

A Tribute to the Faculty of Stephens-Lee High School

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Here's a revised version of Joe's presentation at the Stephens-Lee Recreation Center on April 9, 2019.

From 1923 to 1965, Stephens-Lee High School was a model of excellence for African Americans in Asheville. The teachers and administrators at the "Castle on the Hill," as the school was known, were unusually well qualified. They were dedicated to helping students reach their potential and lead successful lives despite the obstacles they would encounter in society.

First we'll take a close look at three exemplary teachers. Then we'll step back to see the larger patterns, the common threads, that Zoe and I have found in the lives and careers of the 34 faculty in the 1964 school yearbook. We'll conclude with a look at seven more outstanding faculty and the positive impact they made on their students.

Three Faculty Profiles

Elynora (Martin) Foster

Miss Elynora Martin was born in 1908 and grew up in the East End-Valley Street neighborhood. Her father was a tailor. The family worshipped at St. Matthias Episcopal Church located on the hillside near Catholic Hill School, the forerunner of Stephens-Lee High School. Young Elynora Martin knew the East End.

As a student and later as a teacher, she was a serious, academic woman. She was able to attend Howard University in Washington, DC, arguably the top Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the nation at the time. She earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree there. Later she earned a master's degree at Teachers College, Columbia University, which ranked as the nation's top school of education.

Mrs. Foster taught history for at least 37 years in the Asheville City Schools, beginning her career at Stephens-Lee in 1934, transferring to South French Broad High School when Stephens-Lee closed in 1965, and then moving to Asheville High School when it opened as an integrated school in 1969. She retired in 1971.

Toward the end of her career, Mrs. Foster was one of the senior teachers at Stephens-Lee and Asheville High. She must have come across to her students as a lady of the old school. Photographs show a woman who took great care with her appearance, always mindful of the way she presented herself. She dressed well, every day.

Her former student Debra Collington told us during the interview we conducted in 2018 that Mrs. Foster “was my history teacher, an elegant lady who was one of the best teachers I ever had.”

Elegant—what a wonderful word. And she was one of the *best* teachers ever.

Mrs. Foster carried herself with self-confidence and dignity. As her obituary noted in 1999, “she was the first African-American woman in Asheville to receive a master’s degree.” What an achievement!

Gladys (Pierce) Forney

Gladys Pierce was born in Brunswick County, North Carolina, in 1928. She was of a younger generation than Elynora Foster and most of the faculty at Stephens-Lee. She went to college at Shaw University, a HBCU in Raleigh, and to the University of Illinois for her master’s degree.

Miss Pierce moved to Asheville in 1953 to teach at Stephens-Lee. Her position teaching social studies and sociology gave her numerous opportunities to immerse students in black history and culture. She was reassigned to South French Broad in 1965 and taught at Asheville High from 1969 to 1989. She thrived in the atmosphere of the integrated school.

She was small in stature but large in classroom presence. A role model for her students, she commanded respect. As her former student Debra Collington told us, “I think about some of the things that [Mrs.] Forney taught us, the way she kept herself. She had a pride for being African American, being black, that really left a mark. I often would think about that.”

Mrs. Forney was an approachable teacher, someone her students could easily identify with. For young women, especially, she exemplified the kind of person

they wanted to be. Oralene Simmons told us during her interview that Gladys Forney was like a big sister to her.

A true believer in integration, she led the charge for better race relations at Asheville High School and throughout the city. While chairing the Social Studies Department at Asheville High, she conducted workshops in sensitivity training for teachers of both races. She helped found the Asheville-Buncombe Community Relations Council and received the Human Rights Award in 1983.

Among all the teachers in Stephens-Lee's 1964 yearbook, no teacher has been mentioned more often or more fondly in the alumni interviews we've conducted.

Madison "Doc" Lennon

"Doc" Lennon, Stephens-Lee's well-known band director, was born c. 1907 in Greenville, Georgia. He attended Morristown College, a small HBCU in East Tennessee.

Mr. Lennon earned a master's degree at Wilberforce University, a highly regarded historically black school in Ohio, and another master's at Ohio State University. He did additional graduate work at several other universities including Teachers College, Columbia University.

He came to Stephens-Lee in 1941 and taught there until the school closed in 1965—a 26-year career directing marching and concert bands that received numerous awards.

His former student Gary McDaniel told us that band members "had to be there, in [the band room], to rehearse every day and also on Saturdays. . . . You had to read the music."

