

A History of Black Education: Elizabethton, Tennessee

Compiled by Alona Norwood & William Isom II, 2020

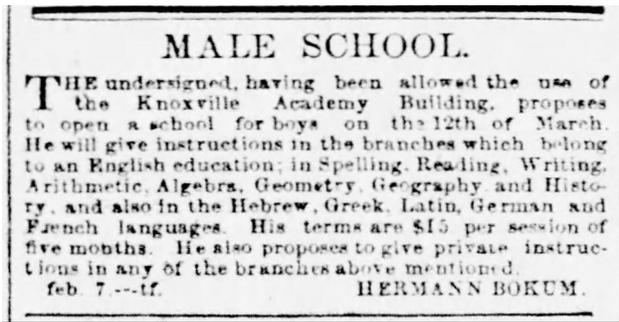
BLACK
IN
APPALACHIA



Black Education, Post Civil War in Elizabethton, Tennessee

Hermann Bokum, Freedmen's Bureau Circuit Rider

Hermann Bokum was born in 1807 in Germany and emigrated to the United States at the age of 21. Having lived almost 3 decades in Pennsylvania, working as a preacher and a teacher, Bokum relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1855. In that same year, Rev. Bokum ran advertisements for private instruction for boys at the Knoxville Academy Building. He also wrote an article for Brownlow's Whig newspaper about vineyard care and grapes cultivation in 1859.



(Knoxville Standard, February 7, 1855)

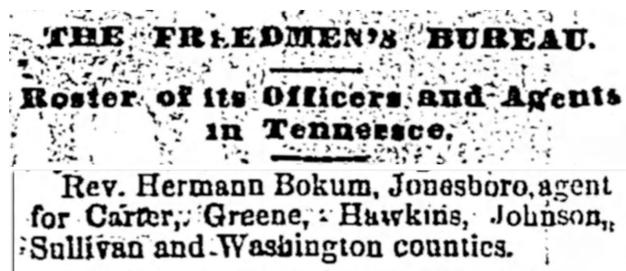
Hermann continued to live in East Tennessee, until forced to flee during the tumult of the Civil War. A staunch Unionist, he wrote of his perspectives and experiences in *"The Testimony of a Refugee from East Tennessee"* in 1863. As a white immigrant, Bokum expressed views hedging close to abolitionism before the War.

He stated in *The Testimony*, "The negroes are attached to the South by many bonds which are not easily broken. The South they regard as their home. . . there many of them have families to whom they are attached, and church relations which they highly value."

The following excerpts are sourced from Albin Kowalewski's *"To be true to ourselves": Freedpeople, School Building, and Community Politics in Appalachian Tennessee, 1865-1870."*

After the War, "the [Freedmen's] Bureau sent paid circuit-riders throughout Appalachia with the express purpose of "establishing schools" and making connections. Hermann Bokum, a rider in upper Appalachian Tennessee, traveled more than anyone . . . His itinerary for late May of 1867 reveals his dizzying mobility: starting May 10th, he would visit "several points of interest" around his home in Jonesboro, Washington County, and then "visit Blountville the County Seat of Sullivan County on the 20th of May, and in the same week Bristol and Kingsport in the same county. In the week following I propose to go to Taylorsville in Johnson County, and on my way to spend a day in Elizabethton to make a final arrangement for the purchase of a lot" all the while remaining "especially interested" in the conditions at Rogersville and Greeneville." (page 62-63)

"Bokum extended the Bureau's reach across the mountains, repeating his efforts town after town, meeting, advising, reporting, at the expense of everyone's safety. By late April [1867] he arrived in Elizabethton and "conferred with those who are interested in the welfare of the colored race—or profess to be." His suspicions were well founded.



(The_Tennessean, April 24, 1867)

The people he first met recommended that he avoid controversy and “not speak publicly on the subject of the school because there were some influential men who thought that such a movement if now made would excite very strong feelings against it.” The town’s freedpeople held impromptu classes, but the whites, he observed, took little interest in their own education and thus resented any Black gains.” (page 64)

“In a zero-sum society such as this, prudence demanded secrecy, and following their advice, he stayed mum. That Sunday, Bokum secretly met with “three leading colored men” of Elizabethton: **William Smith, Rufus Taylor** (who had contacted the Bureau previously), and **Emanuel Tipton**. At the meeting, Bokum learned of their torched schoolhouse outside of town and of the classes the freedpeople held in the woods. He also learned that a rebel had proposed to sell the freedpeople a lot nearby, but pressure from other whites convinced him to rescind the offer. The next day Bokum met with the town’s white leaders. With the skill of a seasoned negotiator, he reminded them that Tennessee’s freedpeople had by that point been enfranchised, warning one who planned to run for office “that he was sure to kill himself politically if he continued . . . to oppose the establishing of a school among the colored population.” His reasoning worked. Political dynamics had certainly shifted, and a month later he returned to find that whites now supported black education. Still, they took no action. By early June, however, he received an “urgent request to address” both Blacks and whites at Elizabethton about securing a lot and building a Black school. “The current of opinion which six weeks ago was so unfavorable to their having a school is now altogether the other way.” (page 65)

“As Bokum scoured the mountains meeting with blacks and whites, he paved the way for others to take his place at each town—to become, in effect, those who would go between the Bureau, the freedpeople, and native whites if need be. The Bureau terminated Bokum’s contract shortly after his speech at Elizabethton, but the Bureau’s presence remained in the mountains. (page 66)

“And so it was that Bokum introduced the Bureau to upper Appalachian Tennessee. As his itinerancy demonstrates, school building necessitated more than lots, buildings, and books, for it entailed making and sustaining human relationships with both races. (page 67)

Shortly after his service with the Bureau, in 1868, Rev. Bokum was listed as the Commissioner for Immigration for the State of Tennessee, filing reports with the Senate and writing articles in newspapers across the state as well as several books; one about the state of Tennessee.

