued operation of the plant. He explained that 79 students are too few to have in a separate building.

He said that the children scheduled to attend Dunbar this year will be reassigned to schools in districts in which they live or in districts closest to their homes. Two of the teachers will fill vacancies that exist at the Western school, and the remaining two will be assigned assistant librarianships and serve in all the city's elementary schools. He said that there is space in the other elementary schools.

Estes said that it has been proposed to the Owensboro Council for Retarded Children that the Dunbar School building, located at 721 Jackson St., be used as a new Opportunity Center site.

He said that the Dunbar building is in much better condition than the Old Seven Hills School building, now housing the four classes for mentally - retarded children and adults. The Board of Education supports two classes at Opportunity Center, and the Council conducts a kindergarten and a sheltered workshop. The Center is carried on as a joint effort between the Board and Council.

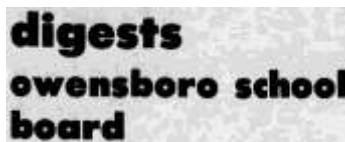
Estes said that though there are 54 individuals involved in the Opportunity Center activities, while 79 children are being moved into other schools, the type of treatment needed by the retarded dictates less class members per teachers. He said, too, that keeping active the Old Seven Hills structure would have necessitated an expensive renovation program on the building.

Estes said that if the Council For Retarded Children approves the Board's offer, the Old Seven Hills building will be put up for sale to the highest bidder.

The Dunbar School building was constructed in 1923 at an original cost of \$27,000. It stands on a lot consisting of 1.11 acres.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 10 August 1978, p.3D:**



At its Wednesday meeting the Owensboro Board of Education took the following final action: Agreed to sell the former Dunbar Elementary School property on Jackson Street to the city of Owensboro for \$50,000. The property was appraised at \$75,000, Hilliard said, but the city has agreed to bear the expense of tearing the old school building down before it turns part of the land into a park. The Opportunity Center and Green River Comprehensive Care Center will continue to use part of the park.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 30 August 1978, pp.1E & 2E:

## *Memories of Dunbar School*

**A center of local history crumbles slowly into the past**

Photos by Jim Baumgarten; Text by Jack Lyness; Messenger-Inquirer



The former Dunbar School stands empty at 721 Jackson St., waiting for a wrecking ball to clear the way for a city park.

What greater storehouse of memories can there be than a school building?

But Dunbar School was much more than a school. More than anything else, it provided a sense of identity for the small black community that surrounded it in the area known at the turn of the century as Snow Hill. In addition to a formal education, it gave its students a social and cultural heritage and a sense of pride.

The two-story building at 721 Jackson St. still looks strong and secure from the outside, with the exception of a few broken or boarded windows. Inside, time's toll is more obvious. A leaky roof has brought plaster crashing to the bowed and buckled hardwood floors. Wiring, plumbing and heating systems no longer function.

Soon, the Owensboro City Commission is expected to consider demolishing the 55-year-old brick structure and replace it with a small, neighborhood park.

But it was integration, not age, that brought an end to Dunbar School. The all-black elementary school was closed in 1963 when all city schools were integrated. It was too small to serve an integrated student body, school officials said.

Later it saw service as classroom space for the school system's program for the educable mentally retarded and as the first home of the Opportunity Center school and workshop. Both programs are now in new facilities, the latter in a structure that was built alongside the old school:



in 1965. For years Dunbar was used as a spill-over warehouse for the workshop. But today its inhabitants of trespassing children by day and homeless vagrants by night have made even that use undesirable.

The building's gradual demise may have softened the passing of the institution.

"It doesn't matter now," suggested David Kelly, a student at Dunbar School from 1953 to 1959. "I felt regret when the school was closed, but what remains is just a building. It's not Dunbar School."

Kelly said he remembers many traditions associated with Dunbar School, most involving competition with the west side black community that identified with Western School and Douglass (now Kendall-Perkins) Park.

Because of segregation, competition was exclusively with other blacks, Kelly said. It spread from the ball field to the concert hall and even the classroom. "I can even remember comparing test scores between the two schools," Kelly said. Playground competition "made the summer a lot more exciting for the kids," Kelly remembers.

