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Display seeks to inform on county's black history

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Mar 1, 2016



A model replica of the Mecklenburg County Training School, the first public high school on the eastern end of the county for black youths, was included among the Black History Month display.

For the second consecutive February, a coalition of alumni bases called Historically Black Schools of Mecklenburg County, Va., Inc., set up a Black History Month display that focused on African-American education and leadership in the county.

This year's display was set up at the old Crop Production Services building in Chase City, which is across the street from the Thyne Institute Memorial, commemorating the site of Mecklenburg County's first school for black youths.

One of the display's organizers, county supervisor Glanzy Spain, said the project was well attended this year. He said the display, which featured a number of pictures, articles and memorabilia items, etc., from the county's historically black schools, as well as a multitude of pictures of and information on African-American educational and community leaders from throughout the county's history, only grew larger as more people came to view it.

"Donations are growing because people are coming," he said.

Thyne Institute was opened in the post-Reconstruction years in 1876 as a private school funded through the Presbyterian church. It served students until 1953, operating as an elementary school during its latter years.

Thyne was the only school in Mecklenburg County offering courses for black youths until 1923.

A number of early black schools in the county were Rosenwald schools, named after Julius Rosenwald, an American clothier who became part-owner and president of Sears, Roebuck and Company. He established a fund communities could draw from to build schools for black children, although many times parents and community organizations such as churches ended up providing much of the funding, materials and labor.

Many of the Rosenwald schools were built adjacent to sponsoring churches. Several of the Rosenwald schools in Mecklenburg County are still standing.

Many elderly African-American citizens of the county still remember attending one-, two- and three-room community schools for blacks under less than ideal conditions. They tell of their long walks to and from school and poor conditions in the classrooms. Even so, they say

education was an important priority that their parents and extended families instilled in them.

Featured in the Black History Month display, one of the pioneers of black education in Mecklenburg County was Matilda Booker.

Booker graduated from the Thyne Institute and Virginia State University and became supervisor of black education in Mecklenburg County in 1920. She soon started organizing the black community to lobby for the construction of a public high school for blacks in the South Hill area.

Churches, community organizations, parents and like-minded white citizens supported the construction of the Mecklenburg County Training School during the mid-1920s. Lumber, materials and labor for the school, which was located on Virginia Street in South Hill behind the present library location and burned in 1945, were donated or funded through the school's supporters.

In the early years of black education, training schools were designated for blacks while white students attended high schools.

Booker used similar strategies to rally community support for a black public high school in Clarksville. West End High School was opened in September of 1935 with more than 100 students ages 13-22.

Booker retired her position in 1955 after 35 years of commuting 100 miles round trip each day during the school week. She died in 1957, sadly never being able to witness the desegregation of the school system.

West End High School burned in 1951. In the following years, spurred by federal funding, Mecklenburg County built four high schools, Park and Bluestone high schools for white students and new East End and West End high schools for black students. When the county desegregated in September of 1969, East End and West End became Park View and Bluestone middle schools, respectively.

The Black History Month display features pictures of "Freedom of Choice" students in Mecklenburg County from 1967-69 who chose to attend white schools. Among those pictured are current South Hill councilwoman Lillie Feggins-Boone and Chase City councilwoman

Brenda Hatcher.

When full integration was mandated in 1969, black leaders note the process in Mecklenburg County was smooth, unlike some neighboring counties, spurred on by both black and white community leaders.

To this day, those who were educated through Mecklenburg County's historically black schools during the segregation era remain close-knit families. They have strong, vibrant alumni bases that keep in touch through national alumni associations and regular fellowshiping events, etc.