

The First Parker-Gray School



Enforced racial segregation in Alexandria meant separate, poorly funded schools for the City's African American students. Here, in the African American neighborhood then known as Uptown, a new school was built in 1920 at 901 Wythe Street for grades one through eight. It was named after the principals of two late 19th century African American schools in Alexandria—John F. Parker of the Snowden School for Boys and Sarah A. Gray of the Hallowell School for Girls—who persevered in educating the City's African American students, despite the high institutional and legal barriers designed to prevent it. The new school would bring honor to its namesakes, create an identity for the neighborhood, and encourage educational excellence for its students.



Parker-Gray School, ca. 1920s
Alexandria Black History Museum, Office of Historic Alexandria



Principal William H. Pitts, ca. 1940s
Alexandria Black History Museum, Office of Historic Alexandria



Early photograph of the Parker-Gray School staff, 1920. Front row, left-to-right: Rev. A. W. Adkins; Henry T. White, principal; Laura Dorsey; Rozier D. Lyles; and James E. Howard. Back row, left-to-right: Mayme Anderson, Margaret Young, Florence Murray, Harriet E. Thornton, Susie Madden, and Sarah D. Gray.

Alexandria Black History Museum, Office of Historic Alexandria

At its opening, the Parker-Gray School employed nine teachers and was led by Principal Henry T. White. The City funded minimal necessities for the school, so members of the community provided chairs, basic supplies, and equipment. The faculty and the community would continue to work as partners to educate Parker-Gray's students and overcome the constraints of segregation and its effort to dismiss them as second-class citizens.

Despite a 1920s Virginia law requiring public education through high school, Alexandria did not provide schools for African American students beyond the eighth grade. Those students who wished to continue their education traveled over 30 miles to Manassas, Virginia, or across the Potomac River to the District of Columbia to attend a segregated high school. This changed in the 1930s when high school classes were added at Parker-Gray School; the first high school class graduated in 1936. In 1950, a new Parker-Gray High School was built nearby on Madison Street. The school at this location on Wythe Street was retained as an elementary school. It was named Charles Houston after the NAACP lawyer and noted civil rights leader. In the 1960s, following the desegregation of the City's schools, Parker-Gray High School became a middle school. It was eventually demolished, and the site redeveloped. The original Parker-Gray School building burned in the 1970s and was replaced with the Charles Houston Recreation Center, which was itself replaced in 2009 by a new recreation center building. While the buildings are gone, Parker-Gray lives on as the name of the community it once served and the history of academic achievement it fostered.

Notable Alumni

Parker-Gray alumni who have paved the way for future generations to persevere with dignity, pride, and confidence include:

Earl F. Lloyd was the first African American basketball player to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Lloyd was drafted in 1950 and played his first game later that year.

Leo Brooks served in the U.S. Army, reaching the rank of Major General, and has two sons who were also U.S. Army generals.

LaJeune Hundley was crowned Miss Parker-Gray in 1958 and zoomed into the fashion world in 1960. A popular Ophelia DeVore model, Ms. Hundley was also selected "Miss Cannes Film Festival" in 1960. She led the way for the inclusion of Black models in the American fashion world. Ironically, her mother, Blois Hundley, a Black school cafeteria worker, was fired from Alexandria's segregated Lyles Crouch Elementary School in 1958 by the then-Superintendent T. C. Williams for asking to have her children attend white schools.

Helen Day was a legendary educator and a persuasive community activist who taught grade school in the Alexandria Public Schools for 46 years. A U.S. Post Office within the Parker-Gray Historic District is named in her honor.

Dr. Rutherford H. Adkins was an educator, Tuskegee Airman, and later the president of Fisk University. Dr. Adkins flew over 14 missions with the elite squadron of Black pilots during World War II. He was a physics professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, and later served as president of Knoxville College from 1976 until his retirement in 1981. In 1997, he returned to public life as the 11th president of Fisk University and served in that position until shortly before his death in 1998.

Dr. Arthur C. Dawkins, a talented musician and extraordinary music educator, graduated from Parker-Gray High School in 1952. Following desegregation, he became a vice principal at T. C. Williams High School. At Howard University, he chaired the jazz studies department, taught music business, established the school's jazz studies graduate program, and founded the Howard University Jazz Repertory Orchestra during his 30-year tenure with the school.

Bonnie Bracey-Sutton is an American teacher and technology consultant now based in Washington, D. C. One of the first teachers to promote the role of the Internet in the classroom, Bracey-Sutton was the only teacher selected by the Clinton Administration to serve on the National Information Infrastructure Advisory Council, whose work in the mid-1990s led to the creation of the E-rate program.

Nellie Brooks Quander was a role model and advocate. She worked in Fairfax County and in the City of Alexandria as a principal and school administrator. She was called "the enabler" because of her leadership skills and was a force in education.



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