

West Side School: *86 Years of serving Broward County*

By Helen Herriott Landers



West Side Elementary School near completion, 1923 (Image courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society)

Mrs. Landers has served as the Broward County Historian since 1990. She promotes understanding of Broward County's rich heritage and seeks to develop and awareness of its historical past with a special interest in the contributions of women.

THE BEGINNING OF BROWARD COUNTY'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

On October 1, 1915, Broward County was officially incorporated by Florida State statute. The county was formed from the southern portion of Palm Beach County and a northern section of Dade County. At the time of its incorporation, the population of Broward County was 4,763.¹

On that date, nine schools that were in operation from Hallandale to Deerfield were handed off to the newly elected three-member Broward County Board of Public Instruction. The board divided the county into three special tax districts and appointed three trustees for each district. In 1915 there were 835 white students and 247 "colored" students.²

Throughout the United States in the late 1800s and the early 1900s compulsory public education was in its infancy. The concept of free public education and free textbooks was an integral plank in Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's 1904 campaign for governor of Florida. Nationwide there was a commitment to the basic goals of public education. Two documents that had a wide circulation were "The Seven Cardinal Principles of Education" and the "Ten Socio-Economic Goals of Education." Throughout Florida school attendance was compulsory but it was not enforced in Broward County until 1926 when the board employed Russell O. Bair as Attendance Officer for the county's schools. He arrived in Fort Lauderdale a few days before the 1926 hurricane.³

In 1920 the population of Broward County had grown to 5,135 residents.⁴ The Trustees of each school district would ask the Broward County Board of Public Instruction to sell bonds for the purpose of building schools. In the Fort Lauderdale School District the Trustees provided for school growth through a ward system. Central High School and Central Elementary were built in 1915. The District Trustees carried out plans for Ward Schools: South Side in 1922, West Side in 1923, North Side in 1927, and East Side in 1936.



Marcellus A. Williams' 1870 survey map. (Broward County Historical Commission collection)

WEST SIDE SCHOOL

1923-1961

Educating Children for Thirty-Eight Years

District Three Trustees were looking for a suitable location for a new school north of the New River and west of the Florida East Coast Railroad. They found a location within Subdivision 9 of Section 9, Township 50 South, Range 42 East. Early surveys of the area now known as Sailboat Bend were completed by George McKay in 1845 and later by Marcellus A. Williams in 1870. Captain William C. Valentine, a Confederate veteran, settled on the New River in the late 1800s. Valentine made noteworthy

contributions as a pioneer settler, surveyor, and public servant. Mary Brickell of Miami, who concentrated on amassing tracts of land on New River and the North Fork, employed Valentine in surveying land in the North Fork area. By July 1898 he was surveying a plat of land bordering the river's forks. The land had come to be used for agricultural purposes, primarily for tomato farming. Valentine turned his attention to producing tomatoes on the land he held on the North Fork of the New River. Valentine drowned in the New River on March 28, 1903. In 1911 the land that Valentine surveyed, the W. C. Valentine section 9 Township 50 south Range 42 east, was platted.⁵



Architect John Morris Peterman. (Broward County Historical Commission collection)

In 1923 R. G. Snow, R. E. Dye, and R. D. Bailey, Broward County District Three Trustees, petitioned the Broward County School Board members, J. P. Smoak, S. C. Mahannah, and Chairman F. L. Neville to purchase land in the W. C. Valentine section 9 Township 50 south Range 42 East for the second ward school. The school would be located in the Waverly Place subdivision, on a two-acre plot sold by John C. Alley to the board for \$500.⁶ Alley was later elected to the Fort Lauderdale City Commission. He died in office in 1931. On December 23, 1923, Ethal Gaines sold property adding to the site of the West Side School and in January 1924, James S. Rickards sold additional land for the school. Mr. Rickards was Superintendent of Broward County Schools from 1921 to 1929. Rickards was known for bringing the Junior High School concept to Broward County. In 1929, Rickards left Broward County moving to Tallahassee to become an assistant superintendent of Florida's Public Schools. Rickards died in 1949. The Broward County School District named a middle school in his honor.

Architect Morris Peterman, was hired by the Broward County Board of Public Instruction to design three public schools in the 1920s: South Side, West Side, and Dillard School. In Sailboat Bend, he also designed the C. P. Weidling residence at 716 S.W. 4th Place. Additionally, Peterman was

the architect for the second county courthouse built in 1927 for \$1.5 million. Cayot and Hart, contractors, built the four-class room West Side School, a stucco Mediterranean revival building, for \$27,577.90.⁷ Construction began on July 20, 1923. West Side was rushed to completion.