African Americans mentioned in “To Be True to Ourselves”

William A. Smith was born in Tennessee in 1839, likely as an enslaved laborer. He would marry another Tennessee native Eliza J., born in 1837. From this Union came at least five children, Margaret (born 1857), John A. (born 1858), James A. (born 1860), Emanuel T. (born 1865) and Josephine C. (born 1870), with the first three having been born before Emancipation. William “worked in a wool factory and owned \$300 in land and personal estate.” He could read but couldn’t write. Eliza couldn’t read or write and the three oldest children attended school, according to the 1870 Census. We’re uncertain as to the whereabouts of the Smith family after this.

Emanuel Tipton was a neighbor of William Smith in 1870, and also was 31 years of age at the time. Emanuel was married to Mary E. and they had two children; Susan H. (3 years old) & a son, Jesse M. (1 year old). Between Emanuel and William Smith’s home was another Tipton family with one Smith child living there. Additionally, there was a sizable white Tipton family who were also neighbors, inferring that Isaac P. Tipton may have been the person that held Emanuel in slavery before the Civil War. Emanuel worked as a farmhand and held \$500 in property. He could read, but couldn’t write. Just after 1870, Emanuel moved his family out to Emporia, Kansas and he worked as a teamster. By 1880, he and Mary had four additional children; Samuel (age 9), Edward (age 5), Eliza (age 3) and Jennie (age 8 months). The three eldest, Susan, Jesse and Samuel were enrolled in school at that time.

According to newspaper reports from the Kansas town, Mr. Tipton served on juries and acted as a delegate to the county Republican convention. In 1885, he secured 1,500 acres of land in Indian Territory through Mary’s father, who was reported to be ½ Cherokee. By October 24 of that year, Mr. Tipton had passed away in what would be Oklahoma.

Mr. Emanuel Tipton and family expect to move to the Indian Territory in the near future. Mrs. T. inherited a claim of 1,460 acres of land from her father who was a half Cherokee Indian.

(Topeka Tribune Recorder, August 22, 1885)

Rev. Rufus Taylor, born in 1819, was once enslaved by the Reverend N.G. Taylor. Rufus Taylor served in the ministry and was appointed by the Tennessee AME Zion Church to serve Elizabethton in November of 1867 (*Knoxville Daily Free Press*). He was also politically engaged, acting as one of the “colored delegates” at a meeting of Republicans in the fall of 1870 (*Herald and Tribune*).

That year, Rev. Taylor was 51 years of age, working as a farmhand. He lived with his wife Mariah and three children Martin (born 1852), Rufus Jr. (born 1855) & Delia (born 1858) in the Happy Valley region of Carter County. All three children attended school.

In 1880, Rufus, now 60, was married to Sarah Miller, a 30 year old mother of two; Alexander Miller (17 years old) & Adie Miller (13 years old). The family lived in the Buffalo Creek community of Carter County.

In 1874, tragedy struck when Rufus Taylor Jr was briefly blamed for the rape and murder of a white girl, Alice Moody. Rufus Jr. was eventually released and the local mob carried out their mission by seizing and lynching Jim Worley.

Rev. Rufus Taylor passed away in Johnson City, Tennessee on August 7, 1895 at the age of 76. He was laid to rest in Cedar Grove Cemetery. (*The Morristown Gazette*).

Park Brewster, Freedmen's Bureau Liaison, Elizabethton, Tennessee

By August 1, 1867, Rev. Hermann Bokum had appointed Park Brewster to take over the Freedmen's Bureau duties in Elizabethton. "Bokum requested that he inform the Bureau of the town's "endeavours to organize a colored school." Expanding Bokum's initiatives, Brewster cultivated relationships with the town's freedpeople, relying on William Smith's advice, especially."(page 66-67)

Mr. Park Brewster was born in May of 1823 in Preston, Connecticut to Ephraim Smith Brewster, a shoemaker and Huldah Giddings.

In 1850, Park was living in his parents' household in Windham, CT and worked as a teacher. Three years later on May 23rd, 1853, he would marry Eunice Wheeler in South Manchester, CT. The new couple moved to the Newtown neighborhood of Queens, New York by 1860, where Park continued to work as a teacher until 1866.

In June of 1863, Mr. Brewster was listed on the United States Civil War Draft Registry in New York.

We're not certain about his life in the US Military, but in August of 1867, he was working as the Freedmen's Bureau Liaison in the city of Elizabethton, Tennessee helping to establish a school for the newly freed Black residents there.

