

Bicentennial booklet tells history of PG schools

By Vernon C. Thompson Washington Post Staff Writer

The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Oct 7, 1976; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877 - 1992)

pg. MD_11

Bicentennial booklet tells history of PG schools

By Vernon C. Thompson

Washington Post Staff Writer

Prince George's County public school students may not remember the Jim Crow Era when that county had two school systems—one white, the other black.

And not too many Prince George's residents remember the old Accokeek School or its sister Accokeek Colored School. And they probably will not remember the old Beltsville School or its sister Beltsville Colored School.

But they can read about it all now in a Bicentennial history booklet published by the Retired Teachers Association of Prince George's County.

The booklet, which traces the growth and pattern of education in the county, provides a rare look at the county school system's roots, according to school board chairwoman Sue V. Mills, who recently accepted the booklet for Prince George's County schools.

Using researched documentation and reflections of retired teachers, the booklet covers the blackboard of events from 1693 to the present. Prince George's Public schools have had financial problems since the days when its children used quill pens and wrote on birch bark, the booklet states.

In 1700, according to the booklet, "efforts to raise funds for the purpose of instructing the youth of the province in arithmetic, navigation and all useful learning" proved unsuccessful.

Eventually laws and enabling legislation were enacted to provide for county schools, which began in the mid-1700s.

One of the first schools built in the county was Bladensburg Academy,

built in 1770. Located at the corner of Annapolis and Edmonston Avenues, the school was designed to teach Latin, Greek and Hebrew. One of the buildings still remains, according to the booklet.

There were 43 public primary schools operating in November, 1865. The schools, which were dilapidated, poorly furnished, one-room frame buildings, stayed open 10 months of the year.

According to the booklet, the first public high school built in Prince George's County was Laurel High School. Opened in 1899, the school was the only high school built in Prince George's County before the 20th Century. The school's construction cost was roughly \$10,000, which came from bonds and donations by Laurel residents.

The booklet states that public schools in Maryland were first made available to blacks through legislation in 1867, but it was not until 1870 that the first black school was built.

The first black school, Black Swamp School, was built by former slave Allen Hawkins, who built the school on what is now called Rte. 382 near Magruder Ferry and Westwood.

Black teachers, according to the booklet, received considerably smaller salaries than white teachers during the Jim Crow Era. In 1900-09 for instance, white teachers' salaries ranged from \$325 to \$450 a year and black teachers—who "taught somewhat of a shorter term"—received \$250.

According to the booklet, many of the "colored" schools in Prince George's County benefitted from the Rosenwald Fund, a fund established

for the education of blacks in 1917 by Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears and Roebuck Co.

Along with sketches of schools, the booklet also relates experiences of teachers in county schools.

Willie Mae Henson, in 1935, remembered teaching a fourth-grade science class about reptiles. At that time one of her students brought her a "surprise."

