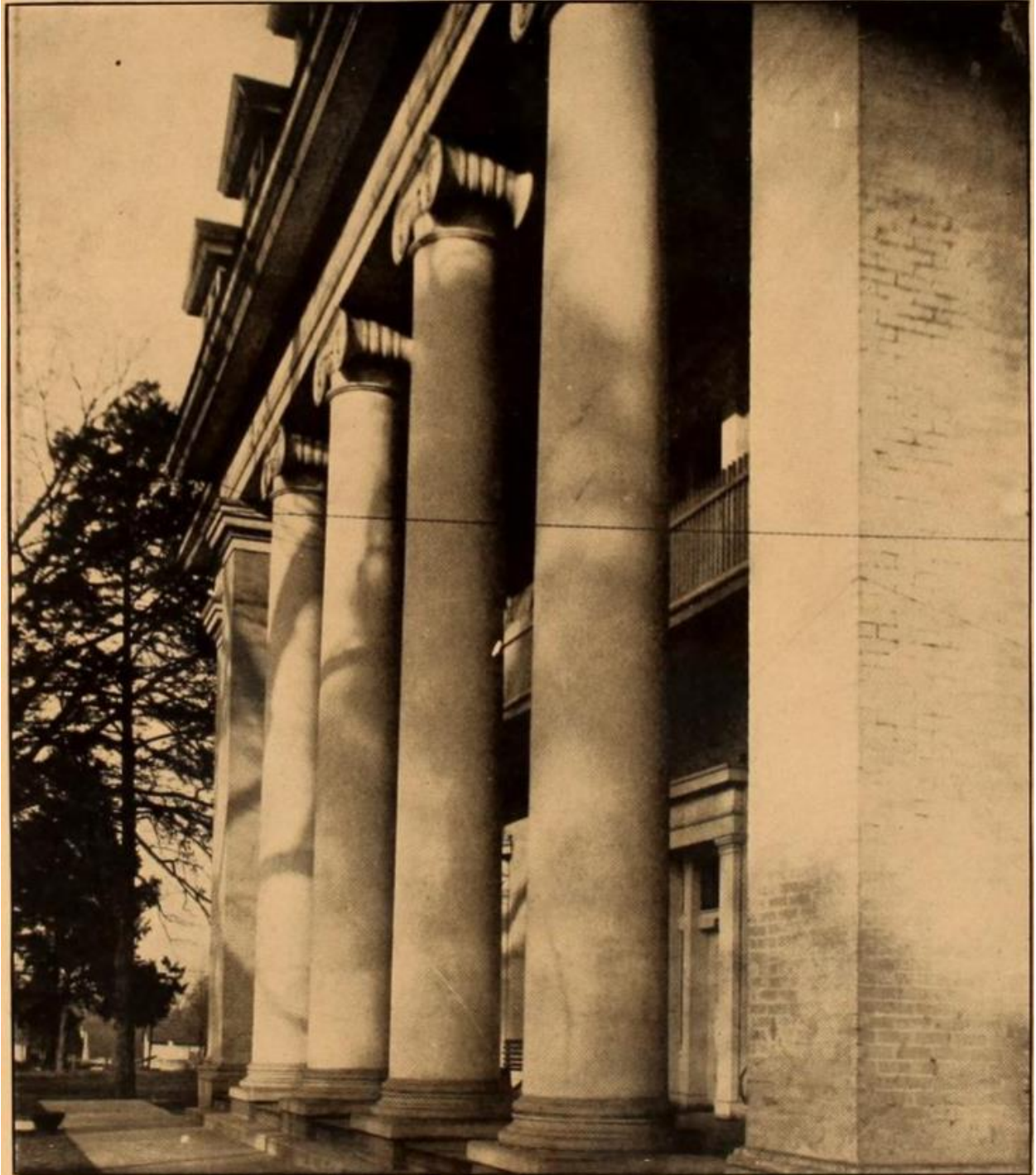


## **50 Years Integrated: An Incomplete Black History of Athens State**

Written By Dakota Cotton, Editing and Research Assistance by Laken Smith



*Founders Hall, 1913 Yearbook.*

As Athens State University approaches its 200<sup>th</sup> Birthday in 2022 we wish to honor all members of the community who have supported this school through its long history. Through turbulent and unsure times, Athens State University has always persevered thanks to the dedication, ingenuity, and love of its students, faculty, staff, and many supporters. Athens State has been a pillar of the community, or perhaps more appropriately phrased: a column – as the stately façade of Founders Hall has come to symbolize and remind us of the historic legacy of this school.