According to Albin Kowalewski's Thesis, "To Be True to Ourselves: Freedpeople, School Building, and Community Politics in Appalachian Tennessee, 1865-1870.", Park's work began with focusing on the perceived moral issues of the Freedpeople:

" . . . missionary teachers established temperance societies, to what they considered good effect, alongside schools in Rogersville, Elizabethton, and Knoxville. The "labors" of the Sons of Temperance "have produced a great change in the habits of the people," reported the [Freedmen's] Bureau agent at Rogersville in 1867. At Elizabethton, Park Brewster, the town's Bureau liaison, reported that about forty freedpeople signed the "Temperance Pledge" he circulated at one meeting, an interesting turn of phrase given that more than half of the freedpeople there "cannot read words more than one syllable." Temperance participation and the erection of school houses in Appalachia have a direct correlation with one another according to Kowalewski. (page 39)

“At the heart of the temperance movement was a document called a pledge that people signed to stop drinking alcohol. In some cases, particularly in the early nineteenth century, people pledged to stop drinking hard or distilled spirits, such as whiskey and gin, only. Usually the pledge was signed in a public meeting and witnessed by all the people present. Making a public declaration reinforced its importance and made it more difficult to reverse. Temperance Pledges came in all sizes and shapes. They could be as simple as a blank notebook or a ledger with a handwritten or printed pledge at the top of each page. Such ledgers would hold hundreds of signatures. In other cases the pledge was an elaborately printed document.”

(Website, Teach US History.org)

When hostile whites prevented the town’s freedpeople from holding classes at “the old Baptist Church,” the town’s “noble Union League” intervened and won permission from the Carter County court to hold class in the basement of the courthouse. “Doubtless the Conservatives thought their much desired object was accomplished and we could not have a room anywhere,” mused their teacher, Park Brewster. In fact, the courthouse, unlike the church which Brewster considered a dreadful “place for a meeting of any kind,” had glass in its windows and likely kept the elements out. According to Brewster, the change in venue was clear evidence “that the Lord is indeed opening our way before us. While the Christian-faith drove the behaviors of African American and Whites working together in Appalachia, existing brick and mortar churches served as a means of recruiting participants for educational opportunities *(page 50)*.”

“Park Brewster, a Connecticut transplant in Elizabethton, who, in the opinion of one Bureau agent, “is an able teacher.” “A letter addressed to him,” the agent continued, “would elicit interesting information.” . . . School builders gauged the reputations of whole communities, to determine whether a “town is reliable and favorable,” through the information they gleaned from the network. Using newspapers and common experiences, the network developed slowly, and it seems to have taken eighteen to twenty-four months from the end of the war for the school-building network to mature. During the Bureau’s infancy, organizing departments and making contacts was what one western Tennessee commander called “being rapidly systemized . . . to the mutual advantage of the Planters and Freedmen.” The network in Appalachia, while not made “rapidly,” was “systemized” by late 1866” *(page 61-62)*.

Park Brewster took over the Freedmen’s Bureau in Elizabethton and built on the base provided by Bokum (the previous director). Brewster built relationships with Elizabethton and surrounding areas’ free people to continue the work of erecting a school house *(page 66)*.

The freedpeople at Elizabethton would surely make productive citizens, pontificating on Park Brewster, because they “have the pleasure of knowing that God and all true Philanthropists are on their side.” Still others worked for posterity *(page 75)*.

Park Brewster, for one, “was obliged to disappoint a large number” of his students when he ran out of spelling books, and he implored the American Missionary Association [AMA] to send as many Bibles and primers as possible. *(page 76)*.

Describing arsonists, Brewster reported ---- “Conservatives & Rebels that fear neither God or regard man” but dread the retribution of the federal government—would be less willing to set fire

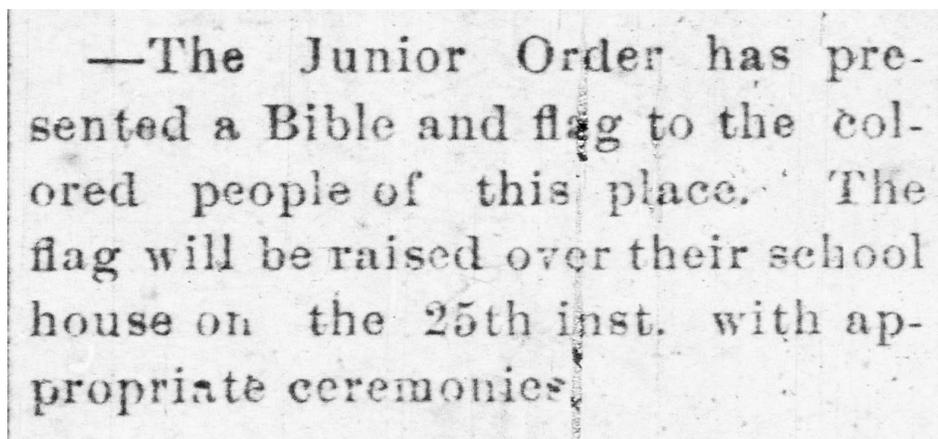
to federal property. But his question also reveals much about how aid groups understood the position of freedpeople in a society reliant on literacy and written contracts” (page 78).

