

Jenkins led Ahoskie blacks' educational opportunities

By Clarence S. Newsome
Centennial Education Committee

Sources of information about educational opportunities for Negroes in Ahoskie during the post-Civil War era until 1892 are inconsistent at best.

However, it is conclusive that a one-room schoolhouse was built at Catherine Creek Road and Hayes Street.

Whether Van Butler or Miles Hall was the first teacher or principal is one inconsistency uncovered in the research.

Writing about the "Ahoskie Colored School" in the Parker Brothers' book *The Ahoskie Era of Hertford County* in 1939, H.D. Cooper, principal from 1934-72, said, "For many of the facts dealing with the early education of Negroes in Ahoskie, we are indebted to Mr. William Hawley Jenkins, who served on the School Committee for 41 years, being chairman for 30 years."



Principal

H.D. Cooper served as Robert L. Vann School principal for 38 years.

This source of information provides the basis for much of the historical content that follows.

First school erected

In 1892, under Superintendent John Vann, the county assumed responsibility for the operation of the Ahoskie Colored School. A building was erected.

An all-Negro committee of Jenkins, Preston Newsome and James Jenkins was named to replace a previous three-man committee that included one white man, Richard Hayes, and two Negroes, Jobe Newsome and March Holloman. The committee employed teachers and conducted all of the school's business for 20 years.

In 1933, the committee was abolished by the legislature when it inaugurated a district plan.

The one-story building was replaced with a two-story building in 1899 to accommodate the increasing Negro population because of the development of Ahoskie as a commercial center and the increased concern of parents to have better education opportunities for their children.

School bell preserved

The large school bell that was used at that building is now enshrined on the campus of R.L. Vann School on Holloman Avenue as a result of a project by the North Carolina Junior Historians, who were students at the school.

Principals who followed Miles Hall were Tony Sessoms, Norfleet Sessoms, Martha Sessoms, Charlie Lewter, Mrs. Mary E. Sills, Paul Jenkins, Marcellus Newsome, the Rev. P.J. Wynn and Joe Gay.

During World War I, the N.C. Department of Education conducted a campaign to place at least one high school in each county for Negro children and they were known as training schools. The state agreed to subsidize the schools as long as the counties furnished buildings, equipment and operating funds.

With C.S. Yeates as principal from 1920-26, the people of Ahoskie wanted a school under this plan. Five acres of land, three-quarters of a mile northwest of the original site, was purchased from Dr. Jesse H. Mitchell.

Subsequently, the building, which by this time had a two-room addition, was moved in 1920 to the new site, the present location of the south end of the original primary building on the Vann School campus.

With the status of county training school, the school was expanded with two more buildings and another for agriculture. The school term was doubled to eight months, and high school classes were taught.

George Allen, a musician, taught several students to play the piano and other instruments, and a small band was formed. James L. Walker taught agriculture classes.

School bus bought

After three years, however, the county training school was moved to Winton to be a part of Waters Normal Institute, which was supported by the West Chowan Baptist Association.

Because of the move, parents of Ahoskie high school students had to purchase the first school bus to transport Negro children to Winton. In the meantime, the school in Ahoskie became known as the Ahoskie Graded School for primer through seventh grade. The Rev. Claude F. Wilder was principal from 1926-34.

H.D. Cooper then became principal and served until 1972. During his tenure several buildings were constructed and organizational plans evolved.

In 1934-35, a one-story brick building with 12 classrooms, an auditorium and a principal's office was constructed.

In 1937-38, a high school unit was constructed with nine classrooms. From 1938-41, the school was known as the Ahoskie High School for the Colored Race. The first class graduated in 1939 with diplomas from a state-accredited high school.

During that first year, the basketball team, coached by J.W. Furell Jr., won the Northeastern championship at Elizabeth City; and the chorus, directed by I. Sherman Greene, tied for state honors in Durham.

In the spring of 1940, Ahoskie students ranked first in district exams at Elizabeth City.

School is renamed

In 1941-42, the school was renamed for Robert Lee Vann in honor of the owner and published of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the leading Negro newspapers of the country. Vann was born Aug. 29, 1879, in Ahoskie. The school colors became maroon and gold, and the mascot became the Trojans.

In 1942-43, the 12th grade was added.

To eliminate the possibility of the basketball team from playing on outdoor courts or in a warehouse, the school and community joined in 1946 to construct a gymnasium, a frame building with white asbestos siding. Although it never had dressing rooms, showers or toilets, many exciting and victorious games were played and physical education classes held during its 32-year existence.

A one-story brick building was constructed in 1947-48, largely through the effort of J.L. Faulcon, the agriculture teacher. Later, in 1965-69, a steam-operated cannery was installed for the preservation of locally grown fruits and vegetables.

The 1950-51 school term included the hiring of W.E. Bowser as the first football coach at R.L. Vann. The same year Clifton Epps was added as band director, and the first school yearbook was published.

In 1953, a six-classroom, brick building was constructed on the very spot where the first two-story, frame building was located from 1920-34. In 1959, additional classrooms and a cafeteria were added to the north side of the primary building to accommodate more students.

As a result of the "freedom-of-choice" plan of integration in 1968, several black students attended formerly all-white schools in Ahoskie, but no white students enrolled at R.L. Vann at any level.

A historic era came to a close in the spring of 1970 at the last of 31 Robert L. Vann High School commencement exercises.



R.L. Vann School teachers

Among the teachers in the late 1940's at Robert L. Vann School in Ahoskie were (clockwise, from left front) Mrs. L.B. Patterson, J.A. Page, Monk, B.B. Riddick, Mrs. M.C. Newsome, Mrs. D.H. Taylor, Mrs. R.M. Manley and Mrs. E.K. Pierce. (Photo courtesy of Clarence S. Newsome)



More Vann School teachers

Other teachers in the late 1940's at Robert L. Vann School in Ahoskie were (clockwise, from left) Mrs. Henrietta Yeates, Edward Hunter, Mrs. Agnes Weaver, Mrs. Georgia Weaver, Mrs. Irene V. Jenkins Newsome Yeates, Mrs. Dessie Weaver and Mrs. India White. Today the school houses Ahoskie's fourth- and fifth-graders. (Photo courtesy of Clarence S. Newsome)

Many Vann School graduates achieved excellence in the classroom and on the athletic fields, but today that success is manifested in their lives as strong forces for the improvement of humanity in communities throughout the world.

After desegregation

The 1970-71 school year was the first for total integration in Hertford County schools. R.L. Vann School was reorganized to include grades 5-8.

Cooper retired as principal on June 30, 1972 and was succeeded by Clarence S. Newsome. The school again was reorganized to include the fourth and fifth grades in the Ahoskie district.

In 1973, kindergarten classes, as part of the ESEA Title I program, were added. In 1975, classes in special reading and special mathematics were added along with a resource center for children with learning problems.

In 1977, the kindergarten classes became state supported and were relocated at Ahoskie Graded School.

Newsome retired as principal on June 30, 1983, and was succeeded by Ray Parker until 1988. Mrs. Brenda Tinkham was principal for one year and was succeeded by the current principal, Harvey Jones Jr.

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