On Friday, August 24, 1923, the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* announced that West Side School would open on September 21, 1923, with an able corps of teachers. The paper reported Mrs. Will Parham had been selected as Principal and teacher of first and second grades with Miss Gertrude Boyd as her assistant and teacher of third and fourth grades. Actually Mrs. L. L. (Mae) Blackburn, wife of the Fort Lauderdale High School Principal, served as Principal.

September 21, 1923: FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

On that Monday morning when the bell rang, all the children lined up to march to their classroom. The teacher assigned each child to a desk. The class stood to pledge allegiance to the flag, sing "Our County 'tis of Thee," listen to the reading of scripture, and recite the Lord's Prayer.

In the mid-1920s, there was a population explosion in Broward County as a result of the booming real estate market. The *Fort Lauderdale Daily News* reported in early 1924 that West Side School enrollment had increased so rapidly that an addition was needed. To address the resultant overcrowding, the Broward County Board of Public Instruction voted to build four additional classrooms and a large open air type assembly room to accommodate the increased enrollment at the West Side School. This addition was ready for new classes in the fall of 1925. On August 4, the Broward County Board of Public Instruction appointed faculty for 1925-26 as follows:⁸

Mrs. L. L. (Mae) Blackburn, Principal
 Vinata Miller
 Louise Frist
 Elizabeth Owen
 Edith Perula
 Helen Mar Frieday
 Ruth Teal (Dichtenmueller)

Mrs. Dichtenmueller was honored as



West Side Elementary School Faculty (1925-1926). (Image courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society)

a Broward County Pioneer in 1979. She recalled, "The Florida boom of the 1920s brought with it a phenomenal period of growth and prosperity, but with it came a multitude of obstacles. This 'Boom' period was caused by a rapid expansion in population as people moved to Florida in great numbers to take advantage of the real estate market. Educators suffered as there were not enough classrooms to handle the sudden influx of children."⁹ Dichtenmueller described her first day of school:

"I found awaiting me forty-six sixth graders, an outdoor classroom sheltered by the Florida pines, furnished in the very latest modern 'Boom-time school desks,' consisting of four long, wide planks forming a square, placed flat on the ground, a portable blackboard, a bulletin board, 4 ft. by 8 ft., attached to a sturdy pine, a chair, and plenty of sand, fresh air, sunshine with the usual Florida showers interspersed and assurances from the Principal of her wholehearted cooperation in making this teaching situation a success."¹⁰

Helen Mar Frieday, daughter of early pioneers, left teaching at the end of the school year and studied for her degree in Missouri during the summer. Lewis Moore travelled to Missouri where they were married. Thus ended Helen Mar Moore's teaching career. Mr. Moore became the mayor of Fort Lauderdale in 1935.

On July 16, 1924, the West Side School Mother's Club petitioned the School District to improve and beautify the school grounds. They respectively petitioned the board to develop a plan of "orderly planning and systematically improving said grounds and do respectfully petition your Honorable Body to employ a landscape gardener for the purpose of landscaping the said school grounds." The Broward County Board of Public Instruction and the District Trustees instructed Superintendent Rickards to communicate with Wyldwood Nursery owner Commodore A. H. Brook and arrange for the landscaping of the school.

The 1926-1927 teachers were:¹¹

Gertrude Boyd
 Ruth Teal Dichtenmueller
 Elizabeth Atkinson
 Mary Louise Parker
 Phyllis Farrington Kelly
 Freida McNeff (sub)

When Gertrude Boyd began her first year of teaching at West Side she had completed her freshman year at Florida State College for Women. At the end of the school year she returned to college for her sophomore year. Each year Gertrude saved the money for the next year of education. She was the first Broward County woman to receive her doctorate in education.

Elizabeth Atkinson became a specialist in music for the Broward County Schools, and Phyllis Farrington Kelly later taught 6th grade at Central Elementary.



