

JEFFERSON SCHOOL

BY VIRGINIA FOUNDATION FOR THE HUMANITIES

Historical Significance

The chronology of the Jefferson School building represents the complex post-Civil War history of black education in Charlottesville. In 1865, the Freedman’s Bureau founded Jefferson School in the Delevan Hotel, a former Confederate Hospital. In 1869, a schoolhouse was constructed that provided three grades of elementary education. Anna Gardner and Philena Carkin of the Freedman’s Bureau organized and presided over this small school located at Union Depot. In 1894, this school was replaced by the Jefferson Colored Graded/Elementary School, a two-story, eight-classroom building on 4th St. NW. In 1926, the school expanded with a new high school facility constructed on Commerce Street. Due to eventual overcrowding at Jefferson and other black schools, Burley High School opened in 1951, while Jefferson School reverted to an elementary school.

Jefferson High School became one of six accredited black high schools in Virginia, emphasizing traditional curriculum and liberal education for its students rather than industrial skills. *The Reflector*, an African-American newspaper that ran from 1933 to 1935, documented Jefferson School activities in a column entitled “Jefferson School Notes.” The newspaper painted a picture of the school’s active learning environment, discussing educational programs including “Home and School Appreciation,” “Literature Appreciation Week,” “Music Appreciation,” and “A Century of Progress.”

Following the Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka decision on May 17, 1954, the long process of desegregation began in the city of Charlottesville. In 1955, black citizens applied to the Charlottesville School Board for transfers from black to white public schools, yet the board announced that Virginia would maintain segregated schools. Soon after, Senator Harry F. Byrd called for a policy of “massive resistance” to integration in Virginia. Despite law suits from the NAACP and other groups, segregationists perpetuated this policy by whatever legal means possible, hiring former governor John Battle for their defense. When Judge John Paul of the

U.S. District Court ordered Charlottesville to integrate the white city schools --Venable Elementary and Lane High-- the school board doggedly pursued appeals of this decision for two years.

In 1958 a pupil assignment plan established attendance areas for all Charlottesville elementary schools, including Jefferson School. The school board gerrymandered attendance zones so that a great majority of young black children resided in the Jefferson Elementary district. The board declared that students who were among the racial minority in their district could transfer to any elementary school where they would be among the racial majority. Achievement tests and interviews were established for any black student who wished to transfer to a white school.

On September 10, 1958 Judge Paul again ordered the city to integrate Venable Elementary and Lane High School with twelve African-American students. Rather than follow this order, segregationist Governor Lindsay Almond ordered the schools closed. Venable and Lane remained closed until February 4, 1959, and African Americans did not attend either school until the following school year. Jefferson remained opened during this time as a "colored school." Continuing a policy of "separate but equal" facilities, the school board added an additional two-story brick wing and a gymnasium and community center called Carver Recreation Center to Jefferson Elementary.

After integration became a reality in Charlottesville, Jefferson Elementary became a problematic educational facility. Jefferson remained an all black school until June of 1964. In 1965 the President of the local NAACP, along with other groups like the Citizens' Democratic Council, called on the school board to end the desegregation problem by incorporating Jefferson seventh graders into the city junior high school program. The Board ultimately decided to place all sixth grade students in the city at Jefferson, a choice based on convenience and a tool to further facilitate the desegregation process. The building served as a city-wide sixth grade middle school from 1965-67. Since this time the building has served a variety of educational functions such as housing preschool, adult education, and ESL programs.

The Jefferson School closed in June 2002. The Jefferson School Task Force, dedicated to preserving Jefferson School and its history, explored options for the future use of the school space and created the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center, opened in 2013. The Center tells the story of the Jefferson School and its alumni, and illuminates other aspects of the African American experience in the Charlottesville/Albemarle community, past and present. It remains home to the city's expanded Carver Recreation Center and a variety of other tenants offering a range of educational, social, service and recreational activities for the community.

Physical Description

Jefferson School is located on 4th Street one block west of the downtown mall, between West Main Street and Preston Avenue. At the time of its construction in 1925, the Jefferson School edged Charlottesville's Vinegar Hill neighborhood, an African American residential and commercial area which was razed during the period of urban renewal in the mid-1960s. The original structure is brick with distinctive detailing in the Classical Revivalist style. The 1938 addition closely matches the original structure, while the later additions of 1958-59 complement the original yet reflect a more Modern style and materials. The building was renovated and expanded prior to its reopening in January, 2013.

Geographical and Contact Information

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