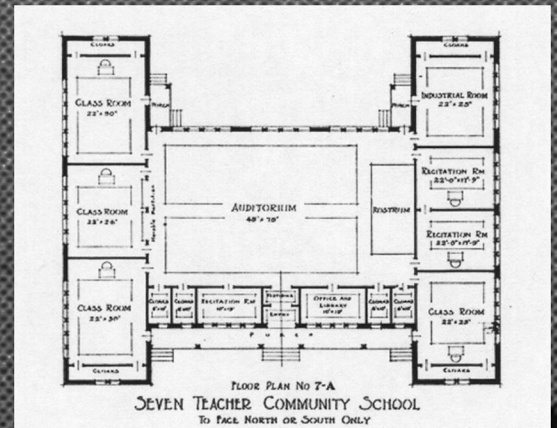
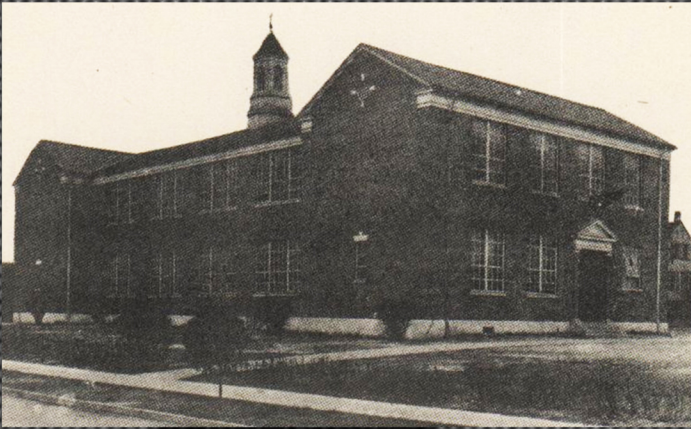


# DOUGLASS SCHOOL

## THE HEART OF KINGSPORT'S BLACK COMMUNITY

Douglass School closed in 1966 when Sullivan County Schools were fully integrated. In its heyday Douglass was the nucleus of the Black community. Clubs, organizations, & even on occasion, churches gathered in Douglass after hours, transforming the school building into the seminal gathering grounds. Now the V.O. Dobbins Sr. Complex, the grounds operate in much the same manner as a community center open to the public.



At the end of the 1920's, Kingsport's need for a new Black school building grew as the population increased. In 1925, the Board of Mayor & Aldermen allocated funding to construct a new building at the Oklahoma School house site. Complaints, petitions, & general outcry erupted from Kingsport's white community. In August 1925 the Oklahoma School House was physically moved to a new location at the railroad "Y" on Sullivan Street where it was renamed Douglass School. As early as 1923, Black parents began asking the Board of Mayor & Aldermen to construct a new school for their children. The one-room Oklahoma School House served 94 pupils and remained in deplorable condition; leaking & overcrowded. The new location of the school was anything but ideal. In December, Douglass parents reported Sullivan Street was, "...unfit to travel, & great piles of dirt, pools of water, & ditches [were] in the street by which the children must travel to the school building." In 1927, the Kingsport Board of Mayor & Aldermen announced a plan to construct a new Black school building using funds granted from Julius Rosenwald. Two years later, the new building was constructed at the northeast corner of Bristol Boulevard & Walnut Street, & by the time the 1929-1930 school year rolled around, Kingsport's Black children had a dry place to attend school. Over the course of the nineteen-thirties, Douglass, its pupils, & staff were challenged not only to maintain the school, but to establish & uphold a reputation for excellence at Kingsport's sole Black learning institution.

# OKLAHOMA SCHOOL

- o 1892: Oklahoma School is built; it is the first and only school in Kingsport for ~20 years
  - o 1913: Another school building was built (what would become Dobyns-Bennett), and Oklahoma became the Black school – although this was intended to be a temporary location.
  - o Feb. 13, 1920: Superintendent Crouch reports to the school board that the one-room Oklahoma School services ninety-four pupils.
  - o Aug. 3, 1923: The congregation of Central Baptist Church petitions the city to open a new school for Black children – the first of many official requests made by the Black community for a new school.
  - o Jan. 1, 1925: Board of Mayor and Aldermen announce two major construction plans for school buildings that coming year – a new high school and major addendums/improvements to the Oklahoma Schoolhouse.
  - o Feb 9, 1925: Oklahoma Schoolhouse construction begins.
  - o Tuesday, Feb 17, 1925: whites living in the neighborhood surrounding the school attend a meeting of the Board of Mayor & Aldermen with an attorney objecting to the school's construction; they claimed that a Black school would drive their property values down.
  - o May 3, 1925: Construction is "Well Under Way on Oklahoma Grade School Building," per Kingsport Times.
  - o August 2, 1925: The PTA demands the Board of Education choose a permanent location for the Black school.
  - o August 1925: Oklahoma School building is moved, "...to a location at the right of Sullivan Street, near the railroad 'Y' ..."
- \*\*Oklahoma School is renamed Douglass School.
- o September 1926: The former Oklahoma School site now serves white students as the Robert E. Lee School.
  - o December 1927: Douglass parents report deplorable schoolhouse conditions: pupils contend with overcrowding, leaks, property flooding, & dangerous terrain on their route to school. Kingsport announces plan to construct a Rosenwald School in the coming year.
  - o 1928: Douglass High School built as a Rosenwald School

## OKLAHOMA SCHOOL CLOSES SESSION

Very Creditable Exercises Held  
in Auditorium of  
High Building

The closing exercises of the Oklahoma colored school held in the auditorium of the Central high school here were a decided success. On Monday evening the program consisted of songs, recitations, dialogues and addresses, and was a credit to the school, reflecting particular credit on the teachers. Those delivering addresses were J. L. Shoun and Mrs. S. N. Haws, members of the local school board, and W. B. Smith (colored).