After his work for the establishment of Black schools in the region, Mr. Brewster eventually returned to Connecticut. The 1900 Census indicates P. Brewster resided in his Manchester, CT family home at 134 Oakland Street with his son-in-law John Wheeler (35), adopted daughter Eunice Wheeler (28) alongside grandchildren May (12) and Kelsey (9) Wheeler. At the time of the census Park Brewster was 76 years old.

On April 23, 1905 Park Brewster passed away. He and his wife Eunice Wheeler Brewster are buried at Buckland Cemetery in Manchester, CT.

Post Reconstruction

From the departure of the Freedmen’s Bureau until the late 1920’s there is a general lack of viable documentation about Black education in Carter County, with information appearing with increased frequency after that period.



—The Junior Order has presented a Bible and flag to the colored people of this place. The flag will be raised over their school house on the 25th inst. with appropriate ceremonies

(The Mountaineer, July 11, 1895)

Elizabethton City Schools Enrollment Cards indicate that there were several Black primary schools in Carter County in the 1920's - 1950's:

- Douglas
- Shell Creek
- Watauga
- Roan Mountain
- Buffalo Creek

Mountain City's Shouns Chapel school in neighboring Johnson County also acted as a feeder school for Douglas Primary & High School in Elizabethton.



Courtesy of Tennessee State Library & Archives

William A.C. Breedlove

The Breedlove family were found in Grainger County, Tennessee in 1870, in an area that utilized Morristown for their Post Office. A farming family, most members are listed having been born in South Carolina. William "W.A.C." Breedlove was born in Hamblen County, Tennessee on February 26th, 1875 to the South Carolina natives, George & Minerva Breedlove.

In 1880, the 5 year old William Breedlove lived in Russellville, Hamblen County with his Father George in an area with a sizable extended Breedlove family. At this time, George is listed as a Farmer Minister.

The Breedlove family can be found throughout the region as educators, ministers and gospel singers. There is a vast connection between the family and Morristown College, the late Historically Black Presbyterian College. Black teachers and principals with that surname worked at Slater High School in Bristol, Tennessee and Sulphur Hollow and Simpson schools in Hancock County, Tennessee, among others.

There's not much immediate information about his early life, but after attending Morristown College, W.A.C. is found married and teaching in Carter County, Tennessee. In September of 1896, at the age of 21, William married Annie G "Joanna" Welch in Carter County, Tennessee. Joanna's parents, John Welch & Sara Ann Crow were from Virginia, but she was born in Tennessee.

In 1900, W.A.C. & Joanna are renting a house in Carter County's 7th district and by this time, have their first child, 6 month old Ina Breedlove. Ten years later, they would own their home and William's occupation would look similar to his fathers, listed as "farmer". Two additional children are in the household; George A. and Thelma W, as well as Joanna's mother, 62 year old Sarah Welch.

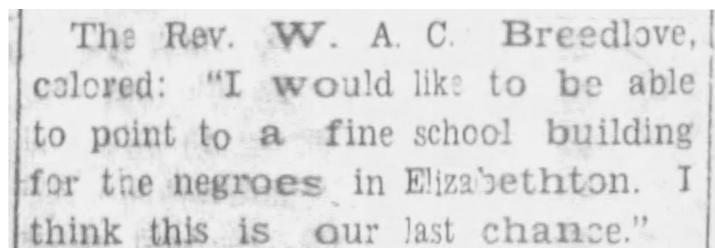
A historic and devastating flood occurred along the Doe River that runs through Elizabethton in May of 1901. The original location of the town's Black community fell in the path of this destruction. Over 150 residents were displaced from the "Old Sam Berry Road" section of town, moving into the Cedar Grove section, some 3 miles to the West. The original school, a church and homes were lost and the community began to slowly rebuild. That process included the construction of Doulgas school under the supervision of Mr. Breedlove.

Around 1902, William became the pastor of the historic Philippi Baptist Church, located in the new Black neighborhood closer to downtown. He was noted to preach at nearby Brown's Chapel AME Zion church as well. St. Paul Methodist Church rounded out the social and religious network in the community, regardless of denomination. Newspaper articles also indicate that Mr. Breedlove acted as a guest preacher at Poplar Grove Baptist Church.

In 1920, the family was listed as living on Gap Creek Road, where W.A.C. worked as a Farmer on land that was now paid for. The entire family is listed as Mulatto during this year and all children were attending school.

William's occupation in 1930 is listed as a school teacher and the family was living at 830 Watauga Street. That year, their younger daughter Thelma had married a South Carolina native, James Wood, who lived in the home and drove a truck driver for a dry cleaning company. Additionally, Joanna's sister Sally Welch and two boarders, Alberta (Elberta Townes) & husband Arvis Whitley lived in the household. The Whitley's worked as an assistant public school teacher at Douglas and restaurant cook, respectively.

In the Fall of 1933, W.A.C. Breedlove presented the need for a new school building to the city, stating, "I would like to be able to point to a fine school building for the negroes in Elizabethton. I think this is our last chance."