To be reminded of this legacy is to honor the original founders of this town and those who donated the land that Founders Hall has stood on for nearly 175 years. Too often missing from this narrative, however, is acknowledgment of the enslaved African-American people whose labor was sold and bodies used to construct Founders Hall and its iconic columns. These people, whose very humanity, dignity, families, and lives were stripped away from them in the brutality and injustice that was the trans-Atlantic slave trade, built the foundations not just of Founders Hall - but of the entire economic system of the United States. The master mason, who hand laid the bricks of Founders Hall's columns, had such a talent and skill that the local Col. Nelson is said to have sold his entire grand home in Athens in exchange for this unnamed enslaved man (Axford, pg. 26, Dunnivant Historic Limestone, pg. 106). While his identity as a human being was taken and reduced to that of property, his contribution to this school and those like him has withstood the passage of time whether publicly acknowledged or not.

On the eve of the Civil War, as the slave trade burgeoned to provide the basis for the region's economic infrastructure, Limestone County's population of enslaved black people came to equal and even surpass that of the white population (Walker, pg. 62, Dunnivant Antique Athens, pg. 25). The 110<sup>th</sup> and 111<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantries fought for the United States and their freedom at Fort Henderson in Athens and at Sulphur Trestle near Elkmont (Davis, Dunnivant, pgs. 82-93). The end of the Civil War was not without great cost and swift retaliation against emancipated black Americans who remained in the region that had become their home. A great exodus of black Americans from the Southern states followed to created distance between themselves and the acute trauma of enslavement, the insurgency of racist violence in response to Reconstruction, and Jim Crow laws that worked to uphold the system of oppression they had just fought to dismantle (EJI).

Athens State survived through the Civil War, and after that conflict began the story of another school in town that was built to educate and uplift free black Americans: Trinity School. Founded in 1865 by the American Missionary



*Mahala Childs, owned by Athens State President Madame Childs.*

Association, Trinity school eventually found a permanent home on the very site of Fort Henderson - the earthen structure that African-American soldiers had built to defend their position in the Civil War. For over 100 years Trinity school “through the dedication of its principals and teachers, achieved accreditation, and a tradition of educational excellence during its existence (Trinity School Historic Marker).”

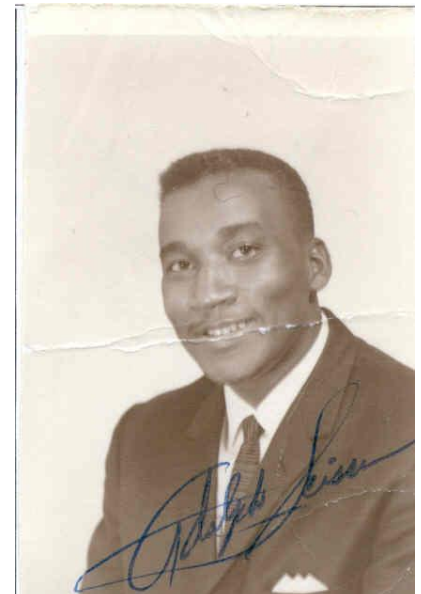
The U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional in 1955, however there was significant resistance and animosity to this ruling in some states. Athens College, as it was then called, was across town from Trinity School. In 1963, the college received a request from the Federal government at Redstone Arsenal to stop discriminatory practices and ultimately make federal scholarships available for students to attend Athens College. The president of Athens College refused to do so (Alabama Courier). The educational facilities in Athens, Alabama did not comply with desegregation until 1969-1970. Rather than close white schools, or integrate white students into black schools, Trinity and “virtually...the entire network of schools that had nurtured Limestone County’s African-American children” were closed by 1970 (Fulton pg. 250).



