



A Forgotten Legacy of Magnolia Avenue High School

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University of South Carolina

September 22, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm

Warren County- Vicksburg Public Library

700 Veto Street; Vicksburg, MS

Thank you very much, Ms. Stokes. I cannot begin to thank you for organizing this event—what arose from your beautifully-crafted and sincere thank you note. When I received your correspondence, I knew that this event would be a wonderful. And that is certainly the case—what a vibrant library. Your programming is fantastic, and I am honored for this discussion to be part of your cultural offerings. I am delighted to see so many people here and greatly appreciate the presence of my original interviewees as well as Mayor Flagg and Mr. Denton from the Mississippi House of Representatives.

I am delighted to be here for a variety of reasons. Of course, I have come to talk about the Secondary School Study and, I will now say, the “somewhat forgotten” and to-be-recognized legacy of Magnolia Ave High School. I applaud Mayor Flagg for initiating a project for the public recognition of the school, and I am delighted to say that I have been in touch with Dr. Bettye Gardner and, in fact, will be meeting her in two weeks in Richmond VA at the conference for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. While I am here to describe this remarkable school, I am also here to thank many wonderful people who helped me understand the significance of the curricular experimentation and community-building work of Principal Bowman and the Magnolia Ave High School teachers. I came to Vicksburg in 2008 to research one of the seventeen schools that participated in this very important educational study—part of five progressive education projects funded by Rockefeller that were being conducted throughout the United States, this being the one that focused on black secondary schools. I return in 2016 to talk about one of the most important of the seventeen schools that participated in this project, and I will maintain one of the more

significant progressive high schools in the country at this time.

With this being a celebration for the completion of the Museum’s research project and the release of the



Secondary School Study Catalog, **[[SLIDE:]]** I wish to begin by thanking Mrs. Thelma Rush who served as guide, inspiration, and accomplice for my research here. The Magnolia Ave High School web exhibition has been on line since 2011 and has been visited by hundreds and hundreds of educational researchers and museum patrons through the past years; however, I promised Mrs. Rush that when I completed the entire project, I would return. And that is why I am here today—to thank you Mrs. Rush.

I would like to thank others, some who are able to attend today.



[[SLIDE:]] Mrs. Orelia Peterson Crump



[[SLIDE:]] Dr. Allene Gayles



[[SLIDE:]] Mrs. Jeanette Jordan



[[SLIDE:]] Mrs. Alyce Shields



[[SLIDE:]] Dr. Edgar E. Smith



[[SLIDE:]] Mrs. Julia Washington Smith



[[SLIDE:]] Mrs. Louise Murray Stewart

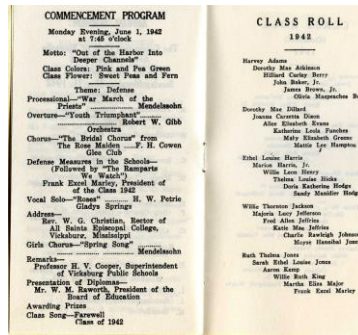


[[SLIDE:]] Mrs. Frances Pearline Williams

I also wish to extend special thanks to Saltine Austin Tyler for her participation in the oral history session,



and [[SLIDE:]] for Dr. Gayles and “the Jeanette Jordan Archives” for providing



important source materials for this exhibition. [[SLIDE:]] I thank you all for bringing

out crucial aspects of teacher-student relationships and the strength of community that I would not have understood

without your participation in the oral history interviews.

With this celebration, there is also sorrow.