As Gary recalled, "In our Christmas parade, they had to take the band and put the band *after* Santa Claus, because if we came before him, then [people] were going to follow the band. . . . We had certain areas downtown where we would stop and do our performance. . . . [When we got to the stadium and went through the gate], "the crowd would get to roar, almost like a president or somebody coming in."

Former student Willie Mae Brown described the human side of Doc Lennon: "That was just the sweetest and mildest mannered man you ever wanted to see." Another

alumnus, Belin Rita, recalled his love of music and said, “I am sure he is somewhere in heaven directing some horns right now.”

Doc Lennon used his gentle personality to encourage students to reach the high standards of excellence he set. A few teachers just have that gift.

Although he became the band director at South French Broad after Stephens-Lee closed, he never taught at Asheville High School. Instead, he accepted a position at Spelman College, a historically black women’s school and part of the Atlanta University Center, where he retired in 1973.

Life and Career Patterns

Before we look at the profiles of more teachers, let’s step back to see the big picture. We’ll trace several patterns that Zoe and I found as we studied the 34 teachers in the 1964 yearbook.

First, *Stephens-Lee’s 34 teachers were all highly educated.* They all had impressive credentials. Every teacher held a bachelor’s degree, and 20 of 34 had earned a master’s degree. Thirteen teachers had completed coursework beyond the master’s.

Stephens-Lee had a decades-old policy, probably established by principal Walter S. Lee, that gave a teacher four years to earn her master’s, or she would be dismissed. There was nothing comparable at Asheville’s white high school.

All the teachers did their undergraduate work at HBCUs. They grew up in a segregated South where state laws barred them from attending white universities.

With one exception, all the teachers earned their master’s degrees at major universities *outside* the South, institutions such as Ohio State University, University of Wisconsin, and, most often, Teachers College, Columbia University.

What made this achievement, truly remarkable in historical perspective, possible? Zoe and I were puzzled at first.

We soon discovered a **second** pattern: *The State of North Carolina paid for black teachers to attend graduate schools outside the South in an attempt to keep higher education segregated within the state and region.* The bargain the state made with Stephens-Lee’s teachers was that if they would not seek admission to white state

universities—the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, and others—the state would pay their tuition to study outside the South.

Teachers took full advantage of this most unusual policy. Alumnus Richard Bowman remembers hearing Doc Lennon say how much he enjoyed his summers in New York City. Imagine how teachers must have felt boarding the train in Asheville, arriving a few hours later in the Big Apple, and then stepping off into a cosmopolitan world that offered excellent graduate programs and much more. Talk about a culturally enriching experience!

The relationship between Stephens-Lee and Teachers College (TC) ran deep. As educators would say today, TC “adopted” Stephens-Lee during the 1940s and 1950s and even sent down a professor, Arthur Linden, to teach courses that carried graduate credit. The close relationship extended to the student body: Stephens-Lee’s students dedicated their 1953 yearbook to Dr. Linden.

Third, *Stephens-Lee attracted college-educated teachers from across the state and from other southern states.* It appears that 20 of 34 faculty members were not Asheville natives. They moved here for the teaching position.

Fourth, we can see that *some teachers made the transition to integration more easily than others.* Gladys Forney, for instance, adjusted well to Asheville High and ended up spending more than half her career in the integrated school. Other teachers chose not to go there. Some of the senior faculty retired or only taught there a short time. In all, 17 of the 34 faculty members made the transition to Asheville High School.

Seven More Faculty Profiles

Clarence Moore

Mr. Moore was a capable science instructor, but he was better known as the coach of football, basketball, and baseball teams that carried a winning reputation with them wherever they played. A legend in his own time, Coach Moore turned out teams that gave the marching bands of the equally famous Doc Lennon something to strut about.

The city school system got a real bargain in Clarence Moore. Coaching all three major sports, the man did a job that was handled by three different coaches in many other schools.

He was a native of Arkansas born in 1908, and a graduate of two HBCUs, Shaw University and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical (A & T) State University, as well as the University of Wisconsin. Mr. Moore had a 38-year career in Asheville, starting at Stephens-Lee in 1935 and retiring from Asheville High in 1973. At one time he was the owner-player of the Asheville Blues Baseball Club, a team that played in the black leagues.

Katheryn Chapelle

Miss Chapelle was the physical education and dance teacher who was in charge of the majorettes for the marching band—always a big hit at football games and parades. She also enjoyed instructing students in more serious forms of dance.

