

Schools of Pompano

By Daniel T. Hobby

Dan Hobby is a lifelong Floridian, who has been professionally involved in preserving the history of Broward County for over thirty years. He is the executive director of the Pompano Beach Historical Society and Sample-McDougald House Preservation Society, and previously served as the executive director of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society.

He is the author of six books on local history, most recently *Pompano Beach: A History of Pioneers and Progress* (2010) and *Images of America: Coconut Creek, Florida* (2012). Among his other activities, he has served as a director of the Florida Historical Society and president of the Florida Association of Museums.



1899 Schoolhouse. From an unidentified newspaper clipping in the collections of the Pompano Beach Historical Society.



Pompano Beach Elementary School, ca. 1940s. Courtesy of the Pompano Beach Historical Society.

In January, 1836, the Florida Legislature created a new county that covered the southeastern portion of the peninsula, from the upper Keys north to the mouth of the St. Lucie River. Named in honor of Major Francis Dade, a U.S. Army commander, who recently had been killed, along with most of his command, in an ambush by Seminole Indians, Dade County had but a handful of residents.

It was not until 1885, that a county school board was established and began meeting. In the fall of that year, Dade County's first public school was opened in what is today the town of Palm Beach. A year or two later, a second school was opened in present-day Miami. As the population of southeastern Florida began to grow, new schools were built, and within a decade, the School Board was operating as many as 15 schools throughout the county, including at least one in Miami for black students.

The completion of the Florida East Coast Railway extension to Miami

in 1896, led to the creation of new settlements along the tracks, including one named Pompano. By 1899, there were enough children living in the Pompano area that the Dade County School Board authorized a school for the community. As was the procedure then, the school board provided plans for a one-room schoolhouse and the lumber needed; local men provided the labor to build the structure.

On October 2, 1899, Pompano's first public school opened its door to nine students. Because many of the early settlers lived near what is today known as Lake Santa Barbara, the schoolhouse was located in that area, around the present-day intersection of 25 Ave. and S.E. Fifth Street. Mary Butler was hired as the town's first teacher, and was paid \$40 per month. That same year, a similarly small school was opened in Fort Lauderdale, with 19-year-old Ivy Cromartie serving as its first teacher. These were the first two schools in what is today Broward County.

By 1901, there were 28 students

attending the Pompano school. As with other local schools in agricultural areas, school terms were abbreviated. The original Pompano farmers did not have access to many agricultural laborers beyond family members and everyone in the family was expected to work during critical times in the growing season. An article in the April 14, 1905, *Miami Metropolis* newspaper explained the situation:

Within the next two weeks practically all of the rural or county schools of Dade County will have closed for the term.

The school at Pompano was closed last week as most of the children were being taken from the school and put to work in the tomato fields.

In nearly all of the schools that will close this month, the attendance has been up to the standard and above, though it is stated that it should and would have been larger but for the fact that many parents prefer to profit by the labor of their children



Blanche General Ely with students, ca. late 1920s. Courtesy of the Pompano Beach Historical Society.

than to send them to school.

For many of Pompano's residents, the first hurricane they experienced was a minimal storm that hit south of the Jupiter Inlet on October 11, 1903. Even though the winds were barely hurricane strength, a number of buildings in Pompano were damaged, including the town's schoolhouse.

Classes were resumed in a nearby building and, in 1905, a new and somewhat larger school was opened on what is today the 800 block of East Atlantic Boulevard. The relocation of the school was a reflection of a shift in the community's center of population eastward to around the railroad tracks. Around 1910, the school building was moved to the 100 block of N.E. First Street. In 1909, Palm Beach County was created, with Pompano being its southernmost town. With the local population increasing, the Palm Beach County School Board authorized a second teacher for the Pompano school. Plans were being made to replace the wooden structure with what one resident described as a "fine stone building." To that end, four acres of land lo-

cated north of N.E. Fourth Street were donated for the new school.