Annie Ruth Malone Jamar

Athens College was officially integrated for the first time by students of the freshman class of 1969. These first African-American students included Neal Ayers, Molly Caudle, Patricia Goddlow, Geraldine Kirby, Mimie Love, Annie Ruth Malone, Sandra Sloss, and Minnie Thatch. Annie Ruth Malone, later Annie Ruth Jamar, who had graduated with honors from Trinity School in 1968, became the first black woman to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in Biology from Athens State. Annie Ruth Jamar went on to receive her Master’s degree from Alabama A&M University and taught in Athens for over 20 years.

Mr. Adolph Scissum, having already received a Bachelor’s degree from Alabama A&M University, became the first black man to graduate from Athens College in 1969, earning a Master’s Degree in Teaching & Administration. Mr. Scissum had been the principle at Lakeview School, the “only black educational institution” in Marshall County, where he also coached young students who would become the generation to persevere through integration. One of these students, Butch Looney, a Marshall County Sports Hall of Famer, would become the first black man to receive an athletic scholarship at Athens College. Looney, along with Doug Mayberry and Robert Bates became the first black athletes at Athens College- becoming MVP’s on the first integrated basketball team while studying for their degrees in education.



Mr. Scissum



*Cuthbert Mutsiwegota, Who's Who in American Universities and Colleges, 1974 Yearbook.*

While it is likely there were earlier participants in sports on campus, Pat Gray is the first black woman seen in the yearbooks to be a member of the Basketball team and intramural volleyball. Valerie Nelson Hendrix graduated with honors in 1976 and was the first black woman on the cheerleading squad, on "The Columns" Yearbook staff, and to be crowned Homecoming Queen in 1974. Cuthbert Mutsiwegota, from what is now Zimbabwe, graduated with honors in 1974. Mr. Mutsiwegota played on the soccer team and was the first to integrate many student academic groups on campus including: Student Government, The Gyre, the first African man listed in the "Who's Who in American Colleges & Universities," Sigma Tau Delta, Alpha Mu Gamma, The Rotoract Club, and the Athenian student newspaper. Mr. Mutsiwegota went on to become a professor at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe.

Randy Wallace graduated in 1976 and also served in Student Government, on the Athenian staff, Judicial Court, and was a member of the Delta Tau Delta and the Veterans Club. Ronald Austin, also of the graduating class of 1976, graduated with honors and helped to integrate Alpha Mu Gamma, The Gyre staff, the Judicial Court, and Student Government. Following in 1977, Nate Mitchell became SGA vice president in 1977 and Bobby Brooks became the first black man to be president of Athens College Student Government in 1981. Around 1976 Patricia Sheffield was a member of the Athens College Singers and came in first place at the Athens College talent show. Ms. Sheffield and Lorenda Ellison performed in the student drama production of "You Can't Take it With You" in 1976. These students are just a few highlighted individuals who broke ground at Athens State, however, there were many more before and after this time who are yet unrecognized.



