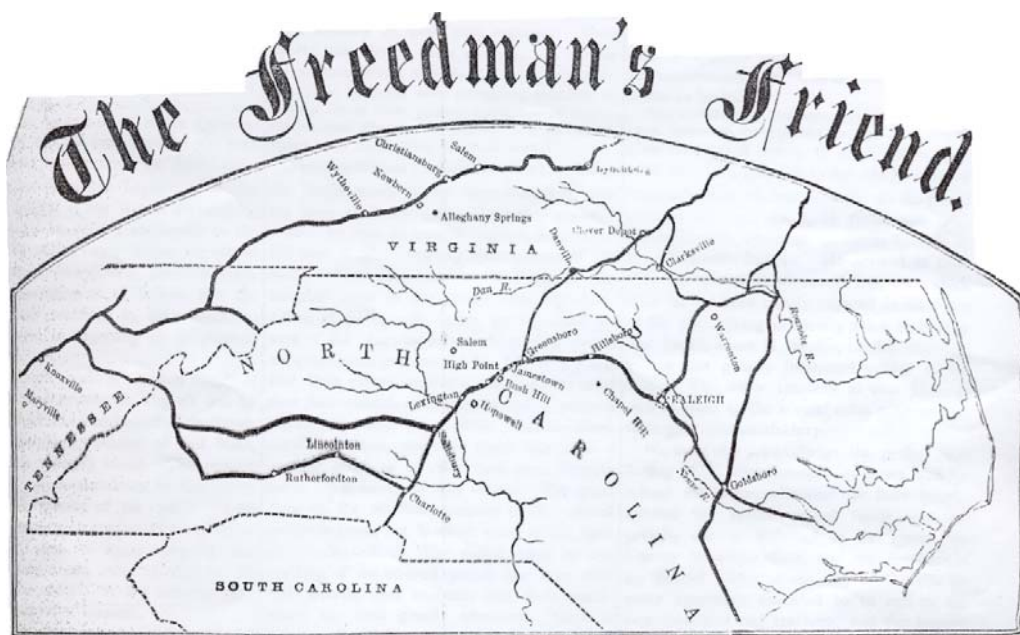


A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION
OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN DANVILLE, VIRGINIA:
FROM DAN'S HILL TO LANGSTON HIGH SCHOOL

BY

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THE VIEW

There is a huge profound mountain in the southern portion of Pittsylvania County, Virginia's largest geographic county. This mountain is densely covered with white oak trees, whereby giving this mountain range the name White Oak Mountain. The view from its summit is magnificent. To the west of White Oak Mountain lies Turkey Cock Mountain Range, so called because of the many wild turkeys roosting there. Due north, Smith Mountain dips down into Virginia's largest lake. To the northeast, golden hills, fertile plains, valleys, and three forking rivers (Roanoke to the north, Pigg to the west, and Banister in the center) rest in the bosoms of Jasper and Farmer's mountains. Due south of White Oak Mountain is the muddy Dan River flowing toward the east. From up there, one can envision the countless streams, branches, and watersheds feeding these rivers, the veins pumping lifeblood into a historically vast agricultural system. This fertile ground harbors the bones of many African-American ancestors. You can sense them, resting. You can feel their spirits as if they are riding on the gathering winds and clouds. What is the essence of this place? Where are the keys to unlock the dark paths of those days of slavery that still haunt this mountain air? How did they survive, as John Weldon Johnson says, "When hope unborn had died"?

The author's name is Lawrence Mozell Clark. He was born in Danville, Virginia, in 1934 to Lawrence Uise Clark and Ida Bell Clark. Pittsylvania County, his parents' birth ground, was carved from Halifax County in 1767. Fifteen years prior, Lunenburg proportioned Halifax. Pittsylvania County is located in the southern part of Virginia and borders the state of North Carolina. It is twenty-eight miles wide and forty miles long from south to north. It was named in honor of the Englishman William Pitt, the Duke of Chatham. William Pitt had been opposed to the heavy taxation placed on the American colonies by the British Crown. Chatham, the county seat, is also named in his honor.

Danville, a town in southwest Virginia adjacent to Pittsylvania County, is located by car an hour's drive south of Lynchburg, Virginia, only forty minutes from Greensboro, North Carolina. Danville, "the Last Capital of the Confederacy," is an industrial town known for its tobacco and cotton manufacturing.

The author and his many maternal and paternal relatives were affected by the policies and practices that gave rise to common schools. The purpose of this paper is to trace the educational growth of African Americans in the city of Danville, Virginia. The author attended elementary and secondary school in Danville, and received a bachelor of science degree from Virginia State University, and a master's degree and a doctoral degree from the University of Virginia. The author not only sees himself as a researcher but also as a participant.

There's a story about an old slave named Stephen of the Slade plantation in Caswell County, North Carolina, who has been credited with the discovery of bright leaf tobacco. One day in 1839, Stephen was tending his master's tobacco as the crop cured. Stephen was seduced by the heat from the wood fire in the barn and was ultimately lulled to sleep. When Stephen woke, the fire had practically died. Panicked by the thought that the crop's suffering would be on his hands, Stephen ran to a nearby charcoal pit, grabbed some charred logs, and threw them on the waning fire. The embers created a sudden dry heat. From the parched warmth emerged the brightest, yellowest tobacco leaf the old Negro (or anybody, for that matter) had ever seen!

