

## *A Tale of Two Schools*

On September 4, 1886, deeds were recorded for the purchase of properties of one-half acre each by the trustees of the Public Free School of the Pungo Magisterial District for two schools. The deed filed in Deed Book 61 at page 233 was for property purchased from Ira V. Capps and Sarah, his wife, and was located in Charity Neck. The deed recorded in Deed Book 61 at page 234 described property that was purchased from John D. James and Mary F., his wife, and was bounded on the north by "the church lot." That church was Asbury. Over the course of the next century, the events involving the people served by the two schools continued to be intertwined and reveal the relationship of the generations of the people who lived there.

The school on the property "lying in Charity Neck" was built as a two-room school for the white children of the area and was located on the east side of today's Charity Neck Road, about a half mile south of the intersection of Charity Neck and Gum Bridge Roads. Lillian White Craft loved to tell the story about the elementary school, where she started in 1906 as a six-year-old, being nicknamed the Corn Cob College because of the pig pen next to the school which was always covered with corn cobs. She recalled that Effie Munden had taught her there in the first grade. The school served the area for about two decades, until, in 1916, Thomas Williams sold property to the School Board for a new Charity School which was to be built on the Williams property at the northeast corner of the intersection of today's Charity Neck and Pleasant Ridge Roads. This school was to be much larger and was to consolidate the smaller elementary schools of the area.

The school on the property up on the main road at the southern boundary line of Asbury Church was built for the black children of the area. More specific information about that school is not available, but it can be assumed that it was built similarly to the Charity School. However, that school building burned in about 1918.

Since the original Charity School was vacated about that time, the community seized the opportunity to use a part of the Charity building to replace the burned structure. Messrs. Walter Brock, Frank Brock, Reuben Lamb and Ernest Jackson oversaw the operation whereby the "big room" of the original Charity School was rolled on mule-drawn logs up to the site beside Asbury Church. There it continued to serve the community as the Pleasant Ridge School for black children until a new school was built on Seaboard Road in 1956.

### **The Charity Schools**

The original Charity School was built as a two-room schoolhouse with a big room and a little room. The school offered the first seven grades, with the younger children using the little room until they "graduated" to the big room. Some of the children from Charity Neck known to have attended the school were sisters Lillian and Annie White, brothers Clarence and Lloyd Murden, siblings Fred and Lucille Wilkerson, Lonnie Murphy and Kenneth Whitehurst.

A deed dated the thirteenth day of September, 1916, between Elizabeth F. Williams and Thomas M. Williams, her husband, and J.W. Henley, Garland I. Bright and E. B. Ives, School Board of Pungo District, Princess Anne County, Virginia, conveyed three acres on Dawley's Road. The property was described on a plat dated August 31, 1914.

These actions culminated in the building of a new Charity School which would consolidate smaller elementary schools in the area. According to an article written by Emily Capps, originally the school had six classrooms. An auditorium was built in 1930. There was no facility for cooking lunches. The children brought their own food from home. The school was never a complete high school, but variously offered a few high school levels. In order to graduate with a high school diploma, the students had to go to either Creeds High School or Oceana High School. The school served the white children of the area until the new Creeds School opened in 1939.



*Neava Williams at the old Pleasant Ridge School*

Photo Courtesy of Virginian-Pilot

## The Pleasant Ridge Schools

Other than the date of the deed recordation, no information has been located about the earliest Pleasant Ridge School. It is assumed that it was built by the county shortly after the property was acquired in 1886 and served the black children of the community as an elementary school until it burned in about 1918.

The present building was moved to the site from the location it had served as the big room of a two-room schoolhouse in Charity Neck to replace the burned structure.

Neava Weston Williams, who began school there in 1924, was quoted in a newspaper article in 1990: "We got a lot of training over there in that one-room school. There were programs on Friday in manners and they would also review the Sunday School lesson. You got what it took at that school." Another newspaper article reports her recollection that the students took turns taking home the towels that hung by the wash bowl to be washed and ironed. They also brought their lunches to school in pails. Occasionally, "Miss" Effie Munden, who lived on the family farm across the road, would make a big pot of soup. Linda Munden Grant remembers that her dad, Walter Munden, would deliver the soup to the school.

School Board minutes show that Laura Cooper was appointed as the teacher at Pleasant Ridge for the 1929-30 school year; Bessie Brand was the teacher for 1930-31.

Sadie Lamb and Barbara Henley visited former teacher Rowena T. McFadden at her home in Norfolk during the 1990s. Mrs. McFadden explained that she finished school at Hampton in 1935, and then taught at Pleasant Ridge for the decade 1936-1946. She went to the school to serve as a substitute, but School Superintendent Frank Cox did not want the children to be introduced to too many personalities, and so she stayed on as a permanent teacher.

She recalled that the students sat on bench seats which faced the road, with four or five students in the same seat. They sat on the bench seat and wrote on the desk from the back of the seat in front of them. She said that it was not unusual to hear, "He's shaking my desk, and I can't write."

She remembered that the chimney was in the middle of the building. They had a tin stove and would get a new one every year. She said that the kids helped with everything. They would help make the fire and would keep the woodbox filled.