Before Pompano got its bigger school, it was moved into yet another county. In 1915 Broward County was carved out of portions of Palm Beach and Dade counties. Initially Pompano was not represented on the Broward County Board of Public Instruction, but in 1919 Pompano pioneer Joseph P. Smoak was elected to that body and served on it for the next decade.

One of the early actions of the Broward County Board of Public Instruction was to authorize a new grammar school for Pompano. A two-story masonry building was constructed on the land donated for that purpose (today the site of Pompano Beach Middle School), and the old wooden school was sold and moved once again. After being used as a private residence for a while, the building was sold to the Methodist Church, which used it for Sunday school classes before it was finally demolished in the 1960s.

Perhaps nothing did more to boost Pompano's civic pride than the opening of the town's first high

school in 1928. Prior to this, Pompano's white high school students took instruction at and graduated from Fort Lauderdale Central High School, which had been Broward County's only high school from the time it was built in 1915.

Although they could now avoid the long daily ride to Fort Lauderdale, some Pompano students who had been attending Fort Lauderdale's Central High School were a little disappointed that they would be moving from a school with 2,000 students and a full range of programs and activities, to a school that had an enrollment that was counted in the dozens.

A new school building was constructed adjacent to the existing grammar school that had been built a decade earlier, and when completed, the grammar school students moved into the new, larger building and the high school took over the older structure. The first graduating class at Pompano High School had just eight students.

As Pompano entered the 1930s, it had a kindergarten through twelfth-grade educational campus that would serve it through the 1950s.

There were still, however, a significant number of area residents who did not have access to local public schools. Rigid racial separation laws prevented Pompano's black residents, who constituted over half the local population, from attending the Pompano schools; they would have to wait until the coming decades for significant educational support from the public school system.

During the era of segregation, the myth was that the races were separated but were provided equal facilities. No one believed it. Almost without exception, black students were given inferior buildings and instructional materials. Black educators were generally paid less than were their white counterparts and had more students in their classrooms.

Exactly when formal education began in Pompano's black community is open to debate. Some evidence indicates that there were regular classes by 1915, but clearly by the 1920s, there was a formal school for black students in Pompano.

According to long-time Pompano Beach resident Mercerlene Alexander Rutledge, the first school serving Pompano's African Americans was a two-room, wooden building located in the 400 block of Hammondville Road. When this structure was destroyed in the 1926 hurricane, classes were held in Psalters Temple A.M.E. Church, located less than a block away. Unfortunately, the church was heavily damaged two years later by another hurricane.

Despite the discrimination and misfortune Pompano's black students had to face, the 1920s brought at least one fortunate change. In 1923, a young teacher came to Pompano. Born in the small central Florida town of Reddick in 1904, she would later graduate from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, commonly known as Florida A&M or FAMU.

Blanche General Ely was a woman who was not given to deep self-doubts. She saw her role as more

expansive than being an academic instructor, although she did not shirk that duty. Rather, she felt that she had to use her talents to provide children in her community the tools they would need to make it in a world in which many forces were at work to insure their failure.

Hers was a 24 hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year calling. Any number of her former students still recall that if Mrs. Ely caught you doing something you shouldn't be doing, anywhere in town, it didn't matter if school was in session or not -- punishment would follow.

Although Blanche Ely differed with Booker T. Washington in some areas, she closely followed Washington's philosophy of making the best of a bad situation and that the black community must develop, on its own, an economic foundation and social stability in order to move forward. No doubt, she was in agreement with Washington when he said, "Character, not circumstances, make the man." She would be a force in the community until her death, seven decades after she first arrived in Pompano.

The Broward County Board of Public Instruction (School Board) budgeted for a new school in Pompano's black community during the 1927-28 school years -- it opened as the Pompano Colored School at 718 N.W. Sixth Street. Mrs. Ely was selected to be the school's principal. In 1954, this facility was renamed Coleman Elementary School, in honor of Rev. James Emanuel Coleman, pastor of Pompano's Mount Calvary Baptist Church.

