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Christiansburg Institute:

Segregation, integration and the gift of education

BY BETTY JEAN WOLFE

In the opening Note of his book, *The Souls of Black Folks,* W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the color-line.” There are no truer words. For millennials or people born after year 2000, it is hard to comprehend what life was like during our nation’s nearly 100-year era of racial segregation (starting about 1877 extending through the early 1970s). The psychological, economic and social challenges posed by Jim Crow – the Byzantine norms, policies and laws used to separate the races – affected virtually every aspect of life – employment, education, housing, interpersonal relationships, where you could sit in a train station or a restaurant or on a bus; which pool or amusement park you could visit and when – even which section of a city’s streets one could meander. The apartheid was so elaborate with dual water fountains and entrances to public spaces designated Colored or White.

Within this context Christiansburg Institute (CI, aka CII, Christiansburg Industrial Institute) operated at its apex, providing academic, industrial and cultural training to people of color living in the New River Valley and beyond. The school’s origin dates to 1866, when efforts by the federal government, the military and northern Christian missionary organizations converged to aid formerly enslaved people, equip them for self-sufficiency and secure for the nation the promise of the 13th and 14th Amendments.

Christiansburg Institute - The Early Years

Archive records for the field office for the State of Virginia’s Freedmen’s Bureau show the Bureau was established in the War Department by an act of Congress in March 1865 with the objective “to supervise and manage all matters relating to refugees and freedmen and lands abandoned or seized during the Civil War.” Between July 1865 to April 1867, the

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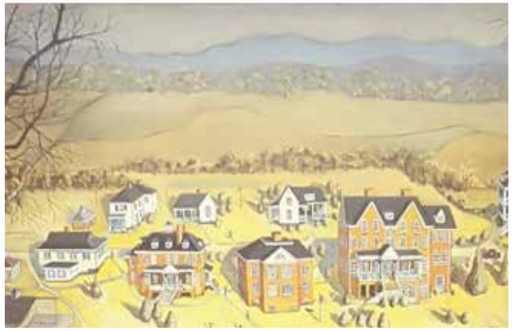

Virginia Bureau was divided into 10 districts with an agent in charge of each. A Quaker and Union soldier from Philadelphia named Capt. Charles S. Schaeffer was the agent for Christiansburg. According to the Montgomery Museum, Schaeffer "started teaching 12 former slaves in a rented house" in 1866. By 1869, the Hill School (as it was then called), had grown to provide instruction for more than 200 students. In 1870, the Friend's Freedmen's Association, a Quaker mission's organization, began financially supporting Schaeffer's work. By 1873, with their help, Schaeffer founded CII. By the 1880s, Schaeffer turned over control of the school to a completely African American staff. Proving true what George Carter Woodson wrote in his seminal book, The Mis-Education of the Negro: "The education of any people should begin with the people themselves."

CI's Evolution

Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute and a native Virginian, served as CI's supervisor from 1896-1915. Edgar A. Long, a friend of Washington's and alum of Tuskegee Institute, began work at the school in 1897, first as a teacher, then as its principal, serving as school leader from 1906-1924. It was during this period CI solidified its reputation for academic excellence, a strict code of conduct for students and staff and for quality industrial training for adolescents and adults. By the 1930s, CI met the educational needs of African American students from 15 Virginia counties, by operating a 165-acre campus of 14 buildings (one of which was a hospital for colored people). In 1947, the Friends' Freedmen's Association deeded the property to Montgomery County. The school system built Christiansburg High School and slowly began to integrate selectively beginning in the late 1950s. CI closed in 1966, marking the end of mandated racial segregation in most New River Valley public schools.

Lessons Learned Alumni Remember

Gladys Sokolow graduated from CI in 1953. Then a resident of Pulaski, she remembered on winter days leaving home and returning in the dark because the bus ride to and from school was long – a 70-mile round trip. "I wanted to go to school and get an education. That's what we had to do to get it," Sokolow said matter-of-factly as she recalled students attending the school from as far away as New York City, Philadelphia, Texas and Tennessee. "They stayed in the dormitories or lived with other black families in the New River Valley, demonstrating how highly they valued their education."

