

Reflections



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THE DORCHESTER ACADEMY MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Dorchester Academy is one of Georgia's earliest African American schools established after emancipation. Dorchester was named after Congregational Puritans from England who initially settled in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and migrated to South Carolina in the 18th century. In 1752, they received 32,000 acres of land from the trustees of Georgia. Naming their settlement Dorchester, 280 white settlers and their 536 slaves relocated to Midway, a town in Liberty County that is located approximately halfway between the Altamaha and Savannah rivers. When the Civil War ended, many white residents left the area, but freedmen remained.

Surviving the devastation of war, these freedmen yearned for an education, and opened a one-room school in Midway. By 1868, William A. Golding, one of the first African Americans to serve in the Georgia legislature, sought the assistance of the American Missionary Association (AMA) to provide teachers for the school he envisioned. As the number of students increased, a second school building was constructed in 1879, and it was renamed Dorchester Academy. By 1897, Dorchester Academy offered elementary classes and a Normal (teaching) department. The school had a library, principal's home, boys' and girls' dormitories, laundry, kitchen and an industrial building on the 30-acre campus.

Tuition at Dorchester Academy was kept low due to student labor. Because the campus was located in a farming community, students that could not afford tuition worked on the campus farm. A fire destroyed the teachers' home, girls' dormitory, dining room, kitchen, and laundry room in 1901, but the students, with aid from the AMA, rebuilt these buildings and added a new boys' dormitory.

In 1925, Dorchester Academy hired an African American female principal, Elizabeth B. Moore. During her tenure, the Farmers Cooperative Marketing Association was founded and the curriculum was expanded to include athletics, music and drama. Moore died in 1932, and the boys' dormitory burned that same year. In 1934, architect George Awsumb designed a new boys' dormitory. This brick building included steam heat, a living room and library on the ground floor, and student rooms on the upper level. It was dedicated in 1935, and named in honor of Elizabeth B. Moore.

The Dorchester Cooperative Center (DCC) opened in 1937 with a cooperative store. DCC and the AMA started the Dorchester Federal Credit Union in 1939 to assist community members in business ventures and home purchases, as they were denied credit elsewhere. In 1940, Liberty County constructed public schools for African Americans, and Dorchester Academy closed.



The Dorchester Academy Museum of African American History was the former residence of Claudius Turner, director of the Dorchester Cooperative Center in the 1940s. Inside the museum, Dorchester Academy's evolution from a freedmen's school to a civil rights site is explored in the exhibits. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

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The boys' dormitory was renamed Elizabeth B. Moore Hall in honor of the first African American female president. This Georgian Revival style brick building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on June 23, 1986. When the school closed in 1940, it became the Dorchester Cooperative Center. In the 1960s, the building provided meeting space and lodging for participants of the Citizenship Education Program. Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

DCC continued to provide community services, and Claudius Turner was hired as the director in 1943. He began voter registration drives and organized the Liberty County Citizens Council (LCCC) to educate potential voters. In 1946, due to the efforts of LCCC, Liberty County African Americans voted for the first time in 40 years. By 1953, LCCC started a chapter of the NAACP. These political activities would set the stage for a future role for DCC in the civil rights movement.

One of the most critical challenges that faced African Americans who wanted to vote was illiteracy. Septima Clark, an educator from South Carolina, directed citizenship educational seminars at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. She provided one week of intensive training in adult literacy and voter registration to many emerging leaders, including Rosa Parks. She often invited other civil rights leaders to speak at her seminars, and was recruited for subsequent work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).



Dorothy Cotton leads a freedom song at the museum dedication.

Photo by Jeanne Cyriaque

In 1961, the Marshall Field Foundation provided leadership training funding to the AMA Division of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. Reverend Andrew Young, a Congregationalist minister,

was chosen to administer the program. He looked for sites where Septima Clark could teach the citizenship classes. Because of the continued partnership with DCC and the AMA, Dorchester Academy was chosen as the site. Dorothy Cotton, then SCLC director of education, recruited potential students for Clark's classes at Dorchester. By February 1964, this team trained more than 1,000 persons in the Citizenship Education Program. These students shared their knowledge with neighbors in 11 southern states. When they returned home, their efforts resulted in 27,993 new African American registered voters. The Citizenship Education Program was a critical element in the successful strategy that led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



Georgia Representative Tyrone Brooks and Dorothy Cotton view the legacy of Dorchester Academy at the museum dedication.

While the DCC was a site for citizenship schools, it also became a safe haven for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Wyatt T. Walker, Ralph Abernathy and Dorothy Cotton often retreated to Dorchester to hold strategy sessions. "Change in the South could not have happened without Dorchester," Walker said in a recent interview with William Austin, president of the Dorchester Improvement Association (formerly DCC). Walker, who was Dr. King's chief of staff, credits Dorchester as a significant place, as "... it provided meeting and dormitory space for the entire staff where we stayed overnight, we could relax and play softball, and we were not under the watchful eye of the major media networks. This was necessary for what we were trying to accomplish."

The Dorchester Academy Museum of African American History exhibits educate the public about the significance of this mission school in Georgia history. From its early days as Dorchester Academy to its role as a cooperative center, Dorchester emerged as a significant site that helped future civil rights leaders. Tyrone Brooks, Georgia state representative and president of the Georgia Association of Black Elected Officials (GABEO) was the keynote speaker at the dedication of the museum. "Dorchester is responsible for the modern civil rights movement as much as any other institution." The Dorchester Improvement Association is the steward for both the museum and Elizabeth B. Moore Hall. For more information about Dorchester Academy, visit the website at www.dorchesteracademy.com.