[[SLIDE:]] I am unable to extend my appreciation to the late Mrs. Carrie

Reynolds (whose thoughtfulness added so much to the interviews) and

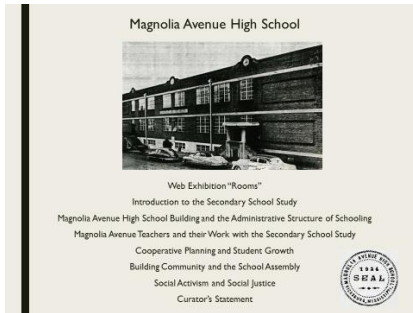


[[SLIDE:]] to the late Mr. Frank Crump. Mr. Crump, a civil rights hero as I later

learned, so kindly sat with me to talk about his secondary school experiences when there was also so much more to discuss in terms of his struggles for civil rights and social justice.

[[SLIDE: INTERVIEW COLLAGE]]

Between 2006 to 2015, I conducted archival and field-based research and staged over 150 oral history sessions with approximately 250 former students and teachers, community leaders, and local historians. I was resurrecting this educational program conducted at black schools in the American southeast—the Secondary School Study, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and occurring between 1940 and circa 1948. For my research I extended my period of study from 1940 to 1950—which would include both Magnolia Ave and Bowman High School.

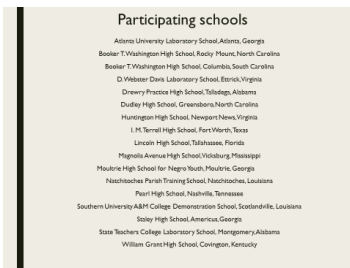


[[SLIDE:]] I have constructed 18 web exhibitions displaying over

500 images and 750 statements about principals, teachers, instructional practices, curricular programs, and civil rights activities from these schools with the intent of reclaiming the lost heritage of progressive black high schools of the mid-20th century.



[[SLIDE:]] Fifty-six schools were nominated for the Study by state field representatives, and forty-five sites were visited. Ultimately, SEVENTEEN schools were selected with Magnolia Avenue High School being the sole member school from the state of Mississippi. [[SLIDE:



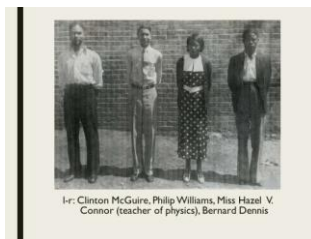
]] The selection of a participating school was based primarily on leadership and the willingness of the faculty to engaged in curricular experimentation and, I believe that a key factor in Magnolia



Avenue's selection was the [[SLIDE:]] role of Mr. Bowman who clearly

embraced tenets progressive education—the important of attending to students interests **and needs**, of building a democratic community—with strong leadership but also with a participatory voice for all. Progressive education is often described as focusing merely on students’ interests and mocked for letting children do whatever they want. Not at these schools—principals and teachers believed in the power of knowledge, the love for ideas, the importance of community, the significance of students and teachers working together, and a fundamental commitment to a 1940s conception of “cooperation.”

J. G. H. Bowman served as principal of schools in Vicksburg from 1906-1944 and took advanced coursework at Fisk University, Atlanta University, and the University of Chicago. Principal Bowman describes in 1942 the educational experiences of students



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]] ““they determined their own units of work, based on interest,

current importance, and supposed ability of the class to carry through the cooperative enterprise. They worked in groups which they themselves formed. Students were asked to discuss. . . . What educational benefits do you hope to derive from this unit? What contribution can a study make toward your immediate or ultimate well-being? What particular weakness of yours do you think can be strengthened by a study of this unit?”” Isn’t this remarkable engagement for students and their participation in their own learning. This type of curriculum was called “the project method” with a component being what today would be called inquiry-based learning.