"Competition was a catalyst," he said, "for a sense of pride, not only in your neighborhood or your school but in yourself. Once schools were integrated, a lot of that subsided. We didn't have the same kind of black-white competition because they (white students) were so much more advanced in their classes."

That sense of pride was mentioned by all the former students and teachers interviewed for this story. Beverly Thruston felt it when she walked through the door the first time the building was opened in 1923.

"It was a beautiful school," she remembers.

Before the present building was constructed, classes were held in a white frame building that may have been the first school built in Owensboro for the education of black children. The first classes for blacks were held in a warehouse that is now the Community Recreation Center at 801 W. 5th St. The old school on Jackson St. may have housed the second; it burned down in 1922.

The new building "was quite a bit different than the old school we were going to," Mrs. Thruston said. During construction of the new building (which cost \$26,922, according to school records) was underway, classes were held in the basement of the Center Street Baptist Church, she said.

Mrs. Thruston remembers a "splendid racial relationship" that existed between black and white children that lived in the same neighborhood. Although they were required to attend separate schools, they played together in the Dunbar playground. Most of Dunbar's furnishings and materials used for classes were the result of donations from the teachers and parents. "It was a quite energetic community," Mrs. Thruston said.

Emma Edwards was a teacher at the school when it opened, then served as its principal until she retired in 1962. "I'd play the piano and sing" at the concerts and operettas presented by the students and faculty to raise money, she remembers. "We put Dunbar on the map," she still boasts.

Miss Emma, as she was called, was probably the single most important factor in the influence Dunbar School had on its community.

"You had to learn under her," Mrs. Thruston said. "You just learned. Her determination was to teach. Get an education and you'll be prepared to face the world, she taught us."

Don Owsley came under Miss Emma's tutelage when he was a student at Dunbar in 1936. "She used to philosophize a great deal," he remembers. "She'd talk about facing the reality of life," and the problems her students would face because of their race, Owsley said.

"She'd always say 'don't embarrass your family or your race.' There was no 'black pride' then like today, but there was something greater. It was a disgrace for you to steal something. Quite a bit of religion was also taught."

"You didn't even think of not going to school," he said.

"The hero of the day was Joe Louis. She started a boxing tournament and everybody got involved."

Owsley said there was great emphasis on proper speech and debate. "Looking back now, I guess that's what started me off talking and arguing," he said.

Miss Emma also was sure her students were well versed in the life and writings of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, for whom the school was named.

Dunbar was a writer and poet who died at age 33 in 1906. Besides writing in the formalized style of the period, and in the singsong style of his Hoosier contemporary, James Whitcomb Riley, Dunbar also wrote many poems in traditional slave dialect.

"There are not many people anymore who can speak it well," Miss Emma said. "We had a few students who became very good at it," she said.

Owsley thinks that itself is a significant loss. "Today they talk about black pride, but I don't hear anybody quoting Paul Lawrence Dunbar."

Today the area around the school has different needs. The construction of the city housing authority's Nanny Locke apartment project in a large open field just south of the school in 1953 wiped out a much-used recreational site, while adding even more children to the neighborhood.

"Besides, its not a school anymore," Kelly observed. "It's just a building.

After it's gone, and even the memories are forgotten, the heritage of Dunbar School will remain.



The 1906 student body at the school on Snow Hill included Mrs. Cordelia McFarland (second row, fourth from left) who today lives in the Nanny Locke apartments only a block away. When that school burned down in 1922, it was replaced by Dunbar School, which was run for almost all of its 40 years by Miss Emma Edwards, far right. [ed. note by J. Long – The old Eastern Colored School did not burn, it was razed in June 1922 to make way for the construction of the Paul Dunbar School.]



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 16 February 1979, p.1B:**





The Death of Dunbar: There are several generations of childhood memories about growing up attending Dunbar School, at 721 Jackson St. in Owensboro. The school was opened in 1923, and named after poet and author Paul Lawrence Dunbar. But time has taken its toll, and the Owensboro City Commission decided to demolish the two-story building to make way for a park. Frank Fuller, of 1013 W. 1st St. in Owensboro, a member of the demolition crew, swung a sledge hammer Thursday knocking bricks from the old building.

