Within Its Walls—A Foundation for Education and Opportunity

Clara Shorts Adams and Robert Adams conveyed a quarter-acre to the Falls Church School District of Fairfax County in 1898 for the purpose of educating African American children. The one-room “Colored School Building at Seminary” was the first public schoolhouse for African Americans living in “The Fort” and “Seminary” community. This school closed in 1925, but School House Lane can still be discerned in the park’s landscape. The new Seminary School for African Americans opened in 1927 on King Street where T.C. Williams High School stands today.

In 1926, the Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia bought the property. The schoolhouse became an African American Episcopal chapel, St. Cyprian’s. Seminarians came from the Virginia Theological Seminary across Bradlock Road for services. The Claibornes renovated the structure for residential use in the 1940s. The Sgt. Thomas Lee Young family lived here from 1947 until the City of Alexandria’s purchase and demolition of the building in the 1960s. The religious elements of the house were retained during Sgt. Young’s ownership. He recalled that his bedroom was located in the chapel’s pulpit, and the kitchen was in the “Amen Corner.”

Few African Americans were educated in Virginia before the Civil War. While some individuals gained literacy, the almost 550,000 African American Virginians—about 90 percent of whom were enslaved—did not have access to education. Even after the Civil War, when public education was established in Virginia, black schools were segregated with unequal funding, facilities, and supplies. African Americans continually took measures to secure education for their children by donating land, building schools, and raising funds. The school that once stood here, and its successor, The Seminary School, were such community initiatives.

“Then residents of “The Fort” were mostly educated people, and they all went to school, though most of them went to school together in the little one-room schoolhouse, but after that, they went to school or worked in the government in Washington, because my grandfather’s sister worked at the Printing Office. And her friends were all schoolteachers. It was that kind of group, you know.”

“By conveying this land to the county for African American education, Robert and Clara Adams assisted in bringing a public school to their community. Married in 1886, they had grown up here in the post-Civil War era as neighbors on land purchased by Clara’s father. A founder of the Oakland Baptist Church, Clara continued as a pillar of the community beyond Robert’s death in 1930. Clara Adams was buried in 1952 next to her husband just east of the school she helped establish. Her headstone stands today on land once owned by her parents, Burr and Harriett Stuart McNight Shorts.”

“Among the first families to purchase land in the area after being emancipated were the Douglass Woods family, descendants of Julius and Rebecca Rust. Rebecca Rust was one of the first African American women in the area to have a high school education. She and her children were active in the African American community. Rebecca Rust and her family were among the first to purchase land in the area. In 1902, Rebecca Rust and her family purchased a parcel of land in the vicinity of the present-day Seminary School. This land was used for agricultural purposes and eventually became the site of the Seminary School.”

“Four young people were among the first students to attend the Fort Ward Seminary School: Lewis Douglas, Archie Casey, Elizabeth Henry, and Robert Adams. These students were among the first to receive an education in the newly established African American public schools. Today, Woods Avenue and Woods Place, in the Seminary area off Quaker Lane, commemorate their legacy. Descendants of The Fort and Seminary families still live there. T.C. Williams High School is nearby on the site of the Seminary School.”

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“The City of Alexandria thanks the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Community for its contributions to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the African American Historical Society, and the Fort Ward Historical Society. T.C. Williams High School is now home to the T.C. Williams High School Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing the history of the school through educational programs, scholarships, and community outreach.”

“The Seminary School opened in 1927 due to community efforts and outside support. Douglass Wood donated the land. The African American community raised $5,000 to receive $900 from the Rosenwald Fund and over $4,000 in public funding. This school was one of more than 5,000 ‘Rosenwald School’ buildings constructed in the first part of the 20th century due to this innovative program to improve chronically underfunded African American education in the South. Highly influenced by Booker T. Washington, Julius Rosenwald encouraged cooperation between blacks and whites by requiring both public funds and cash donations to obtain construction seed money from the fund. Rosenwald, a German-Jewish immigrant and chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Company, by his death in 1932, Rosenwald schools provided facilities for one third of Southern African American students.”

“Douglass Wood, granddaughter of Civil War veteran James M. Peters, and Geraldine Stevenson.”

“Born enslaved in 1854, Douglass Wood became a major contributor to education in ‘The Fort’ and ‘Seminary’ community. His father, William Wood, escaped slavery in Fauquier County and served in the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War before dying in an Alexandria military hospital. Douglass Wood contributed to the land for the Seminary School, often the type of personal initiative needed for the establishment of African American public schools. Today, Woods Avenue and Woods Place, in the Seminary area off Quaker Lane, commemorate his legacy. Descendants of The Fort and Seminary families still live there. T.C. Williams High School is nearby on the site of the Seminary School.”

“Robert Arville Wonder, 1994

“At that time we had the Peters family, we had the Randall family, we had the Craven family, and the McKnight family. We had the Thomas family, and I would venture to say that was the root of the [St. Cyprian’s] congregation, made up of all of those families there.”

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