Principal Bowman was a thoughtful progressive educator who offered great freedom to students but who



was also described [[SLIDE:

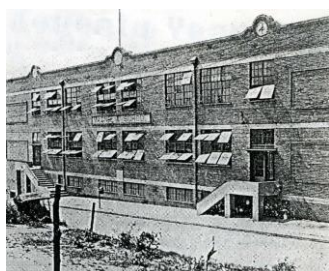
]] by Carrie Reynolds as “a strict man. If you heard him

clear his throat, you knew that he meant business. He commanded respect and we gave him respect.” This is where we begin to see interesting common practices among these schools—what I call a “tough kindness” (somewhat similar to today’s teachers who are called warm demanders); these progressive administrators and teachers believed in the importance of a curriculum based on student interests; however, student and societal needs were just as crucial, and students had to earn their freedom to explore their interests. Freedom was not freely given; it was earned:

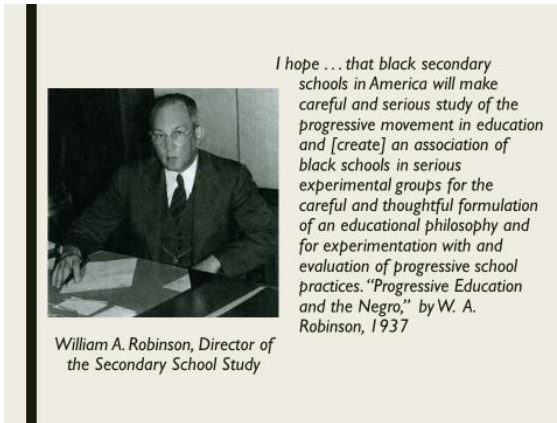


[[SLIDE:]] Alyce Shields remembers “The teachers and the students greatly admired Mr. Bowman. But when he would use the term “girlie”—that was never good. And when Mr. Bowman would clear his throat, you could hear a pin drop. Nobody was seen in the halls or in the corridors.”

We don’t know enough about J. G. H. Bowman. It is said that he purchased land adjacent to Magnolia Ave High School for its use (which could be viewed as a rather remarkable testimony to his commitment to community). This is someone who deserves further study.



[[SLIDE:]] At this time, Magnolia Ave enrolled approximately 300 students with a staff of 12 teachers. The curricular program balanced strong academic classes (including economics, sociology, black history, and civics) along with a vocational arts course of study. While black educators sought to achieve high school accreditation during the 1940s, some believed the teachers were not involved in progressive education’s “stream of educational ideas”



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]] and, thus, were placing too much emphasis on

traditional practices. With assistance from leading progressives, the participants ultimately came to reconsider the basic purposes of secondary education. That was the intent of the project; teachers from the various schools would come together for summer workshops—not for a weekend but for six weeks where they would forge conceptions of education and the purposes of schooling.

The importance of content, however, was not dismissed by these progressives in their effort to redefine



the high school curriculum. [[SLIDE:

]] Edgar Smith notes, “the interaction between

student and teacher was so important. Teachers did not just lecture; they pushed us to interact with them and to come to understand the knowledge. Recitation was still important, however; I recall reciting Milton sonnets. But what was most important was the interaction between the student, the teacher, and the content.”



Magnolia Avenue teachers:
L-r: Mrs. Ryals, Mrs. M. B. R. Bowman, Mrs. Parrott, Mr. Phelps,
Mrs. Bessie Lindsey Jackson, Mrs. E. B. Williams, Mrs. Custard

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]] In fact, Magnolia Ave High School was

recognized as a leader in reconsidering the basic purposes of secondary education —with Principal Bowman’s guidance, the high school faculty prepared a 330 page document, *Magnolia Builds Its Own Philosophy*, which unfortunately has been lost. During the study, faculty developed forms of “correlated” and “unified” core curriculum [and, please, I am not taking about today’s common core] and engaged in a highly sophisticated type of teacher-pupil planning. As we know, the power of a school arises from its teachers, and I think this is summarized in Mrs. Crump’s comment.



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]] “Teachers were easy to approach. They appreciated us and wanted us

to achieve the best. They didn’t want us to miss anything. They knew what we were going to face when we finished high school, and they would do anything to ensure that we were well-prepared. If a student missed something during class, it was just a matter of waiting until the end of day and there was always a teacher available to help.”



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]] One teacher who is mentioned regularly in documents is J. R. Buck.