Prior to the Second World War, two other schools were established for Pompano's black students whose families worked in the agricultural fields. One was located west of town off today's State Road 7 and was known as the Hammondville School. The other was located in the migrant labor camp on Hammondville Road just east to today's Powerline Road.

The burden that these African-American schools worked under can be seen by teacher-student ratios reported by the Board of Public Instruction in 1938. Pompano white schools collectively had one teacher for every 25 students, while the Pompano Colored School had one teacher for every 54 students. At the Hammondville School, the single teacher employed there had 67 students.

Another challenge faced by black students and educators was the tradition of closing their schools during the peak period of harvests so as to allow the maximum amount of agricultural laborers in the fields. This practice continued into the early 1950s, in spite of strong condemnation of it by Mrs. Ely and others in the black community.

As the second half of the twentieth century began, Pompano Beach's African-American students who sought a high school diploma had to enroll in a high school in Fort Lauderdale, Miami or some other city. Blanche Ely's lobbying for a new school that included all grades was finally approved by the Board of Public Instruction in the fall of 1951, and Pompano Beach acquired its second high school. At the insistence of the community, the school was named for Mrs. Ely. Over the years, she had not wavered in her commitment to providing her students with the best educational environment available and character-building.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* held that schools that were racially separate were inherently unequal. Despite the court's order, the Broward County School Board did just about everything it could to keep the schools segregated. Mrs. Ely did not object to separate facilities as much as she did the unequal resources provided to the county's black public schools. In 1957, the Broward County School Board attempted to transfer Mrs. Blanche Ely from her position as principal of Blanche Ely



Pompano Elementary and High school campus. White students went from kindergarten through 12th grade here. This view is looking northeast - the building in the lower left is the gymnasium, with the old elementary school to its right and the new school (used by elementary students after it was built) behind. Courtesy of the Pompano Beach Historical Society.

High School in Pompano Beach to a lesser position in Hallandale. Many were convinced that this was an attempt to punish Mrs. Ely for being so outspoken. The ruling was appealed all the way to the State Board of Education, which overruled the transfer.

Meanwhile, on the east side of Pompano Beach, the white educational campus was showing its age. The city and surrounding area was experiencing a dramatic population growth and in the early 1950s, plans were being made for new facilities. Pompano Beach Elementary School was relocated to a new campus half-a-mile to the east in 1953, and the high school to an adjacent parcel several years later. As the student population swelled, the school's nickname, the Beanpickers, seemed anachronistic to many of those who had not grown up in Pompano. In 1956, a referendum was held and a new school nickname chosen: the Golden Tornadoes. During a relatively short time-frame, from the late 1950s into the

1960s, a number of new schools were built in the Pompano Beach area to accommodate the expanding student population: Norcrest, Charles Drew, Cresthaven, Sanders Park and McNab elementary schools opened during this period. By the end of the 1960s, it was clear that the county schools would have to integrate. The problem for Pompano Beach was that demographic changes and housing patterns made it difficult to keep two high schools open. Following the 1969-70 school year, Blanche Ely High School was closed. Most Ely students went to Pompano Beach High School the following year. Mrs. Ely and community leaders instituted a lawsuit against the closing, and the high school was reopened in 1974, but the demographic problems continued.

In what was a shock to the community, in 1985 the Broward County School Board voted to close Pompano Beach High School. In spite of political controversy and public protests, the school remained

closed for a dozen years. During that period, the facilities were used for administrative offices, adult education and community programs. School Board member Bob Parks, who had previously taught at Pompano Beach High School, took the lead in finding a way to reopen the school. In 1997, it was reopened as an "All Magnet" school, drawing its student population from not only Pompano Beach, but also areas farther away.

As the school year began in 2012, Pompano Beach has nine public elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools located within its city limits. There are also several specialized, alternative and private schools within the city.

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