The exhibit of the pupils' work was on display every night. Everyone seemed highly pleased, and the year was generally commented upon as being one of the most successful in the history of the local colored school.

The special feature of the program Tuesday evening were songs and recitations, and the class play, "Belinda Jane and Jonathan," or "From Punkin Ridge."

J. Fred Johnson delivered a short address.

By request two folk songs were sung by the entire congregation.

W. B. Smith (colored) made a few remarks on the subject of "Take What You've Got and Make What You Want Out of It." A few timely remarks were also made by S. C. Minnich, a member of the school board, and by Rev. A. D. Williams (colored).

An especially interesting talk was made by Superintendent S. W. Gentry.

Music for the exercises was furnished by Miss Alene Greer (colored) of Swift Memorial College. Preston Whitley (colored), also of Swift, came to attend the exercises.

Rev. J. F. Whitley (colored) will make the annual address for the graduating exercises of the City school of Bristol, May 24.



## COLORED SCHOOL HOLDS CLOSING EXERCISES

The closing exercises of the Oklahoma school was held in the Central High School auditorium last Saturday evening. It was the first time in the history of Kingsport that there had been graduates from the grammar department for the colored children. There were quite a number of parents and friends both colored and white present.

The following program was rendered:

Vacation Song, ..... The School Prayer ..... Prof. H. L. Moss  
March ..... Primary Classes  
Recitation .... Theodore Cartright.  
Dialogue ..... Three girls  
A Gypsy Play ..... By girls  
Recitation ..... Bertha Scott  
Play ..... 3rd and 4th Grades  
March ..... Graduation Class  
Welcome Address, Miss Estella Cartright.

Solo ..... Miss Estella Williams.  
Paper—Subject, Education, Miss Nellie Burdine.

Presentation of certificates by Mr. Bennett, President of Board of Education.

Mrs. Georgia Gaines, Principal.  
Dr. M. M. Cloud, Master of ceremonies.

A collection of \$10.18 was taken to defray the expenses.

Kingsport Times, June 17, 1919

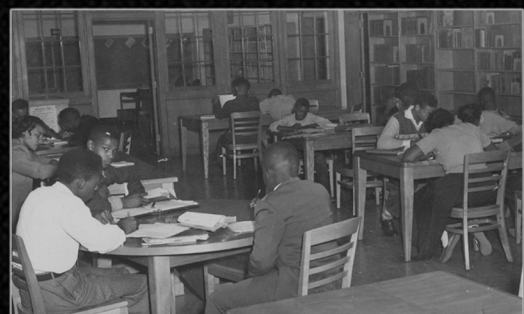


**Douglass Tigers, 1949**



**By 1934, Douglass' scholastic exercises, what students were learning, which students were excelling in the classroom, &, on occasion students' original work would find its way into the Kingsport Times. The staff was small – by the 1936-1937 school year only six staff members including the principal were employed at Douglass. V.O. Dobbins not only coached the boy's football team, but taught the entirety of Douglass' high school grades, & the other instructors typically conducted classes for several grades at a time. It became the frequent site for Emancipation Day programs, which were typically put on by churches & fraternal organizations for the students. In 1936, Douglass staff & students observed "Negro History Week," & a "Negro History" class was also offered.**

**In 1939, the city helped establish the city's first Black public library at Douglass.**



**Throughout the nineteen-forties, the school became the central gathering place for all members of the community. Civic organizations such as the Kingsport N.A.A.C.P., the Improved Benevolent & Protective Order of Elks & musical programs by Bethel A.M.E. Zion Church & Central Baptist Church were held at Douglass. The end of the nineteen-forties also saw the growth of the student body beyond the building's capacity. In 1948, the Board of Mayor & Aldermen acquired funding to construct the new building designated for a three-block section in Riverview, and in January 1951, the modernized Douglass was open for business.**

**A Kingsport Times article reported in 1954 that, “Douglass students are exceptionally proud of & loyal to their school ... every corridor and room is the perfection of neatness. That same year, the city expanded the building again. V.O. Dobbins repeatedly petitioned the Board of Mayor & Aldermen to repair storm drainage in Riverview – specifically citing the dangerous trek to school his students were taking, but the Board refused to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of Black children.**



**Six years after Brown v. Board, the Kingsport School Board agreed to begin the desegregation of schools incrementally: integrating the first grade in the first year, moving to the second grade the following year, & so on. A delegation of Douglass parents and community organizations began demanding that full school integration was due much sooner than the 1972 plan. Ultimately, the school board agreed to a “good faith plan” whereby schools would be fully integrated by the 1966-1967 school year. On Tuesday, June 7, 1966, nineteen students were awarded their diplomas as Douglass’ thirty-fifth & final graduation ceremony.**

**On May 29, 1973, a crowd of Dobyys-Bennett students & parents, along with other community members, gathered in the Douglass community center. Emotions ran high at the meeting as both students & parents voiced their experiences with racist backlash from attendance at Dobyys-Bennett. Black students grappled with racism coming not only from white classmates, but from their teachers as well.**

**Most of the original Douglass School building still stands in Riverview, where it continues to service the community to this day. The building was remodeled & renamed the V.O. Dobbins Sr. Community Complex in October 1981, upon Cora Cox’s suggestion. Renaming the building site after its longest & most prolific leader paid homage to Douglass’ history, but the school will never truly be lost to Kingsport. Black Kingsport continues to gather inside Douglass’ walls, granting the space new life, continuing its spirit and service to the community.**