It was believed that tobacco best thrived on dry virgin soil, and Pittsylvania County was soon discovered to be quite suited to the growing of bright leaf tobacco. The great demand for clearing new land and the labor intensity of the tobacco crop increased the need for additional slaves. The need for more virgin land grew due to the nature of cultivating the crop, so the large tobacco growers were constantly adding acreage. Before long, planters began a rotational crop system designed to maximize the profitability of the land, as is the nature of capitalism and supremacy. The bright leaf tobacco plant required constant attention, the type of care that Stephen, the wise old slave, had given it upon its conception. I'm sure Stephen wasn't aware, however, that his specialty crop would encourage the need for a larger slave force. In 1840, Pittsylvania County was home to 11,588 slaves, ranking fifth among the Virginia counties benefiting from chattel labor. However, Pittsylvania produced 6,439,000 pounds of tobacco, ranking first in the cultivation of the cash crop. Moreover, 1800–60 was considered a golden period for

Virginia planters. As a result, the region south of the James River, which included Pittsylvania and Danville, bore the name “Black Belt,” a metaphor for the large population of black slaves girding the area’s agricultural wealth.

During the Civil War news came to the county and city about the Confederate and Union armies trading victory and defeat as they bloodily debated the fate of Southern states and shackled African Americans vying for their own versions of liberty. While there were no battles in or near Danville, the city did become a military post. According to Pittsylvania County historian Maude Clement, there were established in the city hospitals, arsenals, commissaries, and woolen mills. Noteworthy, the warehouses were converted into prisons; it is estimated that 6,000 to 7,000 federal prisoners were housed in these warehouses. Death took its toll, and more than 3,000 died.

Many of the battles waged destruction along railroad tracks. During the Civil War, miles and miles of track were destroyed as the Union Army mapped its way down the sloping peaks of Virginia. The Yankees used this tactic often and it came to symbolize the paralysis of a Dixie smugness, similar to the Native American practice of scalping prisoners during the French and Indian War, leaving their death cry as an echo of pride. American history has validated the railroad tracks as an iron weapon with an incongruous stretch, steering the power of supremacy against equality, driving victory toward defeat, holding the authority of freedom over oppression in its arrogant steel stance.

If one contemplates most battles for justice fought on diasporas' soil, the railroad tracks become less an emblem for a new architectural and industrial age and more a resolute metaphor for America's race and class disparities.

Danville's information highway (the railway from Richmond to Danville) also became ineffective during the last few weeks of the war. However, after the news of the fall of Petersburg, President Jefferson Davis, along with his cabinet members and other Confederate government officials, was able to flee by train from Richmond to Danville. From Monday, April 3, 1865, to Wednesday, April 12, 1865, the business of the failing Confederacy was conducted in Danville, giving rise to the name "Last Capital of the Confederacy." President Davis was the guest of Major William Sutherlin and spent these days in his home. With a last call not to yield, President Davis fled Danville after hearing the news that Lee had surrendered at Appomattox on April 5, 1865.

For my people freedom was in the air.

A "VERITABLE FEVER" FOR EDUCATION

Despite few economic resources and limited political power, African Americans emerged from slavery with a deep desire to create, control, and maintain schools for themselves and their offspring. The stunning pace with which freedmen established schools, along with the remarkable attendance rates of African-American students, made it evident that "free" or public schooling was a right ex-slaves practically invented and intended to

optimize. In 1860, nearly 1.4 million African-American children under the age of ten lived in the United States, yet virtually none attended school. The enrollment of white children in 1860 was 55 percent, while the enrollment of African-American children was slightly less than 2 percent and occurred almost exclusively in the North. Between 1865 and 1870, with aid from the Freedman's Bureau, African Americans in the South established more than 4,000 schools, employing approximately 9,300 teachers and instructing approximately 250,000 students (Pierce 1955). By 1870, about one-fourth of school-age African Americans attended "public schools." Freedmen established many more schools with their own resources and supplements from Northern missionary societies, philanthropic organizations, and Republican politicians (Anderson 1988).

The push by African Americans for universal schooling created conditions for fundamental changes in the educational system that benefited all American citizens. W. E. B. DuBois stated: "The first great mass movement for public education at the expense of the state, in the South, came from Negroes." The eagerness of the Southern African American to obtain an education after the Civil War was described by Booker T. Washington as a "veritable fever." Washington went on to say the following:

The places for holding school were anywhere and everywhere; the Freedmen could not wait for schoolhouses to be built or for teachers to be provided. They got up before day and studied in their cabins by the light of pine knots. They sat up until late at night, drooping over their books, trying to master the secrets they contained. More than once, I have seen a fire in the woods at night with a dozen or more people of both sexes and of all ages sitting with book in hands studying their lessons. Sometimes they would fasten their primers between the ploughshares, so that they could read as they ploughed.

(Washington, *Story of the Negro*)

African Americans regarded formal education as the vanguard against ignorance, poverty, and powerlessness. Eventually, the rest of the society followed in transforming the purpose and instruction of education.

In an effort to keep slaves from reading and sharing antislavery tracts, for fear of slave insurrections, Virginia legislators passed an act on April 7, 1831, declaring “all meetings of free negroes or mulattoes at any school-house or other place for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatever pretext” unlawful. If a white person took pay for the education of African Americans, he or she was fined fifty dollars and imprisoned for a number of days. If freedmen were caught teaching slaves to read or write, they received twenty-nine lashes from a very familiar whip.