Principal Bowman described him as departing “as far as might seem advisable from the teaching of abstract subject matter from some author’s text book, and to launch out as far as might seem safe in the direction of having children select topics in which they are interested and gather information about these topics from all available



sources.” **[[SLIDE:]]** Mr. Crump described Buck’s African America history class: “we were taught about black leaders who were involved in the struggle for civil rights. The accomplishments by blacks were featured and highlighted in our curriculum.” Another course in black history, in 1943, studied minority groups and types of discrimination— “what people of foreign descent encounter after reaching America. They illustrated certain religious and social customs among Chinese, Syrians, Jews and Italians.” A rabbi appeared before the class and discussed the problems of the Jewish people. Clearly, Buck was addressing racial issues in overt as well as very subtle ways.

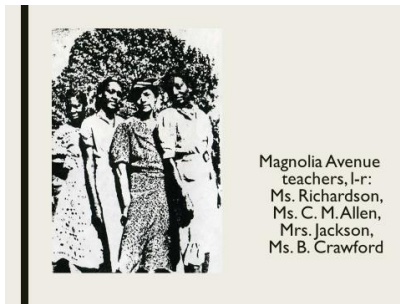


[[SLIDE:]] Thelma Rush stated, “What Magnolia Avenue teachers taught us was not just academic work; they taught us about everyday life and what had been happening to us as black people. Mr. Buck, especially, talked to us in the civics class about how the democratic process should work and what it meant to be in a real democracy. Mr. Buck was helping us understand what our families were doing for us, and he was ensuring—insisting—that we take the opportunity to learn and to make something of ourselves.”

All of the SSS schools (well, and all African American schools) were treated unfairly—inequitable funding, compromised facilities; however, SSS teachers still experimented with the curriculum. **[[SLIDE:**



]] Mrs. Williams mentioned “our books were ragged, but that didn’t stop our teachers. They were magnificent doing what they did with insufficient materials. The teachers were preparing us to live in an unjust world. They didn’t have to say much—we knew. They taught us by example.”



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]] Examples of experimentation come from Bowman’s 1942

report: “With the view toward making the study of English more functional and less traditional, in the eleventh grade classes no books of literature were purchased this year as in former years. Instead, the students and teacher attempted to make a study of certain modern problems. To do so, the students contributed small sums to purchase books that might be used for such a study to supplement those in the library.” During that year, the literature class moved toward a fused core curriculum as they examined the topics of transportation and crime.



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]] Two of Mayme Smith’s classes were using photography as part of an

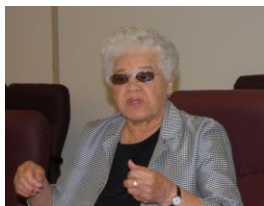


activity project, and [[SLIDE:

]] in 1942, Bowman writes of “A community activity [in Katie

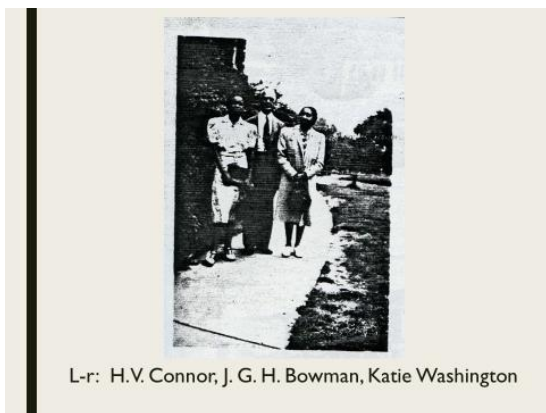
Washington's] sociology class that was largely responsible for an attempt last year on the part of representative citizens to secure a federal housing project for Vicksburg. This year the sociology class, is studying Direct Ways to Build up a Healthy, Intelligent, and Morally Strong Community.”