There were two outhouses, one for the boys and one for the girls. The water bucket sat on the

bookshelf at the corner. The building was not wired for electricity until just before she left. Up until that time, the only light was the sunlight that came through the windows.

The day was divided with the younger children coming until 11 o'clock. The upper grades came from 11 until 3 o'clock. She recalled that there were usually twenty to twenty-five students for each session.

Classes centered around reading, writing and arithmetic. She said that the only singing was during devotions. She said that she "couldn't sing a lick. If the kids couldn't carry a tune, it didn't get carried."

She recalled that usually about half of the students did not have books or materials because they could not afford to buy them. The winter was the only time that learning was not interrupted. Being a farming community, the kids often had to stay at home to help with crops. Because the tenant families on the farms were not charged rent, all of the family were expected to work in the fields when needed. School was from September to June.

Mrs. McFadden remembered that, as a single teacher, she lived with Mrs. Laura Brock, who lived next to the school.

When Mrs. McFadden returned to Norfolk, Miss Leliah Reid filled the position as teacher at Pleasant Ridge. Mrs. Leliah Reid Holloman recently celebrated her 101st birthday and still recalls her years teaching at Pleasant Ridge. She followed the students when the school was closed in 1956 and transferred to the new Seaboard Elementary School, now Princess Anne Elementary.

## **Saving Pleasant Ridge School**

Neava Williams hated to see her beloved school building deteriorate. She cherished the memories she had of attending that school in the 1920s and did not lose an opportunity to speak out about the need to save the old building.

During that same time, Lloyd Murden, Sr., shared the distress of watching the old building sag. He remembered the building as the big room of the two-room Charity School which he had attended for first and second grades in 1914 and 1915. It really bothered him to ride by and see the door open and the windows broken, allowing the rain and bad weather to beat in. He finally just took some boards up there and boarded the windows and did his best to secure the door.

During the winter of 1989-1990, Barbara Murden Henley, Lloyd's daughter who was serving the area as city council representative, decided that it was time to try to do something about the building. She contacted as many people as she knew who had connections with the old building and asked that they meet to see if something could be done.

The small committee met on Saturday mornings in the Asbury Church social hall. Lillian White Craft, Kenneth Whitehurst, Lonnie Murphy and Lloyd Murden, Sr. represented the previous Charity School students. Neava Williams, Alvin and Sadie Walker Lamb, Doris Davenport and Vera Lewis Paydon were there for the Pleasant Ridge School. Emily Capps and Susan Brown Flanagan also participated.

The memories of the times spent in the building which served the two schools were similar. There were good times of work, of play, of kids getting to school for an education in the best way that the families could manage.

Determining what needed to be done and how much it would cost seemed to be a first step. Barbara Henley shared information about the potential project with the Board of Governors of the Princess Anne County/Virginia Beach Historical Society and asked for advice. Board member Mike Newbill, an architect for Newbill and Beale, Inc., immediately made a visit to the site and quickly produced drawings and specifications for the necessary work to be done, pro bono.

In quick down-county fashion, it was decided that the best way to raise money was to have a dinner. A "country dinner" was planned to be held at the Charity United Methodist Church social hall on March 31, 1990. Fried chicken and ham with potato salad, sweet potatoes and string beans would be the fare.

Ladies signed up to make cakes and pies for dessert and to provide for a bake sale. Tickets were \$10 each. A little over \$3,000 was raised.

The first necessity was a new foundation. Expert House Movers, Inc. raised the building so the foundation could be done. The chimney addition on the south of the building was removed and necessary boards were replaced. Other work soon depleted the funds.

Mike Newbill had also paved the way for the building to be considered for the State and National Register of Historic Places. However, a new obstacle surfaced. The property had never been officially conveyed to the Asbury Church, even though it had been used by the church for years. A cemetery had even been created behind the building. It took time for the Virginia Beach School Board to investigate and officially convey the building to the church.

With the legal issues to be resolved and the funding depleted, the restoration project bogged down. Finally, the project caught the attention of Frank Drew, then sheriff of Virginia Beach. With the combination of his non-profit foundation, his own interest in local history, and the availability of the sheriff's workforce, the project found new life. Frank Drew volunteered to put his resources to work to complete the project.

From sanding the floors and painting the walls, to replacing whatever needed replacing to complete the plans created by Newbill and Beale, the job got done. Sheriff Drew also used his knowledge of antiques to locate furnishings for the interior to bring the building back as close as he could to its original status.

Finally, on November 18, 1997, a dedication ceremony for the restored Pleasant Ridge School was held. Since then, the Frank Drew Sheriff's Foundation has continued to see that the building is maintained,

most recently with extensive work in the winter of 2010-2011. The building is recognized as an important historic structure on the Local Historical Register.

Many of the restoration committee members have since passed away. Alvin and Sadie Lamb are buried in the cemetery behind the old school building. Even though they are gone, the Pleasant Ridge School building is still valued by the community as a symbol of early education in the county. It represents a century of folks working together to use and maintain a valued part of community heritage.



*Alvin Lamb and Barbara Henley at dedication of Pleasant Ridge School Renovation*

Photo Courtesy of Virginia Beach Sun