These acts were common in the South as the mental stronghold of slavery was being challenged, which meant that African Americans had to fund their own efforts toward higher learning. Freedmen fortunate enough to gather sufficient resources began sending their children north to school, offering a solution for the limited few. In response to these efforts, however, an act was passed in 1838 declaring any person of color who left Virginia to seek education an emigrant and unable to reenter the state. In the same year, a group of sixteen freedmen of considerable property petitioned the Virginia legislature for the privilege of establishing a school for free African-American children in Fredericksburg. The legislature refused. From 1838 until the close of the Civil War, the only opportunity freedmen had to educate their children was strictly through private instruction.

It was on January 26, 1870, after nine years of civil war and reconstruction that Virginia reentered the Union under the signature of President Grant of a bill of authorization of restoration. Earlier, as required for readmission, the Virginia General Assembly had ratified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

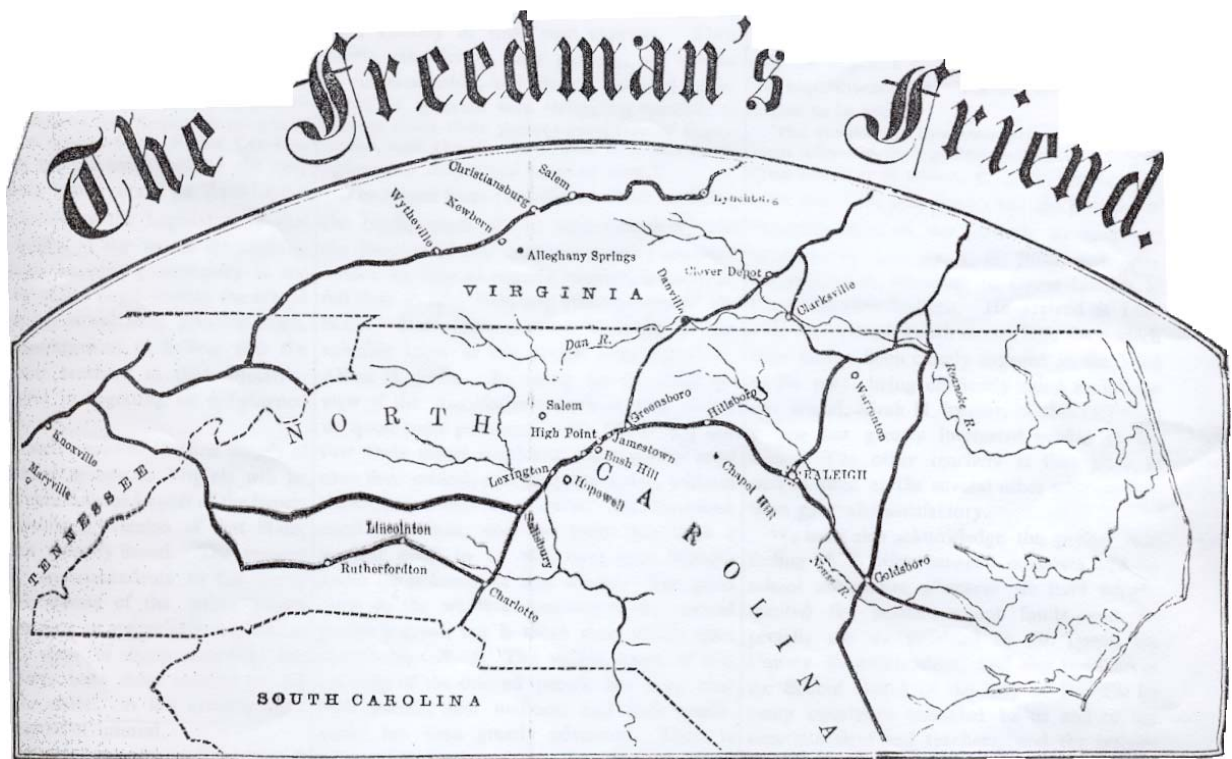
Moreover, by 1870, in Virginia alone, 111 schools were owned outright and freedmen supported another 215. As in the rest of the South, aid was provided by Northern missionary societies and philanthropic groups, yet freedmen paid one-half to two-thirds the cost of schooling. In addition to the economic challenges faced by the African-American community to keep their schools operating, the challenges were compounded by uniform hostility against schools committed to educating African Americans. Southern whites perceived the education of African Americans as a threat to the Southern hierarchy of power, and felt efforts to educate African Americans only made them “uppity” and ruined them as field hands.

In *The Cost and Outcome of Negro Education in Virginia: Respectfully Addressed to the White People of the State*, published in 1889, author Frank G. Ruffin argued, “The amount annually paid out of the taxes to Negro education is a considerable portion of (all) taxation and, therefore, worth saving to our impoverished people, or being directed to a better object.” Ruffin founded his argument on the latest theories of education: “It has often been remarked both here and in Africa and the West Indies that Negro children

up to the age of puberty learn remarkably well, at least by rote, but after that period of life has been reached they become incurably stupid and make no further progress.” He concluded his argument with discussions of African Americans’ lack of political relations, poor industrial conditions, disproportionate criminal records, lack of social aspirations, and absence of civilized religion. Schools were often under attack, burned, and the teachers, both African American and white, were threatened and mistreated. Southern whites resisted releasing the psychology of superiority that identified African Americans as beings of a very different and lower order.

EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCHOOLS IN DANVILLE

One of the first schools for African Americans in Danville sat on “School House Hill,” commonly known as Dan’s Hill. A group of Quakers from Philadelphia, who had formed the Friends’ Association of Philadelphia and Its Vicinity, for the Relief of Colored Freeman (later shortened to Friends’ Freedmen’s Association) during the Civil War, began sending blankets and seeds to the coastal region of Virginia. At the end of the war, the group moved into the interior and established a service relief region. In 1865, this specific region included the south central part of Virginia and the central part of North Carolina, extending as far west as Charlotte and as far east as Goldsboro. Danville served as headquarters for the Friends’ Freedmen’s Association’s relief activity. Danville was chosen as headquarters because there was a Freedman’s Bureau and a Northern military garrison established in this city. One of the primary activities of the association was the establishment of schools for the freedman.