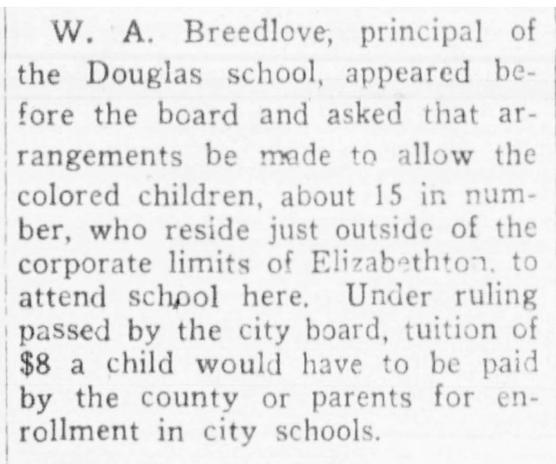


The Rev. W. A. C. Breedlove, colored: "I would like to be able to point to a fine school building for the negroes in Elizabethton. I think this is our last chance."

(The Elizabethton Star, September 22, 1933)

On May 28th, 1934 Mrs. Joeanna Gay Welch Breedlove passed away, leaving W.A.C, a

widower. Joanna was laid to rest in the Odd Fellows Cemetery (aka Colored Cemetery) in Elizabethton.



W. A. Breedlove, principal of the Douglas school, appeared before the board and asked that arrangements be made to allow the colored children, about 15 in number, who reside just outside of the corporate limits of Elizabethton, to attend school here. Under ruling passed by the city board, tuition of \$8 a child would have to be paid by the county or parents for enrollment in city schools.

(The Elizabethton Star, September 17, 1935)

In September of 1935, W.A.C. Breedlove continued to advocate for the Black students in the area, seeking the Elizabethton City Board's permission for Douglas School to accept students from outside of the city limits. Estimated 15 in number, that plan was approved with an \$8 tuition fee for those students.

Via a \$100 donation from a community member, Principal Breedlove purchased overalls and dresses for Douglas students at Christmas time in 1938.

In the spring term of 1939, W.A.C. Breedlove was replaced as principal of Douglas by John Edwards and began teaching 3rd, 4th & 5th grades.

By 1940, William had retired and his daughter, Thelma, had divorced her husband (in 1935 due to "desertion"). They both lived in a home on 830 Watauga Street with Thelma's 9 year old son James. She worked as a laundress in a private home. The family continued to house boarders; Tom Williams, a cook at a cafe and James Singleton, a car washer at a local service station.

W.A.C. Breedlove suffered a paralyzing stroke in February, 1940 and eventually passed away on April 9th, 1943.

William & Joanna are both buried in Odd Fellows Cemetery. This cemetery is identified as "Colored Cemetery" on county property records. The deed is for a long narrow lot next to and behind 219 Old Siam Road up the hill to just short of Scenic Drive. The cemetery is overgrown and has many sunken, unmarked graves.

Elberta Townes Whitley was born in Bristol, Virginia on June 11, 1905 to Elbert Anderson Townes & Georgia Washington Sawyers. Her father was a laborer from South Carolina and her mother was a school teacher from Virginia. They were married on February 6, 1900 and lived in the household of Georgia's parents Nelson & Clara Sawyers on Mary Street in Bristol. Elberta's grandparents, also from South Carolina, were Wesley and Eliza Townes.

It's noted that she attended Langston High School in Johnson City in 1924. Four years later (in 1928) she married Arvis Brooks Whitley, a laborer from Mocksville, North Carolina. Arvis was born to William McKinnley Whitley & Lola Cladwell.

She was a teacher at Douglass School in Elizabethton during the 1920's, receiving a promotion to Assistant Principal in 1930 by the School Board.

In 1930, the Whitley's lived in the household of W.A.C. Breedlove, the Principal of Douglas, on Watauga Avenue in Elizabethton. E.T. Whitley worked as a public school teacher and her

husband was employed as a cook in a restaurant. In December of that year, they had their first child, Marilyn Y. Whitley, followed by another daughter Ann Whitley three years later.

Mrs. Whitley resigned from Douglas in the Fall of 1932 and according to the records, relocated to Kingsport, Tennessee. The majority of her work in the church and school system is documented in Kingsport.

She was a Sunday School Teacher & the chairperson for the "Primary Work" of St. James Presbyterian Church in Kingsport, Tennessee in 1937, 1938 & 1939. In 1940, E.T. Whitley lived with her husband at 838 Maple Street in Kingsport, Tennessee. At that time, Arvis worked at Clinchfield Drug Store on Broad Street.

The next time we see the Whitley's listed in the records, it's 1956 and they're living in Boston, Massachusetts. Husband Arvis is listed as a Factory Worker.

They spent their final years in the Boston area; with Arvis dying on May 11, 1973. The Whitley's final place of residence was 110 Seldon Street, Dorchester, MA. Arvis was survived by his wife, two daughters and brother. His funeral was held in Bristol, VA at the Bullock Funeral Home located on 389 Washington Street. Mrs. Elberta Townes Whitley passed on July 29, 1977 and her body was brought back to her hometown of Bristol, Virginia for burial.

