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Harry A. Kersey, Jr.



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ST. AUGUSTINE SCHOOL: SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS OF NEGRO PAROCHIAL EDUCATION IN GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

by HARRY A. KERSEY, JR.*

THE BAPTISTS and Presbyterians already had active congregations in Gainesville, Florida, when, in 1868, the Episcopalians formed "Trinity Parish." Land was secured and in 1873 a frame church was built on north Main Street where the Masonic Temple now stands.¹ This structure served the needs of the parish for over three decades.

It is not known whether black and white Episcopalians worshipped together at Holy Trinity, but given the residual southern white bitterness during Reconstruction and the Negro separatist sentiment of the time it is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, the establishment of Negro congregations was a topic often broached at diocesan councils, and some progress had been made in opening parochial schools in conjunction with a few of the churches. This was consistent with the philosophy espoused by John Freeman Young, bishop of the Diocese of Florida throughout the Reconstruction era.² He believed that if the church was to have lasting influence among blacks it should provide elementary schools for the children and education for the Negro preachers who were the leaders of their people.³ Young's work among the freedmen in Florida was carried on

* Mr. Kersey is professor of education at Florida Atlantic University. Some of the themes in this article initially were explored by William King in a graduate seminar paper presented at Florida Atlantic University.

1. Frank W. Pisani, "Holy Trinity Church— Its Story" (Gainesville, 1951), 3.
2. Joseph D. Cushman, Jr., *A Goodly Heritage: The Episcopal Church in Florida 1821-1892* (Gainesville, 1965), 155-70. John Freeman Young was ordained into the Episcopal priesthood in 1845, and after serving various church posts in Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, and New York, he became the second bishop of the Diocese of Florida in 1867.
3. *Ibid.*, 83-87. Young envisioned a network of Negro schools in his new diocese under the direction of the Church. One of his strongest supporters was Harriet Beecher Stowe, a recent convert to Anglicanism and a winter resident of Mandarin, who hoped to aid the project by teaching and raising money. Because of the lack of funds in Florida and a waning interest in the Negro in the North, the bishop's hopes did not fully materialize. Church academies were opened in Fernandina and Lake City.

by his successor, Bishop Edwin G. Weed, and by 1889 over 600 Negroes were attending seven Episcopal churches, while approximately fifty colored children were enrolled in parochial day schools.⁴

The diocesan records for 1892 reveal that the rector at Holy Trinity had established the St. Augustine Mission for Negroes in the parish hall and had "opened a night school and hopes soon to have a day school for colored children."⁵ This may be considered the beginning of the St. Augustine School, although an organized educational program was still five years away. The St. Augustine mission was the smallest of the Negro congregations established in north Florida prior to the division of the Diocese in 1893; it was also the last to establish a parochial elementary day school. Yet, it was the only one that survived to this decade, and it remained throughout under the control of its own congregation until the St. Augustine Church merged with Holy Trinity Parish in 1970.⁶

The efforts to maintain a school were desultory until the Reverend Mr. John Speight, a black minister, arrived in 1896. Shortly thereafter classes were being conducted at the mission with all grades meeting in one room. When a new church was completed in 1907, the original structure was turned over to the Negro congregation as a mission church, and the building was moved to the corner of what is now Northwest Fourth Avenue and Northwest Fourth Street where it served as both a sanctuary and a school. In 1905 Ada Speight, a graduate from the St. Augustine Normal School in Raleigh, North Carolina, joined the school staff. Another Speight daughter, Florence, also a graduate of the normal school, later joined the faculty for a short time. A third teacher early in this century was Miss Ela Kendrick. The conditions under which they labored were trying at best. The building was poorly heated, and the roof leaked so that the children during a hard rain had to cluster wherever

4. *Ibid.*, 186-87. Edwin Gardner Weed, a native of Georgia, was ordained in 1871. After fifteen years as a rector in Connecticut, he became the third bishop of the Diocese of Florida.

5. *Journal of the 50th Annual Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Florida* (Jacksonville, 1893), 42.

6. *Journal of the 127th Annual Council of the Diocese of Florida 1969* (Jacksonville, 1969), 106, 138.

they could find a dry spot to study.⁷ Funds for furniture and educational materials were in short supply. For many years there were only enough desks and chairs for the older students; one observer recalls seeing the younger children sitting on the kneelers and writing on the pew seats.⁸ The children provided their own writing materials, and they brought lunches from home as there were no kitchen facilities in the building.

In 1944 the original building had become so dilapidated that it was torn down and a new one was erected with the financial aid of the women's auxiliary of the Diocese. The new building was partitioned to provide a small section for worship and a larger area for the school. In 1949 a surplus World War II building from Camp Blanding was obtained and placed next to the church as an additional school building. After regular church services were discontinued in 1969, the space in both buildings was devoted to the school.

The early funding for the church and school came from the Episcopal Diocese of Florida, primarily from the bishop's discretionary fund and the small Livingston Trust established for the school; the total revenue from these sources never amounted to more than \$1,500 a year. This was supplemented by minimal contributions from the congregation and tuition fees of the students. In the beginning tuition was ten cents a week, and many students paid with a bushel of potatoes, ears of corn, or a cord of wood in lieu of cash. Lebbeus Speight, who attended the school from 1900 to 1908, recalls that his father received a salary of \$30.00 a month, and part of that came from the Diocese.⁹ The Reverend Mr. Fred G. Yerkes, Jr., archdeacon of Gainesville, who began supervising the school during the depression years of the 1930s, remembers that many children generally brought their dimes to school in their mouths because their parents were afraid they might lose them, and every Friday morning the teacher's desk would be covered with wet dimes.¹⁰ This tuition prevailed until after World War II when it was raised to \$1.00 a month.¹¹ In 1970 the tuition at St.