According to the *Freedman's Friend* issue of November 1865, two Quaker women, Eunice Congdon and Eleanor Matlack, arrived in Danville the first week of October 1865 to begin a school. With the help of some local Negro carpenters, they commenced to convert a 100-foot-by-150-foot dilapidated building that had served during the war as a Confederate war hospital into a school. The day students numbered 200, while the grown folk and children who could not come during the day were eager for the night school to begin. Congdon noted:

You have no idea of the amount of misery and suffering; of the great destitution among the colored people. . . . Many colored persons are now coming into the city, driven from their former homes by their masters, who having got all the work for the fall done, crops gathered and wheat sown, send them away without

anything to help themselves, without homes and work, just as winter is coming on. In some cases, [the Freedman's] Bureau drives them back and they are obliged to stay under the old slavery conditions. Very many refuse to go back; rather stay here and suffer.

By the spring of 1866, Eunice Congdon obtained and rang a plantation bell every morning, summoning an average of 400 children to school. Each morning, the students arrived at the little wooden-framed building that once served as a Confederate war hospital. The day began with the two-teacher, two-assistant staff maintaining “beautiful order, an almost military precision of drill, the children passing from room to room at the tap of bell.” The wonder of this image is overwhelming considering what current standards of education would easily deem “a disproportionate student-teacher ratio.” It is almost humorous (and exhausting) to envision a teacher in today’s academic environment conducting large group instruction in something called “the main hall” amidst so much disciplined silence that one could hear the chalk screeching letters on the blackboard.

Exercises in arithmetic, reading, writing, spelling, and geography introduced the school day while fifty to a hundred boys and girls assembled in reading class at one time. The teacher would engrave a word into the meat of the blackboard, “c-a-t,” each letter blooming literacy like a lightbulb coming on in a realized mind. She would then read it aloud, “kat,” underlining the word with her pointer while punctuating the coughing *k*-sound, playfully tossing the *t*- toward her class. And the class would pronounce “cat” in unison. The semblance of call and response between the teacher and these eager students is hopeful, a truly promising light—majestic like the rainbow my sister sent to our cabin from some place on high.

Poor economic conditions in the African-American community contributed to the cramped and clearly unaccommodating learning environment. During harsh winters, many students attended school with empty stomachs and without suitable clothing to keep them warm. Some winters were remarkably, severely cold, with the Dan River slumbering beneath an unwavering, dense ice, and the stillness that invaded all of Danville making poverty more discernible. Suffering and hunger shivered inseparably as school attendance waned, taking a backseat to the simple quest to survive.

Winter soon passed and despite its residual hindrances, Congdon observed the students were fervent learners and displayed “a sense of deep responsibility” toward reviving their studies. The Quakers felt that the students had great natural ability and compared well to, if not excelled, the white children in reading and writing (Wiencek 1999).

By the spring of 1866 George Dixon had come over from England and assumed the superintendent position for the relief region. He stated in a December 1867 issue of the *Freedman's Friend*:

We have now gotten possession of the entire property at Danville, and have put it into thorough repair. Beside the large school room we have now three recitation rooms, with new benches and desks. I trust this is the last expense the association will be put to with the buildings here. We are this month charging every scholar five cents (per week) and most of them pay it cheerfully. There are some orphan and fatherless children who will not be able to pay. In a few instances we have made them a present of the money to take with them to the school. One of the teachers saw one of her scholars gathering rags around the houses and asked her what she was going to do with them. She replied, “Sell them to raise five cents for my

schooling.” I have conferred with John Langston, who was sent out by General Howard, as to the best method of raising money for the education for the freedmen, and he is of my opinion that nothing can be raised with any degree of certainty without a fixed charge, and likes my plan of making it as little as possible at the commencement, particularly in the winter season; and advance might be made when they get to work in the summer.

A sad day arose when the first school mistress, Eunice Congdon Dixon, a new bride, left with her husband, George Dixon, the superintendent, during the fall 1868. There were approximately 500 people at the depot to see them off. Many of her pupils wept openly and she in turn was deeply touched. Alfred Jones succeeded George Dixon as superintendent and was accompanied by his wife, Mary, son and niece Carrie Jones. Susan C. Martin, who succeed Eunice Dixon, gave an insightful and vivid image of the school and its setting on November 23, 1868:

The town of Danville is not much in itself—consisting only of a few straggling streets. There are no public buildings and the houses and stores bear a dilapidated look. Its only attraction is its situation, and that is indeed beautiful. The hills amongst which it lies buried, rise on all sides, and stretch away as far as the eye can reach. They are constantly covered with verdure, pine and oak woods dotting them here and there, thus relieving the monotony of the landscape. The Dan River runs round two-thirds of the town, making it almost an island. The population is between four and five thousand.