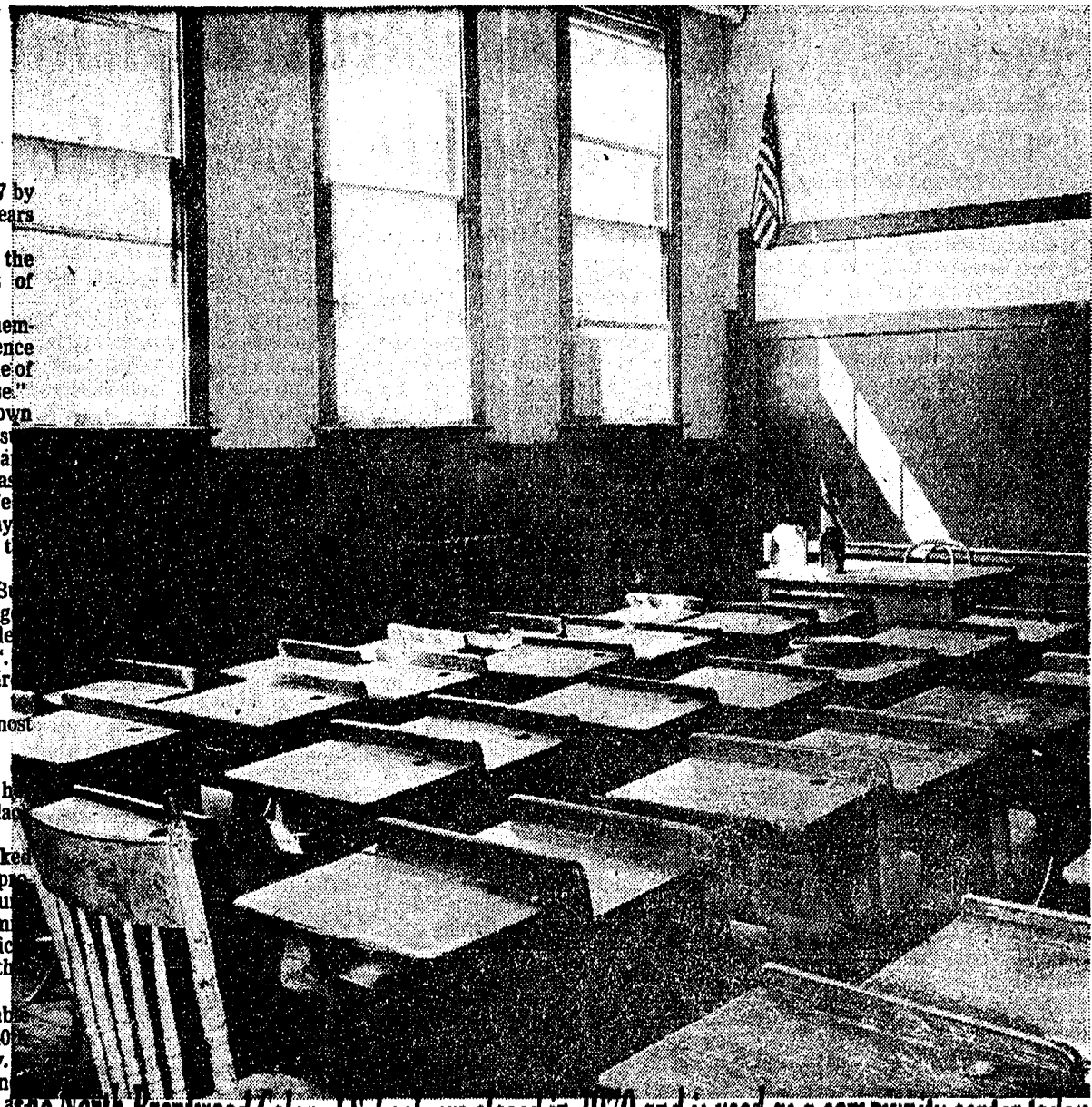
"... I saw Robert put a large brown bag on my desk. He said, 'I have a surprise for you.' As I thanked him and began opening, to my horror it was a great big, black snake coming to life. The air got in the bag. Needless to say, I took a flight out of the room to the highway," she wrote.

In another instance, Elizabeth Burroughs, another Prince George's County teacher faced with student pranks, walked toward her desk. "When she noticed that the children were acting peculiarly, glancing toward one another, and seeming almost to hold their breath."

She wondered what was going on and found out when she opened her drawer. It was a long, dead black snake.

Undaunted, Ms. Burroughs picked up the dead snake by the tail and proceeded to chase the children around the schoolyard for at least five minutes. "Needless to say, no more tricks were pulled on Ms. Burroughs that year," the booklet reports.

The Bicentennial booklet is available from Authur B. Hamilton, of 6515 40th Ave., Hyattsville, 20782 at \$5 a copy. It has also been placed in every Prince George's County school library, according to the Retired Teacher's Association.



The North Brentwood Colored School was closed in 1970 and is used as a community center today.