

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



Everybody's stories matter. It's not just a matter of nostalgia, it powers us into the present and the future. -- Barack Obama
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THE "LITTLE SCHOOL" ON ISLAND STREET

In towns all over the South, the schools in Black communities were a source of pride that inspired loyalty. -- Annette Gordon-Reed, *On Juneteenth*

A small wooden school house for negro children once stood at the corner of Island and Bloch Streets in a Black community then known as Jacksonville. This school, nearly forgotten today, taught some of Montevallo's most admired female teachers, among them Barbara Belisle, the first African American to teach at Montevallo HS, and Kathlyn Lathion, a retired special ed teacher, recently honored as a "Hometown Hero." The "little school," as it was affectionately known, set these little girls on a path where they would become outstanding lifelong educators.

Equally deserving of admiration is Onnie Dell Fluker, a "little school" student who would go on to teach and to write a history of early Black education in Shelby County. Her nephew, James Salter, remembers his Aunt Dell as "a very soft-spoken person and teacher who always found an opportunity to teach a lesson . . . whether it was at home, the school house, or the church house. It is why her hundreds of students loved her."



*Onnie Dell Fluker,
a lifelong teacher,
1918-2015*

This soft-spoken teacher exemplifies the fierce pride women of her generation took in their profession. After she retired in 1980, she wrote "Schools for Blacks in Shelby County," most likely because she feared this history might be forgotten. Remarkably, her account has been preserved in a folder of loose papers in the archives in Columbiana, two-and-a-half typewritten pages signed "Onnie Dell Fluker, a retired teacher." She saw to it that the story of Black schools did not go untold.

"Before and during the early twenties," she writes, "there were 'colored' schools dotted all over Shelby County. Most were held in churches. A few had school houses." Montevallo was one of the few. As early as 1924, our town was fortunate to have a two-room school house furnished with potbelly heaters and two salaried teachers paid by the county. (They made \$40-\$45 a month.) The facility was primitive, however. "None of the early schools had running water or indoor plumbing. There were no electric lights.

The building was in such bad shape that in 1932 the state board of education marked it for "immediate abandonment."

It would continue in use through 1939, however, when an elementary school in Almont opened. Until then children from all over Montevallo, even those "across the creek," walked to the school in Jacksonville. Kathlyn Lathion remembers vividly the horrible day in April 1939 when a tornado ripped through town, destroying Shiloh Missionary Baptist on Selma Road. There were so many powerlines down she had to be carried home on the back of her cousin Willie Bell. She still recalls the fear of being carried over the wooden bridge above Shoal Creek.



A typical two-room wooden school house like the one on Island St

After 1939, the little wooden school house fell into disuse. Long-time resident Patricia Walker, known to many today as "Miss Trish," remembers how as a curious child she played in the abandoned school house. She describes it as "fallen in," a "shanty," a tiny space with a stage at one end, benches (no desks), and a blackboard on the wall.

In the late 40s, Fluker's parents, O. C. and Mary Eliza Cunningham, were forced to sell their house on Main Street to make way for the FHA housing that opened in 1952. They bought the nearby school house property, added onto and fixed up the building, and turned it into the family dwelling. It seems fitting that for the rest of her life Fluker would make her home in the renovated school house.

The opening of the all-white Montevallo Elementary School across the street in 1964 created provocative ironies. She later reflected on her complicated feelings about integration:

Several years ago, we purchased the 'Little School House' and remodeled it into a dwelling house, where we now live. In front, on a hill, sits a new formerly all-white school. I was often teased about teaching there where I could walk to school. When integration came to the county, I was invited by the Principal and the Supt. to teach there. I was also approached by several business people who suggested that I should be the one to "Cross over" there.

But she would not be the one to "cross over": "I feel that I belong with my people. I understand them and their problems" ("Mini Revelations: A Short Autobiography").

In 2011, aged 93, Onnie Dell Fluker was presented the key to the City of Montevallo, and rightly so. This soft-spoken woman, a lifelong teacher, kept alive her pride in her people and her dedication to the history of their schooling.

Photos courtesy of James Salter.

Submitted by Kathy King & Anita Stewart Sims. Contact us at Moyaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of any errors of fact or interpretation.