Waughtown Freedmen’s School

The Waughtown Freedmen’s School was founded in 1866 and was the first school established in Forsyth County after the Civil War for people who had been enslaved. The African School in Happy Hill and the Lewisville School were organized in 1867, and a school in Clemmonsville opened in 1868. Waughtown’s freedmen applied for charitable support to fund the school but were declined. Nevertheless, within a few months they organized the school independently. The school was located on what deeds refer to as the ½ acre “Church and School House lot” near the homeplace of Harris Fries, a Black farmer, off Waughtown Street. The freedmen owned the church and schoolhouse building and land.

A Black graveyard is sandwiched in the center of the block bounded by Colony (formerly Home), Waughtown, Peachtree, and Sprague Streets. The 1917 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map records a one-story, frame building with a shingle roof on the graveyard property. It is marked as “old & vacant.” It is believed that the graveyard is a remnant of the “Church and School House lot” on which the Freedmen’s School was located. It is possible that this old and vacant building was indeed the 50-year-old, multi-use schoolhouse and church.

In March 1866, North Carolina passed an “Act Concerning Negroes and Persons of Color or Mixed Blood,” more often known as the Black Code. The vagrancy statute of the Code made it a crime for anyone who was capable of working failing to support himself through “some honest occupation” or have an “apparent means of subsistence.” Alternatively, anyone Black found “in dissipation,” gaming, “sauntering about,” or earning money unlawfully could be arrested for vagrancy. Schools offered children and adults safety from such charges in addition to providing an education to those who had previously been denied one.

The Waughtown Freedmen’s School, formed eight months after passage of the Black Code, offered day, night, and Sabbath classes. In November 1866, the Report of the Freedmen’s Schools in North Carolina recorded an average attendance of 23 pupils, of whom nine were over age 16. None of the students had been free at the start of the Civil War. Nevertheless, ten were judged to be advanced readers while four could read “easy lessons.” The Sabbath school enrolled 70 students, and the night school had 53. By January 1867, the day school had an average of 35 students, three of whom had been free at the beginning of the war, but the night and Sabbath schools record zero students and may have ended or been temporarily closed.

The freedmen hired William G. Kerner to teach at the school. Kerner was the son of Philip Kerner, a plantation owner who enslaved eight people and whose father is the namesake of Kernersville. Family history notes that Philip abhorred slavery, though he did not free the people he held in bondage before the end of the Civil War. William was reported to “favor colored suffrage” in an 1867 newspaper. William later taught at the Bluff School and served as a magistrate and registrar in Kernersville.

The Freedmen’s School educated numerous people who then took their skills and knowledge to other parts of the
world. Isabella Butler was one of the school’s youngest students. She married Rev. Robert Wyche and moved to Charlotte, where she taught and served as principal of Myers Street School, a graded school for Black children, for over 19 years. The City of Charlotte named a school for Black children in her honor after her death. Addie C. Morris was also educated at the Freedmen’s School. She went on to study at Shaw University and was sent to Africa as a missionary by the Woman’s Missionary Society of Chicago. She began a grammar school for Winston’s Black children in the basement of First Baptist Church in the Depot Street neighborhood and was instrumental in opening the Colored Baptist Orphanage in Belview.

The neighborhood’s Black Baptist community was an important institution that also used the schoolhouse and church. Early prayer meetings were held in the cabin of John and Mary Fries. As the size of the meetings grew, they moved into the schoolhouse and church building. Rev. George Washington Holland, who founded Winston’s First Baptist Church in 1879, led services in a brush arbor on the property of Washington and Harriet Fries after the congregation outgrew the schoolhouse and church. Today’s First Waughtown Baptist Church grew out of this movement and was organized by Rev. J. Pinkney with help from Rev. Holland. The congregation moved to Moravia Street in 1913.

This information is also available at the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission web site: www.ForsythCountyHRC.org