Hildred Etta Taylor Shearer Brown Jones' family is predominantly from the Tennessee region. Her father John "Poodle" Howard Taylor worked as a Janitor in the area.

John Howard Taylor came from a family of farmers from Carter County, Tennessee. The 1870 Census shows John's father Benjamin as a farm laborer (43 years old), His mother Sabra A. Taylor (38 years old) was keeping house. John (18) worked alongside his father as a farm laborer while his sister Charlotte Taylor (16 years old) stayed at home. The only person who could read in the household was John's sister Charlotte and not a single person could write as reported in the 1870 Census.

Hildred's mother was Addie Davis. Born to Lank Davis and Cherry Redrick Nave in 1879, she spent her time working as a homemaker, housewife and undoubtedly a farmer. She, like her husband, had attended three years of school.

John "Poodle" Howard Taylor and Addie Taylor had their first child, Hildred Taylor on April 8, 1902 in Elizabethton, TN. They had two more children and adopted a son living in the household, according to the 1940's census. Hildred was the oldest, with Howard, Nathaniel (adopted) following.

Hildred Taylor attended & graduated from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial College (now Tennessee State University). On May 17, 1925 Hildred married John Luther Shearer from North Carolina and began her career in teaching two years later. Before coming to teach in her hometown, she taught school in Elk Park, North Carolina for four years, perhaps at the nearby Cranberry School.

In 1930, Hildred was married to John Luther Shearer and they were living in the household of her father on Church Street in Elizabethton. They had two sons by then, John Luther Jr. & Hardin Davis. The couple both worked as public school teachers at that time. In 1932 she was listed as the only teacher for Watauga Colored elementary school in Carter County.

Hildred was mentioned frequently in the newspaper records from 1932 to 1963, beginning around the time she started her career at Douglas (1933). In 1939, she was the director of the Douglas Glee Club and directed performances and plays by the students around the community.

By the 1940 Census, Hildred and John's family still lived in her father's household with their two sons. Though Hildred continued to be employed as a public school teacher, John was now working as a drug porter for a drug store in town.

Hildred's father, John "Poodle" Howard Taylor passed away in 1943 from complications associated with tuberculosis. He was buried in the historic Cedar Grove Cemetery.

In 1944, Hildred continued to teach at Douglas. That same year she took out a divorce decree against her husband, John Luther Shearer, of which it is assumed was granted by the court.

In June 1, 1947, Hildred was included in a highlight of Douglas school, where a snapshot of her career is given. For seven years, she assisted with the First Baptist Church Story Hour at the school. For nine years, she led the Children's Department of A.M.E. Zion Church. At the time of that article, she had been teaching for 14 years in Elizabethton.



Two years later, it was noted that Mrs. Shearer was teaching 1st, 2nd & 3rd grades at Douglas.

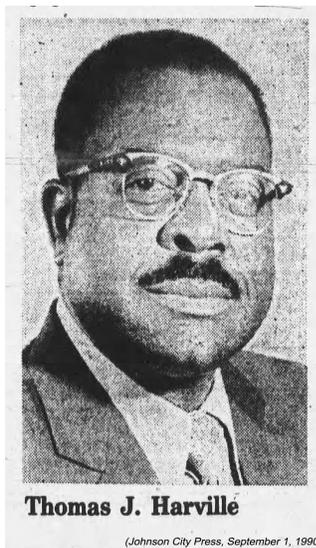
Hildred married a 71 year old William H. Brown, owner & operator of Brown's Funeral Home in Bristol, Virginia in June of 1950. In October of that same year, William passed away.

On July 5th, 1950, now Hildred Brown, informed authorities of her mother Addie's passing. The cause of death was reported by authorities as cerebral hemorrhage. She fought the hemorrhage for 24 hours before succumbing to death and was buried alongside her husband in Cedar Grove. That same year, Hildred joined other members of the Alumni Club of Douglas at the Baptist Association meeting in Parrottsville, Cocke County, Tennessee.

At some point, Hildred married William F. Jones, who she remained married to through the duration of her life. She also had assumed ownership of the Memorial Funeral Home of Kingsport, Tennessee.

In the 1950's, Ms. Shearer frequently wrote a society and happenings article for the Elizabethton Star called "Community News of Interest to Colored People"

Overall, Hildred taught for 30 years in the Elizabethton Schools system and her last known address was 621 Watauga in Elizabethton. She passed away of a blood clot in her heart on May 14, 1961 at the age of 59. Her funeral was held at Douglas School and Philippi Baptist Church in Elizabethton. She was ultimately laid to rest at the historic Citizens Cemetery in Bristol, Virginia.



T.J. (Thomas James) Harville was born on the 4th of July, 1915 in Plantersville, Alabama to Henry Harville and Gatsey Rush.

Both Dallas County, Alabama natives, Gatsey & Henry married in Selma on December 23rd, 1911. In 1917, they had two children and Henry was an employee of the Gulf States Steel Company, digging coal at the Virginia Mine in Adger, Jefferson County, Alabama.