Mickey Hickman grew up in Pulaski and attended CI for eighth and ninth grade. "The school was my

parents' alma matter. My mother was homecoming queen. My dad, a star football player," he relayed by phone, his pride so evident you could hear him smiling. "CI was 'the place' blacks went to get their education and go out into the world," Hickman said. "It was like a shining city on a hill."

Debbie Sherman-Lee, a Christiansburg resident and retired high school teacher, wistfully recalled how, as a girl during recess at Friends Elementary School, she loved looking down at CI's campus and watching the high school students scurry about during changeover of classes. "My older sisters graduated from CI. I only attended 8th grade there. It was 1966. Integration had started. I went to Christiansburg High School," Sherman-Lee said.

When asked what that was like, she responded: "It was OK. Some of my friends felt alienated. Neighborhoods then were segregated. Christiansburg's black community extended geographically from Franklin Street (downtown) to High Street," Sherman-Lee shared. "There was also a black community in Cambria. My friends and I would walk to school together, then be immersed in all-white classes for the whole day. Some of my friends were called [racially insensitive] names. The experience instilled a sense of isolation and animosity in them. They didn't like school anymore."

After pausing a moment, Sherman-Lee concluded, "CI was a regional academic institution. Its closing broke up our community. In this way, racial integration was bittersweet. Much was gained, but our sense of belonging was lost."

Erma Jones, a graduate of CI, shared a different perspective about integration. "Before 1960, Montgomery County handpicked which students – and families – would integrate the schools. Then, in January 1960, approximately 10 students left CI to go to the white school (Christiansburg High School). I saw their willingness to go as a sacrifice," Erma conveyed during our phone interview. "Those students wanted racial integration so much, they were willing to leave what was familiar and comfortable to get it."

Mickey Hickman said his experience of integration was life-changing because it coincided with his coming of age. "I attended Pulaski High School for 10th through 12th grades, starting in 1964. Though I had always been a successful student and athlete, I was absolutely terrified to go," Hickman admitted. "You must remember the turmoil of the times; I thought having all white teachers would be like having to pass George Wallace blocking the schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama. Instead, I discovered that Pulaski's white students and teachers were relaxed about us mixing. Integration had started before I arrived. As a result, we were cordial towards one another."

The esprit de corps, however, only went so far.

"Though I was included in white circles for my achievements in school – I was excluded outside of school," Hickman said. During these tumultuous years, two white teachers had a big impact on his life. "Their names were Suzanne David, my U.S. history teacher and Harold Lambert, my basketball coach."

David encouraged Hickman to attend college, which he did. In 1966, during his senior year, Lambert put four black players on the school's men's basketball team, three of whom started. "That was huge, especially when we'd play in places like Narrows, VA," Hickman said. He recounted how he was racially taunted at the free throw line. "People would shout: 'Three, six, nine, who's that monkey on the line' over and over again. Hickman found the experience unnerving, yet in the same game, "You'd have white players from my team and the opposing team come over and apologize to me for the fans."

Recollection of these incidents provoked Hickman to make a surprising confession. "When I was in high school, I was ashamed of my color. I'm sad to say that, but that's how I felt." He resented the unwanted attention being black seemed to attract.

"I was naïve. I didn't understand. By the time I entered college in 1968, so much had changed. When Martin Luther King Jr. got assassinated, I was so angry I didn't know what to do. A bit later, James Brown came out with, 'Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud.' My friends and I sang the refrain everywhere we went," he chuckled. "I sported a big afro." In college, being black was a source of pride for Hickman. "I felt free," he said. Black empowerment was an antidote to Jim Crow's strictures and repression.

Joyful regarding his newfound pride, Hickman used the duality of his CI and Pulaski High training to propel him through earning his Associates' degree at Wytheville Community College, his Bachelor's degree from Virginia Tech, his Master's degree at Radford University, and eventually a Doctorate's degree from Virginia Tech. Proving what George Carter Woodson said philosophers have long conceded: "That every man has two educations – that which is given to him, and the other that which he gives himself."

Kathryn King, chairperson of CI's Alumni Association (though she was born a decade after CI closed) provided a fitting coda: "A lot of people see CI has just African American history. But because my maternal grandmother, Kathryn McDaniel Smith and my great aunt, her sister, Cora McDaniel Pack, attended CI, to me the school is my family's history. It's important because it's part of me," King said.

Christiansburg Institute is important because it's part of America's story.