One school program, common among the SSS members schools, was the Friday assemblies and



dramatizations. **[[SLIDE:**]]

Jeanette Jordan remembers, “All of the teachers would come to the Friday assemblies where Professor Bowman was the master of ceremonies. This wasn't just an event for the students. It was a grand time for the teachers where they showed how proud they were of us. We were a true community.”



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As described by Principal Bowman in 1943,

“Assembly programs are presented cooperatively by the classes. These programs have been both informative and entertaining. . . . A dramatization presented by the second year class in history brought out very vividly the contrast between the customs and dress of prehistoric man and men of modern times. The Third year English class presented a forum on the question: Should eighteen and nineteen year olds be drafted in preference to older men? The sewing class presented a dramatization on cotton.”



[[SLIDE:]] Julia Washington Smith described these dramatizations as “a form of the project method where we were taught and then displayed our knowledge through prepared activities.”



[[SLIDE:]] And Louise Murray Stewart mentioned: “Students were called upon for impromptu programs and, amazingly, we did it! Where did that confidence come from? Everyone knew how to do something. Also, the Friday assembly taught us to learn how to listen and how to conduct ourselves in groups. The assemblies taught cooperation and gave us a chance to actually display our learning.”



[[SLIDE:]] Within this context, many teachers were, in their own ways, engaged in the struggle for civil rights and what we would call anti-racist education. Social activism within the classroom and outside of the school take on differing meaning at this time when a teacher could be fired for being a member of the NAACP. Each school’s web exhibition describes teachers’ overt as well as subtle efforts to address issues of civil rights. What does become apparent is that Magnolia Avenue High School educators were well aware of social injustices, and many were engaged in efforts to instill courage among students. [[SLIDE:



]] Allene Gayles described, “While the teachers could not be too active in the quest for civil rights, they made certain that we registered to vote. On our 18th birthday, a teacher would take us to the City Hall where we would register (and pay a poll tax of \$2).”



[[SLIDE:]] What insights do emerge from the Secondary School Study, a project based upon cooperation and experimentation? And I wish to add, these were professional terms. There were steps to the “process of cooperation” and there were types of experimentation—this was an implementative study. We see a generation of African American educators working together who acknowledged the significance of community and sought ways to strengthen relations among students, teachers, parents, and the general public; believed in the importance of correlated core curriculum, teacher-pupil planning, school philosophy, and interests and needs of students; and explored curricular and instructional activities that further developed basic tenets of progressive education in African American educational settings.

[[SLIDE: GRADUATES]] From the sweep of history, we know that these Secondary School Study teachers did not end the Jim Crow era. Yet, their tough kindness, their love for their students, their dedication to their profession, and their fierceness-merged-with-compassion changed many lives of young people. By attending to interests and needs, these teachers would display boldness and kindness as they confronted racism while simultaneously building communities of hope and strength for their students and for themselves.

[[SLIDE: BLANK]] I wish to thank you all; this 2016 visit is a very meaningful and sentimental experience, and I will always remember the kindness of these wonderful students who took the time to talk about a school and its teachers and principals that so influenced their lives. It is a testimonial to the role of teacher. May I ask the teachers in this room to now stand; this is your legacy.

Vicksburg will be special for another memory—that from 2008. Sitting in a hotel room, I heard NBC announce that Barack Obama had been elected president. I didn't want to be by myself that night. So I drove to downtown Vicksburg. And I was welcomed as I stood among individuals I had never seen before—members of the Vicksburg African American community—holding hands, weeping, and singing. The moment was special and, after having spent the day hearing accounts of uncivil behavior from an earlier era, served as a reminder of change and hope for our country and for our schools. Thank you, Vicksburg.

I swore that I would not go “academic” on you—or, at least, too academic; and I kept my talk within 30 minutes so that we could have time for questions and conversation.

From the September session:



Original participants and other students from Magnolia Ave. High School (during the 1940s)

with George Flaggs Jr., Mayor of Vicksburg