Around 1926, the Harville family had migrated to live and work in another coal mining town, this time in Benham, Harlan County, Kentucky. Benham was a company town of International Harvester. By this time, the family had grown to three children: Willie Nell, a daughter and two sons, Thomas and Housley.

The 11 year old Thomas enrolled in the segregated East Benham school and became one of the first seven graduates there in 1936. After his High School graduation, Thomas attended Morristown College in Hamblen County, Tennessee for two years and then moved on to West Virginia State College in Kanawha County.

Unfortunately, tragedy would strike the Harville family, when Henry suffered a fatal stroke in the mines on September 25th, 1939, during Thomas' senior year in West Virginia. By this time, Thomas James was 24 years old and the entire family lived with his sister, now, Willie Nell Johnson, her husband and 4 children. Upon his return to Harlan County, he took a position teaching at East Benham, all the while taking graduate courses during the summer; at the University of Chicago, then at the integrated University of Kentucky.

Newspaper accounts help us to follow Thomas' path to Elizabethton and a lifetime of service. At some point, he married Harlan County native and East Benham High School Graduate, Wilma Rose Foster. Wilma was the child of James Foster & Georgia Walker Rose. The new couple would eventually settle in Northeastern Tennessee.

Throughout her career, Wilma would attend Peter Cortez Business College and East Tennessee State University. She worked for 23 years at J.C. Penny's department store. Her community work included serving as the Public Relations Coordinator for the Johnson City branch of the Morristown College Alumni Association. Additionally, she was a member of the Eastern Star Lodge, Harville Community Choir and Thankful Baptist Church in Johnson City.

The following article from the Johnson City Press on March 25, 2015 details the highlights of his life and career:

ELIZABETHTON — Thomas Harville didn't quite reach the designation of centenarian. But that was one of the few things the distinguished educator and public servant failed to achieve in his long and successful life, which included his 2009 induction into the Carter County/Elizabethton Educators Hall of Fame. Harville died Thursday at the age of 99. "He was such a professional man, and he had this aura about him. He was a man who could work with anyone," said Catherine Armstrong, a fellow teacher when they both were at T.A. Dugger Jr. High School.

"I remember the students really liked him and showed him great respect," Mrs. Armstrong said. "The other members of the faculty, the administration, the PTA, everyone liked and respected him."

Proof of that respect was that he was asked to come back to become principal at Elizabethton High School after a stint as in-service director at Greene Valley Developmental Center. He began his tenure at the high school for the 1972-73 school year, with the Civil Rights struggle still in the newspapers and television. It was less than four years since the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Despite the national struggle over integration, people on the scene that year do not recall any controversy about a black man being installed as principal of a predominantly white high school.

"I don't recall any problems at all," Mrs. Armstrong said. Joe Alexander was a junior at Elizabethton High School when Harville became principal. He also remembers no problems.

“He was a nice guy. He was always very enthusiastic and was always very friendly.” Alexander, who is now proprietor of Alexander Insurance Agency, said he knew what to expect because Harville had already been the social studies teacher at T.A. Dugger Jr. High for most of the students.

“People always got along quite well with him ... I know my parents were very open-minded about him becoming principal,” Alexander said.

At the time Harville was born, it would have been inconceivable to have a black principal of a white high school.

Harville was born on the Fourth of July, 1915, in Plantersville, Alabama, not far from Selma. His father, Henry, a tenant farmer, and his mother, Gatesy, were both uneducated. They had few possessions they could pass on to their first son except a strong faith in God and a strong faith in the value of a good education. To that foundation, Harville would add two more: a faith in himself and a faith in his students.

Eventually, Henry became a coal miner and moved his family to Harlan County, Kentucky. Harville thrived in the new environment and his new school at East Bentham, even though the 11-year-old was placed in the third grade because of his scanty education. That turned out to be a blessing because the school only had 10 grades, but added the 11th and 12th grades while he was attending. He became one of the first seven graduates in 1936.

He wanted to continue his education but it was the midst of the Great Depression. He defied the odds and demonstrated his faith in himself and his God by telling his parents, “I am going by the grace of God. I just believe God’s grace and mercy will get me through.”

Harville completed his first two years at Morristown College, then enrolled at West Virginia State College.

His last year was a struggle. His father died of a stroke in the coal mines. The coal mine company provided \$1,000 to the family. His mother offered to share some of the money with Thomas, but he told her to use the money for her expenses and those of his younger brother.

After graduating, Harville returned to Harlan County, where he was offered a teaching position at his old high school. He also began taking graduate courses in the summer, first from the University of Chicago, then the University of Kentucky when it became integrated. While at the University of Kentucky he said he was greatly influenced by the advice of Prof. Lucille Lurry in 1958. Harville said she told her class that if they were still teaching the way they taught 25 years ago, they were out of step.

Harville took that to heart, but wondered how he could change his teaching style. He wrote in his autobiography, *T.J. is my Name* that during the 198-mile drive from Lexington to Harlan County that he prayed “Lord, Help me to never do anything that will cripple any student. Help me to do that which is best for them in the years to come while they are under my care. Help me to indoctrinate them with desires and concepts of learning that tomorrow’s world won’t be as hectic and difficult as mine has been.”