Our buildings are situated in the outskirts of the city, on the top of a high hill, at the foot of which runs the river. The prospect from the mission house is very fine and gives us much enjoyment. The school house is a frame building, one hundred feet wide by one hundred and fifty long, and was used during the war as a hospital. It is comfortably fitted up with everything necessary—benches, desks, class-rooms, etc., and presents quite a respectable and cheerful appearance. We have in daily attendance upwards of 240 pupils,

who are graded into four divisions, the normal scholars forming the first class. They collect twice a day in the large room for general exercises, when they repeat texts and passages of Scripture, of which they know a great number, and repeat with emphasis and understanding. They never seem to tire, but every day are ready to learn something new. Their manner of singing hymns is very interesting. To see for the first time, between two and three hundred little dusky forms, with their bright, happy, eager faces, singing, with exquisite pathos—

“I think when I read the sweet story of old,
When Jesus was here amongst men,
How He called little children, as lambs to His fold,
I should like to have been with them then.”

—is something never to be forgotten; and hard, indeed, must be the heart that does not go out in love and sympathy towards these poor, neglected little creatures, struggling towards the light. Their intelligence and aptness to learn is truly astonishing, and they compare favorably with any white children I have ever known. There are in my class two little boys, neither of them over seven years old, one of whom learns a psalm for every Sabbath, and the other has read the Testament through twice. There is something very exciting in teaching the freed children, and I believe every one who enters into the work has the same experience. They come neat and clean, as a general thing, and their clothes—though old and scanty, as must necessarily be—bear the evidence of care—for there are a very few ragged ones. It is a perfect marvel how these people do so much with so little. Their exertions to provide for themselves families, and pay for their children’s schooling, are very great, and as far as my experience goes, I think they deserve encouraging, especially as the disadvantages they labor under are not a few.

I dread to think of the approaching winter and their inevitable sufferings; so many are thrown out of employment by the closing of the factories. The people here will do nothing for them, and their only hope is in their Northern friends. Our night school is large—at the present time averaging 130 pupils. They are principally adults, and many of them, after working hard all day from sunrise to sunset, walk five and six

miles to school. This in itself is sufficient evidence that they appreciate the advantages they enjoy. They cannot bear to hear the least allusion to the school being discontinued, and, if Friends could only see for themselves the increasing interest they manifest in the cause of education, it would encourage them in their good work.

Many come from the country to the Sabbath-school who are unable to attend during the week. These are seasons fraught with interest and instruction to both teachers and scholars. George and Eunice Dixon were faithful laborers in this field, and the amount of good they accomplished is perhaps unknown, even to themselves. We are blessed [to] have for their successor Alfred Jones, whose Christian teachings will fall into hearts prepared to receive them. May they be like the seed which fell upon good ground, and bring forth a hundred fold.

EDUCATION AND POLITICS 1871–83

“On the left of the station, at the top of a high hill, stand our school and mission houses; neat and tidy and reputable in appearance,” documented an October/November 1871 issue of the *Freedman’s Friend*. The reputation of learnedness and study of Danville Negroes stretched beyond Virginian borders. “School House Hill,” as Dan’s Hill became known, supported one of the first schools for African Americans in Danville and beckoned distinguished guests thrilled to witness the “sweet spirit of seriousness” that convened amidst these young academics.

The “Primary Department” prepared younger learners who were “instructed from charts in the alphabet and prepared for the use of reading books.” The “Normal Department” tutored scholars who aspired to higher levels of achievement, many of whom advanced to more formal institutions such as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute established

in Hampton, Virginia, in 1868. Other qualified disciples acquired teaching positions in other areas of the country, most often in one of the nineteen schools that were established in North Carolina and Virginia by November 1867. The *Freedman's Friend*, an abolition-turned-freedom journal, didn't underestimate the aptitude of Danville's black scholars when it forecast, "the sentiment of serious, sober spirituality thus imbued, will tell on their future lives, and the seed thus planted will be scattered broadcast over the land."

Despite challenges from every direction, interest in education continued throughout the 1870s, for African Americans understood very well that they could not improve their conditions if the community remained uneducated. In the early 1870s Freedman's Bureau records indicate that African Americans in Danville raised \$600 to purchase land for a school (Wiencek 1999).

In 1877, the *Freedman's Friend* described Danville as "a flourishing place, carrying on a larger tobacco trade than any other town in Virginia." Men earned an average of \$5.50 per week in the fields while women secured an income ranging between \$1.50 and \$10 per month doing domestic work. Grossing a mediocre salary after "graduating" from slaves to sharecroppers, Danville's Negro residences were barely able to turn lowly shanties into respectable dwellings. Many families found shelter in ex-horse stables, which they portioned into tight niches, paying their white landlords (notwithstanding crop shares) a median rent of \$3.50 per month. The tattered boards did a more thorough job of fostering the pungent stench left behind by the former four-legged occupants than warding off winter's biting cold. The poorest shacks were occupied by the desolate,

elderly, and helpless. The more accommodating abodes bore wide cracks that served as windows and doors, through which sunlight offered a pinch of heat to rebuke freezing temperatures. Those who could afford it purchased themselves “a room with a window, the cracks covered with pieces of paper and a tolerably warm chimney.”

However demeaning the conditions, the same issue of the *Freedman's Friend* chronicled one woman's hopefulness:

In one of the single huts made with slabs, the chimney outside, we found a man, his wife, and four children, and a deserted wife with three children who got only \$1.50 at the tobacco factory. The others had rented the cabin and she was staying as an unwelcomed guest. The children having no claim to shelter stayed out of the house during the day, except when it stormed, only coming in when their mother came home. Yet the wife in this cabin was quietly humming a hymn as we went in, as she stood at the table ironing . . . and was rejoicing in a sense of forgiven sin and felt a peace of mind to which she had been long a stranger, and now she intended again to read her Bible.