Born in Mississippi in 1903, Miss Chapelle graduated from North Carolina A & T and Teachers College, Columbia. She had a 41-year career in the Asheville City Schools, starting at Livingston Street School in 1927, transferring to Stephens-Lee in 1949, and retiring from South French Broad in 1968.

Lacy T. Haith

Mr. Haith was the shop teacher who held degrees from North Carolina A & T and the University of Michigan. Born in 1909, he was a native of Alamance County, North Carolina. His teaching career in Asheville spanned 35 years, 1937-1972.

Mr. Haith cultivated the reputation of a strong disciplinarian—a tough guy, to put it bluntly. Rev. L. C. Ray, a former shop student, remembers that Mr. Haith wouldn't stand for any nonsense. Gary McDaniel, another former student, admitted that one day he smarted off in class to Mr. Haith, who quickly informed the young man he was going to tell his parents. Gary responded, "Go ahead." By the time he got home that same day, Mr. Haith "was sitting on my porch, and he told my parents how I acted out. Guess what—from that point on I never acted out again. . . . That made me wake up and say, 'Hey, he cares about my future.'"

After he retired, Mr. Haith was ordained as an AME minister and began a second career in religious work. He received the Martin Luther King Award in 1994.

Ollie (McCool) Reynolds

Mrs. Reynold was the music and English teacher who wrote the Stephens-Lee song, the alma mater that every alumnus seems to know by heart. Clearly, she fell in love with the school as a student and kept it in her heart throughout her life.

As a young woman, Ollie McCool followed a particular career path that Zoe and I found at Stephens-Lee: She was an Asheville native (born 1912) who graduated from Stephens-Lee (Class of 1929), went away to school (Talladega College), and then returned to her hometown to teach at her alma mater. As the years went by, homegrown teachers such as Miss McCool became an important source of supply for elementary as well as high school teachers.

Her husband was the principal of Livingston Street School, and the two of them enjoyed spending summers together working on their graduate degrees at Teachers College and New York University.

Lucy Mae Harrison

Miss Harrison, another Asheville native (born 1911) went to college at Fisk University, a distinguished HBCU in Nashville, and came back home to teach, first at Hill Street School, next at Stephens-Lee and South French Broad, and for one final year at Asheville High School—a career of almost 40 years in the city schools. She did graduate work at Miami University of Ohio and at Ohio State.

We're fortunate that UNCA researchers interviewed Miss Harrison before her death in 2005. As an English teacher, she talked eloquently about the strong influence that local churches had on black schools, a testimony to the close sense of community that African Americans felt in Asheville. Ministers spoke at commencement exercises as well as on other occasions. Mrs. Harrison went so far as to say that some principals preferred to hire teachers who attended their own churches.

Miss Harrison spoke from the heart about the unanticipated effects of integration. Whereas black teachers at Stephens-Lee had inspired students and helped them

work up to their capacity, white teachers at Asheville High “may go out of their way and are not trying to hurt us, but they don’t understand the ‘hurt within us.’”

The Optimist Club of Asheville honored Miss Harrison for her work in 1985.

Joseph E. Belton

Born in Rock Hill, South Carolina, a graduate of the historically black Johnson C. Smith University and also the University of Michigan, Joe Belton was Stephens-Lee’s last principal, serving from 1958-1965.

He worked hard to maintain a good relationship with the city school board and the local business community. Principal Belton became skilled in the art of school politics. White as well as black leaders held him in high regard.

After Stephens-Lee closed in 1965, the school board appointed him principal of South French Broad High School and then promoted him to assistant superintendent of the Asheville City Schools. He was active in a number of civic organizations including the YMCA Board of Directors and the Asheville-Buncombe Human Relations Council. He received a posthumous Community Service Award from the Chamber of Commerce.

Myrtle Rumley

An Asheville native born in 1905, Miss Rumley was Stephens-Lee’s guidance counselor. She was a graduate of Shaw University and the University of Michigan with a professional diploma from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Miss Rumley appears to have functioned as an informal assistant principal as she helped Mr. Belton run the school. She served officially as the acting principal in 1954 while the then-principal, Frank Toliver, was on leave to complete his doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Miss Rumley maintained a network of contacts in state and national professional associations as well as in the city of Asheville. She chaired the Phyllis Wheatley branch of the YWCA.

She advised college-bound students and helped make job connections for students who decided to enter the workforce instead of going to college.

Miss Rumley retired from South French Broad in 1968 after 38 years of service in the Asheville City Schools.