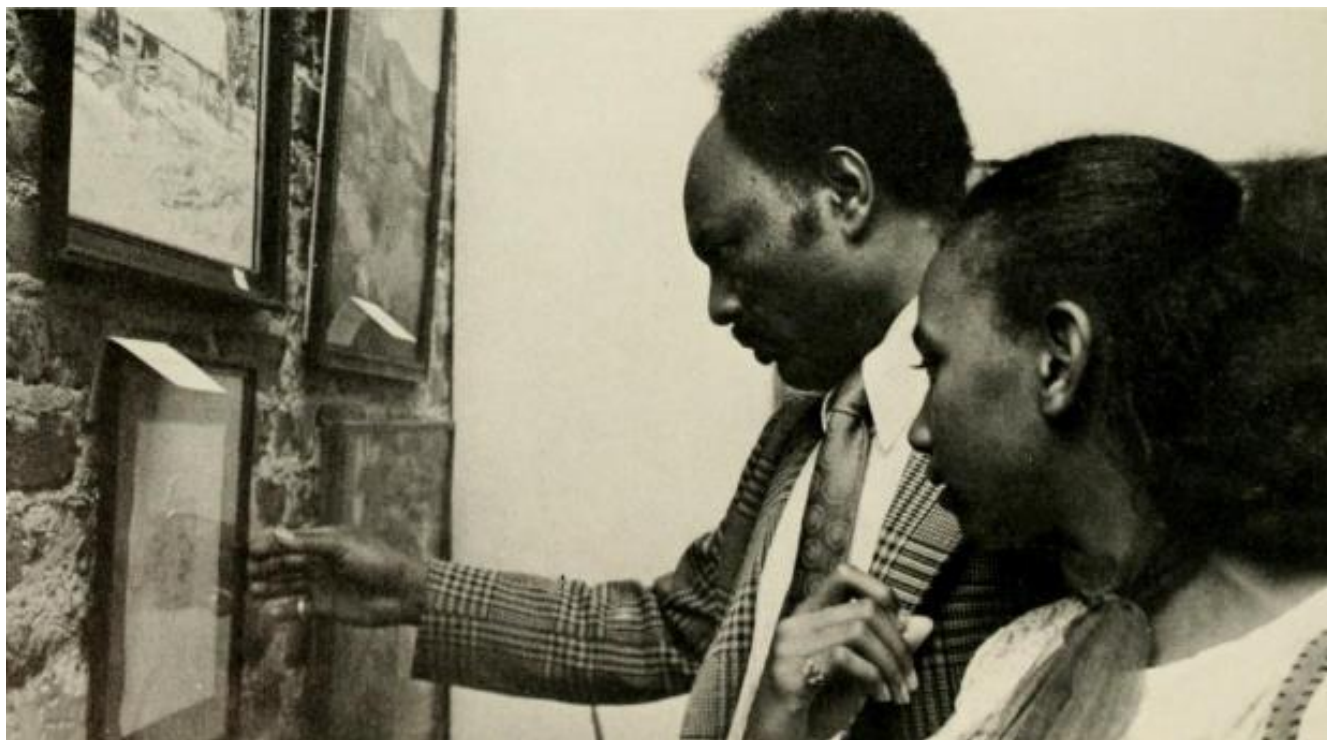
*Rehearsal for "Black America Sings" Event in 1975 Yearbook. Shown: Valerie Nelson (Hendrix), Nelson Simmons, Lorenda Ellison, and Dale Braxton.*

While the grounds, facilities, and maintenance staff have included people of color for over 100 years, it was only in the last several decades that they were allowed into supervisory, white-collar professional, faculty, or administrative roles. Ms. Doris Darby was a staff member in the library in 1976, and Mr. Arnold Greene served as an admissions counselor at that time for several years. Mr. Harden Wesley was a library staff member in 1977, and Ms. Margaret Oliver was a staff member in Student Support Services, Veterans Affairs, and served as an advisor for many years beginning in 1978. Ms. Oliver was also integral to Athens State's compliance with integration orders and served as the first sponsor of the African-American History Association on campus. The African-American History Association began in the mid 1980's and Mr. David Pipkins served as the first president.



*Doris Darby, 1976 Yearbook.*

Mrs. Dora Ashford, who had been a counselor at Athens' Trinity School before it was closed, became the first African-American woman to serve as a faculty member at Athens State. Mrs. Ashford taught for the education department and was followed by Ms. Teresa Terrell who began as a sociology professor in 1979 and served at Athens State for over 20 years. Mr. Othel Washington became the first black man to take on administrative roles at Athens College, serving as a counselor in the late 1970's and as Dean of Student Affairs in the early 1990's. Mr. Washington was an instructor for vocational education in 1980, and may have been the first black man to take on a teaching role.