When he returned to East Bentham, he told his students what Lurry had said and then he told them they were going to help him teach in a better way.

His faith in his students soon paid off. They put a large mural on a wall at the school and entitled it "The Exploration of the United States."

The students began to conduct research on the history of each of the 50 states. The students wrote to every state capital, chambers of commerce and libraries throughout the nation. All of the research and planning was done by the students under his direction. Before long, the whole school was involved in the project. The math class plotted latitudes and longitudes, the English class wrote letters to state capitols and chambers of commerce. It was such a whole-school success that the Harlan County superintendent of the schools had the students explain the method to all the other social studies teachers in the county.

When one of the social studies teachers asked the students how they had benefited from the method, Harville said one of the boys stood up and said, "one thing about it, when this project began, I had no interest whatsoever in social studies and hardly anything else. But when we're put on our own and responsible for getting a unit of work together, all of us students found that the teacher meant that we had to do it and we got busy and planned it. This kind of teaching has meant more to me than any I have received."

In 1960, T.A. Dugger Jr., the superintendent of the Elizabethton City School System, heard of Harville's successful method and offered him a job teaching in Elizabethton. The school system was still segregated then and Harville was assigned to teach at Douglas School.

Harville soon found that the fifth and sixth graders at Douglas were a year-and-a-half behind the other students of the school system in English and science. Harville said he had long endured substandard materials and funding, but he could not tolerate his students trailing so far behind. He immediately went to East Tennessee State College and found help in Prof. Madison Byar.

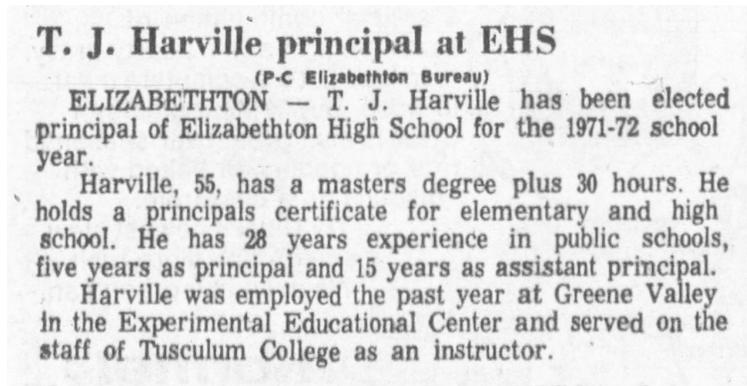
Byar encouraged him to spend time reading in the library to find an answer. After spending many hours there, Harville found his answer: team teaching. He told Dugger's successor as superintendent, J. Howard Bowers, who endorsed the plan.

Soon, just as had happened at East Bentham, teachers, students and parents were sold on the plan. Members of the community were also brought in who could provide assistance. By this time, the method had a name: team teaching.

The results were remarkable. The state report cards showed the students at Douglas had made tremendous growth during the year, much more growth than the students in the rest of the city's schools. The 5th graders had shown growth of 1.3 in arithmetic scores, compared to the rest of the city's growth of 0.4. In language, the growth was 2.4 compared with 0.5. In spelling, the growth was 3.5 compared with zero growth for the rest of the city.

For all of his successes in education, Harville became better known in Johnson City as the commissioner of the Johnson City Housing Authority, where he served from June 1975 to June 1995. Serving the young people remained a priority and one of his most passionate efforts was

to create a community center, the Pro-To Club to help teenagers.



(Johnson City Press Chronicle, June 3, 1971)

Harville always remained passionate about education. In the 1980s and 1990s the former principal of Elizabethton High School had monthly outings with Fred Baker, the former principal at East Side Elementary School and Bill Armstrong, the former principal at Harold McCormick Elementary School.

“We used to go out every month and we would discuss education,” said Armstrong, who is married to Catherine Armstrong. “By the time we got done with lunch, we had pretty much solved all the problems.”

In nominating Harville for the Hall of Fame in 2009, Bill Armstrong said “Thomas J. Harville was a student advocate. Students loved and respected him. He believed that all students should be responsible for bettering themselves. He also was strong on the idea that we should all work together to make our community and world a better place in which to live.”

Funeral arrangements are incomplete at Birchette Mortuary.

Eds. note: Some of the information for this article was taken from a 2009 Johnson City Press interview with Mr. Harville.

Additional information can be gleaned from other newspaper articles & public records from his time in the region:

Having migrated to Erie, Pennsylvania by 1948, Mr. Harville’s mother, Gatsey, had returned to the region and passed away in 1961 of coronary disease at the age of 69. She was laid to rest at Westlawn Cemetery in Johnson City, Tennessee.

Mr. Harville’s position with the Elizabethton School System would change in 1973 to Curriculum and Audio-Visual Coordinator.

In 1991, the now-retired T.J. Harville was appointed by Tennessee’s Governor to the Greene Valley Developmental Center’s Board of Trustees.

Thomas’ wife, Wilma, passed away on December 15, 1996.

Information sourced from:

Kowalewski, Albin James, "“To be true to ourselves”: Freedpeople, School Building, and Community Politics in Appalachian Tennessee, 1865-1870. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2009

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