

Historical Events Related to Sand Town School

By

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This article will review major events and activities that took place in the City and County of Mobile, the State of Alabama and the nation in 1873 when an application was submitted for a “colored” school in the Spring Hill community. In 1873, according to **The Heritage of Mobile County, 1702-2002** an application was submitted for a school, “Spring Hill-Colored.” (pp. 52-53). Research of the Mobile Archives, the Mobile County Public School System, and the Local History and Genealogy Library of the Mobile Public Library revealed no information on the Negro school in Spring Hill. It is unknown when the school was actually constructed and when classes began in the one-room school house, However, a study of the schools in Mobile by the University of Alabama recommended that the Negro School in Spring Hill be abandoned. (**Co-operative Study of the Mobile Public schools, Volume IV: Organization and Administration of the Mobile Public Schools, Bureau of Educational Research, College of Education, University of Alabama,** 1949, p.136. The study revealed that the average daily attendance for the Negro School in Springhill was 19. (p. 122). The study gave its rationale for the closing of the School:

As indicated in the section of this report dealing with school sites, the condition of the Negro buildings throughout the county is as a whole poor. Too many of the one-teacher schools are housed in churches and abandoned residences. To replace these small buildings now would tend to fix the continuance of these one teacher schools for years to come. Such would not be desirable. The consolidation of these schools is discussed in the following section. Some of these plants should be closed or renovated now, however in order to make them livable even for a few School

This same **Co-operative Study** pointed out very unique characteristics of the public schools in Mobile County. A separate Board of School Commissioners was established in 1826 and was responsible for both city and rural schools. This Board was given the authority to appoint the Superintendent and the school system and was not regulated by the city or county governments of Mobile. (p. xvii) The Board of School Commissioners was given responsibility for the control and development of the schools in Mobile County and were elected at-large by the citizens of Mobile County. (pp. 1-2)

It is interesting to note the conditions in Mobile in 1873 when the Negro school in Spring Hill was proposed. The southern states were in the process of Reconstruction following the Civil War that ended in 1865 and the city and state were occupied by federal troops. The period following the Civil War was a treacherous time for the city of Mobile. Many people left the City and were replaced by Freedmen who lacked skills for an urban environment. (Michael Thomason, **Historic Mobile: An Illustrated History of the Mobile Bay Region,** 2010, p 33. In the Spring of 1867, there was a series of incidents, most notably the “Pig Iron” Kelley Riots on May 14, 1867. William Darrah Kelley was the Judge of Probate for Mobile County (1867 – 1873) and spoke on the corner and Government and Royal Streets in favor of the rights for Negroes. His speech broke out in a riot between blacks and whites in attendance that resulted in at least three deaths. (From **The New-York Times May 15, 1867: RIOT IN MOBILE.**) This incident forced the federal authorities to replace the local governments, still mostly Ex-Confederates, with Unionists. Eventually the state bowed to federal

pressure and adopted a new constitution that allowed blacks to vote. From 1868 to 1877 white Republicans and blacks were voted into positions of power and influence. (Thomaston, p. 31)

A major impact in 1873 at the time that the Negro school was initiated in Spring Hill was the Panic of 1873 and the yellow fever epidemic that year. Since the end of the Civil War, railroad construction in the United States had been booming. Between 1866 and 1873, 35,000 miles of new tracks were laid across the country. Railroads were the nation's largest non-agricultural employer. Banks and other industries were putting their money into railroads. When the banking firm of Jay Cooke and Company, a firm heavily invested in railroad construction, closed its doors on September 18, 1873, a major economic panic swept the nation as people went to the banks and demanded their money. The panic led to bank runs and bank failures, followed by commercial bankruptcies and unemployment so severe that the downturn was called the Great Depression at that time. It lasted so long, more than five years, that it is now known as the Long Depression.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/grant-panic/>.

Probably the most definitive work on schools in Alabama was written by Horace Mann Bond, **Negro Education in Alabama: A study in Cotton and Steel**, a published version of his dissertation written for his doctor of philosophy degree from the university of Chicago in 1936. While the book did not deal with Mobile specifically, it addressed topics in Mobile during the time that the colored school was established in Mobile such as Social Forces in Reconstruction, pp. 22-34; Economic Forces in Alabama Reconstruction, pp 35- 62; The Course of Political Reconstruction, 1865-1875, pp. 63-72; Public Education of Negroes During Reconstruction, pp. 87-110; The Objectives and Content of Reconstruction Education, pp. 111-119; and Cotton and Steel: Economic Changes in Alabama, 1865-1900, pp. 120-134.

About The Writer

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