*Othel Washington with a student at an art show, 1976 Yearbook.*

Dr. Von Burton became the first black man to serve as assistant professor in business administration in 1988. Dr. LaDoris Baugh was the first person of color to be promoted to full professor, she is a member of the College of Business. Dr. Rosemary Hodges was the first person of color to achieve that status in the College of Education, followed by Dr. Wanda Humphrey. Dr. Malcolm Cort is the first black full professor in the College of Arts & Sciences. Dr. Patricia Sims served as the dean of the College of Education from 2014 to 2018, the highest level of administration that a person of color has served in since Dr. Denver Betts retired as the Vice President of Academic Affairs in 2011.

Recalling *all* of our history, including that of injustice, honors those who have overcome oppression and enlightens those who are striving to learn and move forward in a more equitable society. As Dr. Denver Betts is quoted during a black history event in 2009: “I’m looking forward to a time when American History is truthfully told to all its citizens (Athens News Courier).” While many of the African-Americans who built this school remain nameless, they are honored by the persistence of their progeny in the often silent struggle for equity, justice, and representation.

This story is an incomplete one, and we encourage anyone and everyone to help lend voices to those who have not been given the opportunity to share their stories in the past. The Athens State Archive and members of the Archives Equity Initiative are committed to increasing representation of marginalized groups in the historic record and to collaborative outreach efforts with the campus and extended community.

- For more information on the **Multicultural Student Association** or to get involved please contact Dr. Quanda Stevenson: Quanda.Stevenson@Athens.edu 256-233-6515
- For more information on the **Athens State Archives** or to get involved, please contact Dakota Cotton: Dakota.Cotton@Athens.edu (256) 216- 6663.
- The Trinity School Archival materials are held at the **Limestone County Archives**: archives@limestonecounty-al.gov (256) 233-6404
- The **Athens-Limestone County Community Association** are working towards rebuilding the Fort-Henderson / Trinity School site, for more information please contact Mr. Richard Martin: richardwilkesmartin@gmail.com (256) 278-1262 or Carolyn Williams (256) 777-9727.

## References:

Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. "History – Brown v. Board of Education." Retrieved 11/10/18 from: <http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/history-brown-v-board-education-re-enactment>

Alabama Courier. "College Forced on Racial Policy." September 12, 1963.

Athens News Courier. "Betts gives speech at Black History event." February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Axford, Faye and Edwards, Chris. "The Lure and Lore of Limestone County." Portals Press, 1978.

Cole, Jean. "Group plans to return shell of city's black high school to its former glory." The News Courier. October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

Commencement Collection. Athens State Archives, 300 N. Beaty St. Athens, AL. 2018.

Davis, Rebekah. "The Battle of Sulpher Creek Trestle." Limestone County Archives [Powerpoint], 2018.

Dodd, Donald B. and Dodd, Wynelle S. "Historical Statistics of the South." The University of Alabama Press, 1973.

Dunnavant Jr., Robert. "Antique Athens & Limestone County, Alabama: A Photographic Journey 1809 -1948." Pea Ridge Press, 1994.

Dunnavant Jr., Robert. "Historic Limestone County, Alabama." Pea Ridge Press, 1995.

Equal Justice Institute [EJI]. "Lynching in America." 2018.

Equal Justice Institute [EJI]. "Segregation in America." 2018.

Fulton, Charlotte. "Holding the Fort: A History of Trinity School in Athens, AL." Athens Limestone Community Association, 2014.

Limestone County Heritage Book Committee. "The Heritage of Limestone County, Alabama." Heritage Publishing Consultants, 1998.

Limestone County Historical Society & Athens- Limestone Tourism Council. Trinity School Historic Marker. 2002.

Walker Jr., Robert Henry. "History of Limestone County Alabama." Limestone County Commission, 1973.

Yearbook Collection. Athens State Archives, 300 N. Beaty St, Athens AL. 2018.