West Side Elementary School First Grade Class, 1923. (Image courtesy of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society)

CLOSING OF THE WEST SIDE SCHOOL

By 1961 residential areas of central Broward County were changing. New schools were being built to satisfy the needs associated with the rapid growth in Broward County and to keep pace with updated technology equipment and television access in the classroom. The Broward County Board of Public Instruction members, Virginia Young, Chair, Verlon Burrell, Dr. Charles Forman, Wesley Parrish and John O. Calvin voted to close West Side at the end of the school year. The students “will move to Hortt, Croissant Park and Edgewood Schools. Principal Mrs. Van Hyning and the teachers will go to Lloyd Estates Elementary School. The school will be closed, but the memories will remain and echo among the hallways.”¹²

From June 1961 until March 5, 2002, the school was office space for various School Board Departments. Other buildings were brought to the site, including surplus from the Naval Air Station, and used by School Board administrative offices.

There were efforts by the City of Fort Lauderdale in 1996 and Broward County’s Cultural Affairs Division in 1999 to restore the school as a community and artistic center.

On March 5, 2002 Lennar Homes purchased the entire Broward County School Board site of 13.4 acres for \$5,000,000. This included the boarded up West Side School. Lennar Homes created the Villages of Sailboat Bend, a multi-use project that included the development of a luxury condominium community, construction of affordable live/work artist lofts, and the restoration of the West Side School to be used as the headquarters of the Broward County

Historical Commission and Museum. Several key entities worked together in supporting the school’s restoration. They were Lennar Homes, Broward County Cultural Affairs Division, ArtSpace Projects, the City of Fort Lauderdale, Broward County Historical Commission, and the Broward County Commission. County Commissioner John Rodstrom spoke of the importance of the Sailboat Bend Historic District, emphasizing the restoration of the West Side School is like a gem on the finger of West Las Olas Boulevard.

WEST SIDE SCHOOL: BROWARD COUNTY’S HISTORY CENTER

In the fall of 2009, 86 years after it first opened, the West Side School re-opened as the headquarters of the Broward County Historical Commission and Museum. The school has been completely renovated and restored. Within the walls of this early 20th Century historic school the history of Broward County will be available to all of Broward’s residents.

A BROADER VIEW OF HISTORY

Even before the area was surveyed, Native-Americans walked across this land, and lived along the New River and its upper North and South Forks. When the Spanish explorers arrived in the early 1500s they found the Tequesta Indians living along the southeast coast of Florida. During those years, the Tequesta canoed and walked along the upper reaches of the New River and the North Fork. In 1763 at the end of the French and Indian War, England returned Cuba to Spain in return for Florida. The Spanish Navy honored the request of the eighty-nine surviving Tequesta to be resettled in Cuba. Archaeologists have identified at least three Tequesta Indian sites in the Sailboat Bend area.

Their presence is verified around the West Side School neighborhood as a result of archaeological investigations. North of today’s Broward Boulevard and south of the New River’s North Fork, currently the site of North Fork Elementary was Annie Thomas’s Seminole Camp. The camp was a hub of Indian activity. But by October 1925, Mrs. Frank Stranahan (Ivy), Vice President of the Indian Committee of the Florida Federation of Women’s Club, reported that Annie’s camp, which was located on private property



Seminole camp north of Broward Boulevard on the North Fork of the New River (Broward County Historical Commission, Ivan Austin collection)

was “for sale and one day they will be ordered to move.”¹³ It was through Ivy Stranahan’s gentle persuasion that Annie Thomas and her family moved to the reservation.¹⁴

- 1 “Broward by the Numbers,” Broward County Planning Services Division #29, October 1, 2005.
- 2 Cooper Kirk, “The Broward County School System,” *Broward Legacy*, vol. 11, nos. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1988), p. 31.
- 3 Letter from Muriel Blair, September 21, 1926, Denyse Cunningham, “The Big Blow Broward County and the 1926 Hurricane,” *Broward Legacy*, vol. 28, no. 1.
- 4 “Broward by the Numbers,” Broward County Planning Services Division #29, October 1, 2005.
- 5 Rodney E. Dillon and Joe Knetsch, “Forgotten Pioneer, The Legacy of William C. Valentine,” *Broward Legacy*, vol. 17, nos. 1., p. 40.
- 6 Minutes of the Broward County Board of Public Instruction, July 9, 1923.
- 7 “Cayot and Hart Are Successful Bidders For New Building”, *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, July 13, 1923.
- 8 Broward County Historical Commission, Pioneer Day Program, 1979, p. 20-21.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Broward County Board of Public Instruction ledger, in the archives Broward County Historical Commission, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.
- 12 “School Closing,” *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel and Daily News*, May 1961.
- 13 Betty Mae Jumper and Patsy West, *A Seminole Legend, The Life of Betty Mae Jumper*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Florida, 2001.
- 14 *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, June 17, 1975.