

Last of Segregated Schools In City Abandoned in 1909

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By RUDY JOHNSON

"By action of its committee on instruction . . . the Board of Education has decided there shall be no more segregation of colored children by massing them in one school.

"The committee voted to recommend the abandonment of the Commerce Street Colored School and the placing of its pupils in the schools of the districts in which they respectively reside."

This was a newspaper account on July 29, 1909, of a Newark Board of Education meeting which indicated the end of segregated schools in Newark, 45 years before the Supreme Court's historic decision ordering an end to all "separate but equal" provisions nationally.

45-Year Career

In Newark, the board's action pointed up the culmination of the 45-year career of one of Newark's foremost educators and the city's first Negro principal, James M. Baxter.

The news report stated further:

"The passing of the Colored School is the end of a feature of the local public school system that has existed for more than half a century. The attendance of late has been very light and when Principal James M. Baxter, after upwards of 40 years continuous service, applied for and was granted retirement with the usual pension, the school authorities concluded that the institution had outlived its usefulness."

First of Race

Baxter, who was said to be the first colored teacher in New Jersey, was esteemed by fellow educators in and outside Newark. His retirement as principal of the Public Colored School presaged not only the close of an era in Newark public school history but the end of his life as well. Baxter died on Dec. 21, 1909, not quite six months after his retirement.

Ironically, Baxter was instrumental in the events leading to Newark public school integration and the subsequent closing of the colored school which he grew to love in his long career.

At his death, leading newspapers of the day chronicled his story. They included the New York Times, Boston Record, Boston Advertiser, Boston Transcript, Brooklyn Eagle, New York Sun, New York Herald, Jersey City Journal, and the Newark Evening News.

In one of the longest obituaries, the New York Times wrote that Baxter . . . had the distinction of being the only colored principal of a public school in Newark and was the Dean of the Newark staff of principals upon his retirement . . .

The Times stated further: "His death recalls a lively contest as to the right of a colored child to enter high school upon graduating from grammar school. The controversy ended with a decision in favor of the Negro race after an earnest plea from the colored principal. He insisted that colored grammar graduates have the same privilege of the grammar grades and the first Negro pupil to be admitted (Irene Pataquam Mulford) was graduated under Mr. Baxter."

In 1872, the year after Irene entered the high school, the Board of Education voted 2 to 1 that "colored children are hereby declared to be entitled to admission to all the public schools of the city on the same terms and conditions as other children."

James Miller Baxter, as a youth of 18, began his teaching career in Newark on Oct. 26, 1864, in a two-room school house located on Lafayette Street. He subsequently served under the late Superintendent of Schools George B. Sears in Commerce Street, State Street, and Market Street schools.

Born and educated in Phila-

delphia public schools, Baxter was asked to take the job by the Newark Board of Education soon after his graduation from the Quaker operated Institute for Colored Youth in Cheyney, Pa., now the site of Cheyney State Teachers College.

He became respected and admired in Newark by his colleagues and students alike. As an indication of his esteem, a

Morton Street School principal wrote on the 44th anniversary of Baxter's career:

"I think you richly deserve the title of 'honorable' and I heartily congratulate you upon (this) anniversary of your service as a school teacher, than which there is no more honorable calling . . ."

In 1902, 200 of his pupils gave a banquet in his honor, present-

ing him with a gold watch and chain fob.

Diplomatic Corps Nomination

A week before his death, Baxter was honored at a "complimentary banquet" given by the Public School Principals Association of Newark, to which he belonged and which he had served as secretary at one time.

The principal was a man of many activities, public and social. He was a Congressional Convention delegate and a member of the New Jersey Central Committee. He was also proposed as U.S. Minister to Haiti.

In 1881, the New York Globe, commenting on his prospective diplomatic appointment, wrote:

" . . . While we should be pleased to see Mr. Baxter successful, we believe (he) could do more good at home."

Scrapbook

Mr. Baxter did stay home. In local affairs, he was clerk of the vestry of St. Philip's Episcopal Church for 25 years. He was one of the first masters of Alpha Lodge 116, Free and Accepted Masons, and he had the honor of being the inspiration

of the James Baxter Social Club, with R. Watson Harris as first president.

Baxter was also a man of many interests. In a huge scrapbook of clippings gathered over many years, the educator saved such diverse items as a newspaper description of actress Sara Bernhardt when she appeared in Newark; a full news account with pictures of the Garfield assassination; an article entitled "What is Nickel?" explaining the origin and composition of the U.S. coin, and, of course, the programs of his Public Colored School's many successful concerts.

He saved many articles about some of the Negroes of the day, including William F. Johnson, the only American killed in the

Battle of Santiago of the Spanish American War. Johnson, who rose to the rank of sergeant, was a Newarker and a graduate of the Newark High School. His home was at 64 Newark St.

Also recorded in the Baxter scrapbook is the obituary of Alexander Huggs, a justice of the peace and first Negro appointed to the police and detective force, and Dr. George W. Rolertort, official physician of the Newark alms house and "one of the best known colored men in this state . . ."

The scrapbook is a testament of Baxter's active life in the Newark community. A concrete monument to his memory is James M. Baxter Terrace, one of Newark's first city housing projects, built around 1940.

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