The *Freedman* further accounts the unique story of a minister who had been called to preach the Gospel as a slave. His master was strongly against his preaching to the other slaves but allowed the young minister his service to God. After freedom, he toiled long distances by foot on “First Days” (Sundays) spreading the Word and receiving no salary beyond that he procured from his weekly manual labor. His home was described as “well-built and commodious” although the calling allowed him little time to rest.

In addition, the political landscape of the state of Virginia and the Danville community began to shift, allowing for greater participation and visibility of African Americans. In

1879, William H. Mahone, a member of the Readjuster Party, came into political power with the aid of the African-American vote. Mahone was elected to the U.S. Senate and captured control of the Virginia General Assembly. The Mahone organization made several positive improvements that proved beneficial to the African-American community in Virginia (Workers of the Writers Program 1969).

These improvements included the following:

- the expansion of the public school system, with special attention given to African-American schools and teachers
- the elimination of the poll tax as a requirement for voting
- the establishment of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute at Petersburg (later named Virginia State University)
- the abolishment of the whipping post
- the establishment of Central State (Mental) Hospital for Negroes

The Mahone organization had a direct effect on the politics of Danville. In 1880, Danville had a population of 4,397 African Americans and 7,526 whites. By 1882, the political power shifted, resulting in African Americans controlling seven of the twelve seats of the City Council. In addition, an African American, J. H. Johnson, served as mayor. African Americans held the three seats of the justice of the peace and four of the nine policemen were African Americans. One of these four policemen served as health officer and another as weight-master of the public scales and clerk of the market.

African-American participation in political city life was not looked favorably upon by many of Danville's white citizens, especially white Democrats. On November 3, 1883, a riot ensued, and white Democrats took over city government. Seven African Americans were wounded, four of whom died; two white men were seriously, but not mortally, wounded (Hairston 1955).

THE DANVILLE SCHOOL ON HOLBROOK STREET

During the 1870s, an eight-room school for African-American children was erected on Holbrook Street. The Danville School, as it was known, was administered by a white principal and had a staff of seven African-American teachers. The name of the school was later changed to Westmoreland. After the death of the white principal in 1881, William A. Yancey became the first African American in the city to serve as principal of a school.

Charles J. Daniel followed Yancey's tenure in 1882, and stayed until receiving a post at Virginia State College in 1888. Professor W. F. Grasty, a native of Danville, succeeded Daniel and remained principal until 1929.

William Franklin Grasty was born in Danville on November 10, 1860, just before the outbreak of the Civil War. His parents were John F. Grasty, a farmer, and Jane Giles Grasty. From his early years, he was inclined towards the ministry and felt that some of his life's work would be in this field. He had the opportunity to attend the school on

School House Hill under the sponsorship of the Quakers. Not only did he complete the grade school, but he also attended the normal grades, which enabled him to attend Hampton Institute. He graduated from Hampton in the class of 1879, and secured a teacher's license and began teaching in Chesterfield County, Virginia. After teaching for two years, he was called back to Danville, and for thirty-eight years was identified either as a teacher or principal. He became principal of Westmoreland in 1888 after Charles Daniel had received the position at Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (Virginia State University). During his tenure of thirty-eight years, we made great strides in eradicating illiteracy among my people. In addition, he served in the following roles:

- president of the Virginia State Teachers Association for ten years
- trustee of the Pittsylvania Collegiate Institute at Gretna
- instructor in the Summer Normals at Petersburg
- president of the Booker T. Washington Institute at Rocky Mount, Virginia

In 1906 he accepted the pastorship of the First Baptist Church. He retired from the school system in 1927 due to poor health. In his honor in 1932, the new school on New Street was named the William F. Grasty Elementary School.

By 1900, the population of Danville was 16,520, with 10,002 white citizens and 6,518 African Americans. In 1905, the public school enrollment was 1,627 whites and 1,022 African-American students. As the African-American population increased, the need for

more schools became necessary. In 1893, the Monticello School on Franklin Street was erected, followed by the Arlington Public School on Abbott Street in North Danville.

In 1913, a separate seven-room building was erected to house the high school, grades nine to eleven. It was known as the Westmoreland High School. Professor Grasty continued supervising the elementary and the high schools. All but the annex of Westmoreland was torn down in 1925 and replaced by a three-story, fifteen-room building. For the first time in the history of public schools of Danville, the high school department of an African-American school was completely separated from the elementary school department. In 1926, Professor I. W. Taylor was made principal of the elementary school. The high school occupied the annex of Westmoreland. Professor Grasty was then responsible for only Westmoreland High School. He remained principal until he retired in 1927, having served more than forty years.

In August of 1929, Professor Edwin A. Gibson of Atlanta, Georgia, was named principal of Westmoreland High School. Under Professor Gibson's leadership, the twelfth grade was added and received in 1932 its first accreditation by the State Board of Education. He remained principal of Westmoreland High School until 1935 and became principal of the new John Mercer Langston High School.

Just outside of the city, Almagro Training School served some of the students living in rural Pittsylvania County. Mrs. Avicia Hooper-Thorpe, former English teacher in the Danville public schools, attended Almagro Training School and graduated in 1924. She

recalled that the school had only eleven grades. After completing these grades, she enrolled in and completed the twelfth grade at the Industrial High School, a parochial school supported by the Presbyterian Board of Education. This was founded in 1884 and served the children of Danville and the surrounding counties. Industrial High School was destroyed by fire in 1929. Almagro was eventually annexed to Danville and the Almagro Training School became one of Danville's public schools (Hairston 1955).