7. Interview with the Reverend Mr. Fred G. Yerkes, Jr., Jacksonville, June 18, 1971. Tape in files of the author.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Interview with Lebbeus Speight, Gainesville, July 14, 1971. Tape in files of author.

10. Interview with the Reverend Mr. Fred G. Yerkes, Jr.

11. *Journal of the 105th Annual Council of the Diocese of Florida 1948* (Jacksonville, 1948), 55.

Augustine was \$4.00 for a five day week, including lunch in a recently-added kitchen facility. The Diocese paired St. Augustine with the Episcopal Child Day Care Centers in Jacksonville for funding purposes in 1970, but it had little effect except to raise teacher salaries. The bulk of funding for the school still comes from local sources. This dependence on self-help rather than the diocesan treasury can be traced in part to the influence of Archdeacon Yerkes, who consistently held that St. Augustine should be supported primarily by the constituency that it served. This allowed the black community to shape the school to meet its particular needs without undue influence from the Diocese or the white Episcopal congregation in Gainesville. Such a policy may not be viable in the future, but apparently it has served the school reasonably well.

The organization of the school has fluctuated greatly since its founding. From 1896 until about 1910 it offered work concurrently with the Union Academy for Negroes in Gainesville, and went to the ninth grade.¹² From 1910 until the time of Reverend Speight's death on Christmas Day in 1924, the school taught the normal elementary subjects but went no higher than the sixth grade. After Speight's death the school continued under the direction of Melvis Jackson, who insisted that St. Augustine remain a parochial elementary school despite some feeling in the congregation that the school should not conflict with Lincoln High School which had opened in 1923 and which provided twelve years of education. In the late 1940s the organization and curriculum of St. Augustine was greatly influenced by Dr. Florence Jennings, an experienced educator whom the Reverend Yerkes had prevailed upon to work with the school. She began reorienting the program toward a preschool curriculum, and conducted extensive in-service training for the staff.¹³ This trend was reportedly vigorously opposed by Miss Jackson, who resisted any change which she thought might jeopardize the autonomous existence of the elementary school.

12. The Union Academy for Negroes in Gainesville was established by the Freedmen's Bureau in 1866. It opened in January of that year with 120 boys and girls as students, and offered the only public educational opportunities for Negro children until Lincoln High School was opened in 1923.

13. *Journal of the 104th Annual Council of the Diocese of Florida 1947* (Jacksonville, 1947), 62; interview with the Reverend Mr. Fred G. Yerkes, Jr.

However, as Miss Jackson's health worsened and public educational opportunities for black youngsters were expanded and improved in Gainesville, fewer children entered the upper elementary grades. Following her death in 1957 the course of the school was irrevocably set toward its present status, and it eventually was renamed the St. Augustine Day Care Center.

Some have observed that St. Augustine never was a true parochial school in the sense that there was no substantive direction from the Diocese on curriculum development, teacher selection or supervision, and it received only minimal financial support. Despite these shortcomings the quality of the school's program appears to have been good, according to the accounts of some former students. Lebbeus Speight recalls his father's insistence that "the children learn something" and how he enforced this admonition with strong discipline.¹⁴ Evidently the combination of no-nonsense education in a religious setting appealed to many parents, for children sometimes walked three to seven miles to attend what Gainesville's black community often called "Speight School." It is estimated that enrollment may have reached as high as ninety in the original building but remained around fifty in the years since World War II due to space limitations and local laws governing the number of students that could be accommodated. The tradition of excellence established by the Speights was continued by Melvis Jackson during her three decades as director. Although she possessed only a high school education, she had a strong personality and was highly respected since she emphasized both rigorous academics and character building. Mrs. George Gibson is director in 1972. She attended the school in her youth and later returned to teach under her cousin, Miss Jackson.¹⁵ Evidently Miss Jackson was a versatile and energetic person, for she taught all grades above kindergarten utilizing used texts which she arranged to have supplied by the Alachua County School Board. When children left St. Augustine for the public schools they were sought by the teachers who knew that most of them would be working on or above grade level due to their preparation. Many students continued their education through college, and

14. Interview with Lebbeus Speight.

15. Interview with Mrs. George Gibson, Gainesville, July 14, 1971. Tape in files of the author.

today leading members of the black business and professional community in Gainesville are alumni of the little white school house "near the square."¹⁶

With any private educational venture the question is inevitably raised— who patronized the institution? Certainly St. Augustine did not cater exclusively to a particular religious or socio-economic group as might be expected of an Episcopal school. There were probably never more than two dozen black Episcopalian families in the parish during its existence, and that would not have sustained a school.¹⁷ Neither was there a well established Negro "middle class" in the city which would have patronized the school as a badge of social status. Therefore, there appears to have been broad based support for the school due in large part to the esteem in which the Reverend Speight and Miss Jackson were held, but also because many parents wanted more for their children than what available public education facilities had to offer Negroes throughout most of this century.

In December 1971 the St. Augustine Day Care Center received its final financial support from the Episcopal Diocese of North Florida, thereby terminating a seventy-five year association. An independent board of directors comprised of local Episcopal churchmen, parents, and laymen now directs the affairs of the center. Although its days as a school are at an end, St. Augustine continues to serve the Negro community of Gainesville, perhaps in ways more appropriate to the times and needs of the people.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Interview with the Reverend Mr. Fred G. Yerkes, Jr.