DISCRIMINATION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION: 1900–30

The United States Supreme Court's 1899 decision in *Cumming v. Richmond County (Ga.) Board of Education* shaped the nation's discriminatory nature of the secondary education of African Americans in the first three decades of the twentieth century. As a result of the court's ruling, Southern school boards were not required to offer public secondary education for African-American youth. In 1915, most major Southern cities had no public high schools for African-American children. African-American children constituted 39 percent of the total secondary population, yet made up zero percent of the enrollment in public schools (Anderson 1988).

Virginia maintained only six public high schools for African Americans in 1916. Although African Americans comprised 35.3 percent of Virginia's school population, 7.1 percent of high school students were African American. In Danville, the enrollment of whites doubled while the enrollment of African-American students increased by 20 percent. The scarcity of educational opportunities for African Americans coupled with

African Americans' deep desire to educate their children resulted in large loads for teachers of African-American students. In 1920, the pupil-teacher ratio in African-American schools of most of the Southern states averaged more than 35; one-third to three-fourths more children than teachers in white schools. Yet the disparity between salaries of Southern white and African-American teachers increased during the first 30 years of the twentieth century. In 1900, African-American teachers received 65 percent of what a white teacher would earn annually. By 1930, African-American teachers earned only 47 percent of the pay received by white teachers (Pierce 1955). By 1938, Virginia had 63 high schools for African-Americans; however, 64 of the 100 counties in Virginia had no high schools for African-American students.

JOHN M. LANGSTON HIGH SCHOOL: A MECCA FOR THE COMMUNITY

Despite these conditions, students watched from the annex of Westmoreland as a new high school was being constructed on the corner of Gay and Holbrook streets in Danville in 1935. Under the principalship of E. A. Gibson, the cornerstone of the new high school was laid in 1936. At a cost of \$100,000, the African-American community was appreciative of the new structure that held fourteen classrooms, four laboratories, a library, an auditorium seating 776, a gymnasium, an area for vocational studies, two offices, two private telephones, and a cafeteria. The new high school was named in honor of renowned Virginia politician, lawyer, and educator John Mercer Langston (Hairston 1955).

John Mercer Langston was born in 1829, the son of a white father and black mother. After his father's death, young Langston was sent to Ohio and spent his remaining childhood there. After graduating from high school in Cincinnati, Langston attended Oberlin College, graduating in 1849 with a degree in theology. By 1854 he had studied law and had been admitted to the Ohio Bar. During the Civil War, he recruited African Americans into service and in 1867 served as inspector general for the Freedman's Bureau. From 1868 to 1875, Langston was dean and vice president of Howard University. In 1877, he was named minister resident to Haiti and *chargé d'affaires* to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, remaining in diplomatic service until 1885. Soon after returning to the United States and his law practice, he was named president of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute. In 1888, Langston was elected to Congress, but was not seated for two years due to vote-counting irregularities. Langston died in 1897. The "Lion" as a mascot for the new high school was appropriately symbolic of his tenacity (Cheek 1989).

The Langston family chose for its colors maroon and gold, and in 1939 a student named Edith Whitman penned the lyrics to the alma mater. In an interview in the fall of 1999, Ms. Whitman indicated that the physical education teacher, David P. Brown, organized a contest in which he asked students to compose the lyrics for the school song. Ms. Whitman's writing skills earned her the honor of winning the contest.

During its thirty-three years of operation, Langston High School experienced outstanding leadership. From 1936 to 1948, E. A. Gibson served as principal. A. L. Armistead, who

served as principal until 1951, followed him. C. D. Paige led the school from 1951 to 1954. John Byrd was principal from 1954 to 1961. Vera Murphy was acting principal from 1961 to 1963, and led as principal from 1963 until Langston's closing in 1969.

In September of 1939, Melvin Alston, a teacher in the Norfolk public schools, filed suit on behalf of himself and other African-American teachers of Norfolk for equalization of African-American and white teacher salaries (Workers of the Writers Program 1969). Despite the court determining that the teachers entered into their teaching contracts voluntarily and had no redress, African-American teachers continued to fight for equal pay. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall and Charles Hamilton Houston, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked with the Negro Virginia State Teachers Association on salary equalization.

During this time, African-American public school teachers were making on average one-third less annually than white teachers. The teaching contract of Avicia Hooper-Thorpe reveals that, in 1933, a beginning English teacher at Westmoreland School received an annual salary of \$540. Her salary was paid in ten monthly installments of \$54. The contract also contained among its conditions a clause stating that \$1.80 per day for daily absences would be deducted from her check and used to pay the substitute teacher. After 33 years in the school system (1933–66), Mrs. Hooper-Thorpe's annual salary had increased to only \$5,500. Her pension at retirement amounted to \$100 per month. This

payment pattern was typical among African-American public school teachers. Many African-American teachers received wages far lower than many unskilled white laborers.

During the 1940s, the men of Danville answered the call of the nation to participate in World War II. Despite their segregated status, African-American servicemen served with pride, honor, and distinction. Many of the male faculty members of Langston High School of draft age were inducted into the armed forces. In an interview in the spring of 2000, Coach James Slade, a former student at Westmoreland and a faculty member of Langston High School beginning in 1941, stated that he was drafted into the U.S. Signal Corps. However, Principal Gibson asked Slade to seek a deferment. The U.S. Army granted his deferment and he and Principal Gibson were the only men on the faculty that year. During and after World War II, it became fashionable to wear armed forces attire, especially “Ike Eisenhower jackets” and combat boots.

Langston High School served not only the African-American students of Danville, but also students from other parts of rural Pittsylvania County. In the mid-1940s, eighty students from the southern section of Pittsylvania County were Langstonians due to the absence of secondary education near their homes. Eventually Taylor High School was built in Pittsylvania County and this cadre of students attended Taylor.

The memories of teachers and students, as well as information found in Langston’s yearbooks, indicate Langston had three distinct curricula: academic, commercial (business), and practical (vocational). The offerings appeared to be a combination of the

educational philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois. Students considered college-bound enrolled in the academic precollege curriculum. Students who chose the commercial curriculum also had the option of enrolling in college. In the vocational track, students enrolled in programs such as home economics and industrial arts (masonry and carpentry). Additionally, several of the local barbershops had apprenticeship programs for Langston's students.

Between 1952 and 1969, the Langston High School yearbooks show that students were served through several clubs and organizations. In his study of black segregated high schools, Frederick Rodgers indicated that African-American students participated to a great extent in extracurricular activities, allowing for training in leadership roles and civic responsibility unavailable in desegregated schools. Langston was no exception to Rodgers's observation. Student clubs and organizations included the Student Council, the Modern Scholars Club, the Ushers Club, the Junior Red Cross Council, the dramatic club known as the "Langston Players," the *Langstonian* newspaper, the choir, the cheerleading team, the Library Club, the Student Patrols, the Photography Club, Future Homemakers of America, and the Y-Teens.

The author, Lawrence M. Clark, Sr., a graduate of Langston High in 1952, remembers the multipurpose auditorium-gymnasium as a center for social gatherings, Friday and Saturday dances, cabarets, talent shows, sporting events, and plays. A community event of special importance was the Junior-Senior Prom. Dr. Clark recalls the young women in their evening dresses accompanied by young men in their semiformal attire. One of the

biggest challenges leading up to the Junior-Senior Prom was securing a “suitable” date or escort. Over the years, tons of crepe paper was used to decorate the gymnasium.

Langston High School became known as the Mighty Lions due in part to its outstanding performance in sports. The coaches for Langston throughout the years were David P. “D. P.” Brown, James A. “Wimpy” Slade, Coach Turpin, Howard “Hank” Allen, Theodore Manly, and James Holmes. The basketball tradition was a carryover from Westmoreland School, while the football program had its beginnings under Coach Slade in 1945. Coach Slade recalls borrowing equipment for the only three games the team played in 1945, losing all three. The following year the team played three games during the season, losing the first two and winning the third against Henry County Training School (later named Albert Harris High School). By 1949 Langston had become a football powerhouse and ended the season undefeated with nine victories.

The basketball team also made the city take notice, winning the Western District Tournament in 1949 and 1950. By defeating Maggie Walker High School of Richmond, the Langston basketball team became the state champions in 1950.

Under the leadership of Allen, Manly, and Holmes, Langston’s athletic programs continued their winning ways during the 1950s and 1960s. A track team was added in 1950 and entered interscholastic competition. A baseball team was added in 1957 and won the state championship in 1964. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the

basketball and football teams won several Western District championships and were often runner-ups.

In the performing arts, Langston's choir and the Langston Players participated in drama and music festivals at the district and state level. In 1954, under the leadership of W. D. Grasty, a Langston band was established. The majorettes, known as the Lionettes, were added as an entertainment feature later in the year.

During the 1950s, many students returned to Langston from the armed forces to complete their schooling under the veteran's G.I. Bill. It was commendable for these students to return to school following the Korean conflict. This return sparked the formation of the Veterans' Club, whose aims were to keep veterans informed on school policies and their rights and duties in relation to the Veterans Administration. These veterans also served as role models for other students.

In 1958, the Langston High School moved to a modern new structure with a campus complex consisting of classrooms, administrative offices, vocational units, a cafeteria, an auditorium, and a separate physical and health education building. The new structure added significantly to Langston's educational programs and made the operation of school activities more efficient and specialized.

In 1959, one of Langston's outstanding 1937 alumnae and opera star, Camilla Williams, visited the school and received the key to the city of Danville. Ms. Williams was the first

African-American soprano ever to appear at the New York City Opera in *Madame Butterfly*. Subsequently, a Danville park was named in her honor.

The civil rights movement highlighted the 1960s. In an infamous reaction by the city police, white sanitation workers were deputized to squelch the orderly march on city hall by civil rights demonstrators. Although not historically documented as a major event in the civil rights movement, the march on city hall caught the eye of the nation. Danville's participation represented a typical example of how small Southern towns dealt with the changing customs and behaviors in human relations. Many of the students of Langston participated in the march on city hall and other activities in the movement during the 1960s.

In addition to participation in the civil rights movement, many Langstonians lost their lives during the Vietnam conflict. Symbolic to the memories of these Langstonians, the 1967 yearbook, *The Lion*, was dedicated to the memory of Clifton Odell Hairston, who fell mortally wounded on the field of battle in Tam Ky, Vietnam, on January 26, 1967.

In summary, John Mercer Langston High School was one of the important vertices in the triangle of home, school, and church that has historically framed the African-American community. Langston became a mecca for the community in its role as a center for educational, political, and social activity. Langston gave the African-American citizens of Danville the opportunity to attend plays, sporting events, and concerts, as well as to watch their sons and daughters grow into adulthood. Langstonians and their offspring

have gone on to become teachers, lawyers, ministers, scientists, entertainers, experts in trade, and domestic and international government officials. Foremost, former students of John Mercer Langston High School have become exemplary parents and homemakers, producing another generation of African Americans committed to the quality education of their children.

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