

FROM SLAVE FARM TO COUNTY TRAINING SCHOOL

BY ALLEN B. DOGGETT, JR.

NOT so far back but that the oldest residents may recall it, the Dixon Plantation, or, as it was later called, the Robbins Farm, with its hundred slaves, its "Big House," and six hundred acres of level land, occupied a conspicuous place under the antebellum regime in the life of the lower end of Gloucester County, Virginia. Today the entire six-hundred-acre holding, with the exception of twenty-three acres deeded to the State for a county training school and some thirty-five including the Robbins grist mill, is owned by colored people, some of them descendants of slaves on the old plantation. And the "Big House," where, tradition has it, the two house servants were the only Negroes who were given any instruction in reading on the farm, has now become a dormitory which houses teachers and those pupils who, coming from distant parts of the county, are unable to return to their homes at the close of each school day. Where sixty years ago ignorance and indifference were the common lot, the same land and the remaining physical property are today being used to develop the capacities of a race.

But this transformation has not come without effort. Determined leadership has been constantly behind the project of developing the Gloucester County Training School. To Tom Walker, or Lawyer Walker, or T. C. Walker, as he is variously called at home, or abroad in his native State, where his activities constantly call him in the fields of education and child welfare, belongs the credit for furnishing the dynamic energy and continuous interest necessary to push a school from one room and teacher to a plant of seven buildings and eight teachers. When T. C. Walker returned to his home county after graduating from Hampton Institute in the early eighties, the one-room log cabins, the lack of schools, the rented land, the empty home life, gave the young man the cue for the great interest and passion for better schools which has gripped him ever since, and he at once hired out as a teacher in the largest one-room school in the county for \$22.50 per month. Into this little building the zeal and personality of its teacher

soon attracted a class of 125 pupils. This group was the beginning of what is now called the Gloucester County Training School, which carries its pupils through the third year of high school and sends many of them on to professional careers.

How the county school board at the persistent solicitation of the young teacher promised to furnish another teacher for



MR. THOMAS C. WALKER



THE FIRST TWO BUILDINGS OF THE COUNTY TRAINING SCHOOL

the overcrowded schoolhouse if the patrons of the school would add another room, how the room was added, and, that building in turn becoming overcrowded, how the local board

finally agreed some sixteen years later to match dollar for dollar in the erection of a four-room schoolhouse, is a story of triumph in teaching an entire county the value of education and in ability to secure the maximum from the county authorities.



**MR. WALKER'S
BIRTHPLACE**

**WHERE HE WENT
TO SCHOOL**



**WHERE HIS
CHILDREN WENT
TO SCHOOL**

To see the school plant today is to think of it as always having been there, but no doubt there are still those who as they attend the entertainments, the school closings, or the farmers' conferences, recall the fields, where now stand the school buildings, and the old mansion house, when they were put to far different uses. Despite all the changes that have been made in this property the leader in the great transformation is still not content with his work. He must needs improve his equipment, secure higher salaries so that he can retain his best teachers, paint the buildings, improve and beautify the

grounds. The work will never be done so long as T. C. Walker ranges the offices of school boards, the centres of philanthropy, and the farms and homes of Gloucester County to gather in the support for his work of transforming a county with the help of a school.

Mr. Walker, between the time he gave up active teaching six years after his first experience in the one-room school and his agitation for an adequate four-room building, had been doing many interesting things for himself and his people. For instance, he had passed the bar examinations of his State and had been practicing law for some years, using his talents in



THE FIRST BUILDING OF THE COUNTY TRAINING SCHOOL WHICH HE HAS BUILT FOR HIS NEIGHBORS' CHILDREN

the court room where the need for them was great. Then, too, he had been pushing a county-wide home-owning movement by founding and directing the Gloucester County Land and Brick Company, which by its signal success in financing and directing the building operations of the new landowners, had shown the way to others interested in purchasing on the group plan large tracts of land for home purposes. It so happened that a large share of the Robbins Farm was bought by a group under his direction, enabling those to own land and homes who as individuals would not have been able to do so. The colored population had thus thrown its anchor overboard in Gloucester County and its transient, roving quality disappeared with each purchase of land and the erection of each home. There was now something to build upon.

Fresh from these successes, he formed an Educational Association which was to help in raising money for the four-room schoolhouse to meet the dollar-for-dollar condition



A MEETING OF THE GLOUCESTER EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION

posed by the county school board. This was the first organization of its kind among colored people of Virginia and was the forerunner of the Patrons' Leagues which are behind so many similar projects today. With the erection of the four-room building at a cost of \$6000 four teachers were secured and the first public, graded school in the county for Negroes began its work. It was a big step from one room, one teacher, and one hundred and twenty-five pupils. But there was no satisfying this vigorous leader. The school term was only five months long. Too short! The pupils should have another month of schooling. So Lawyer Walker left the county for a few days and returned with money sufficient to pay his



THE SECOND SCHOOL BUILDING

teachers another month, and the school term in the graded school became six months long. School terms have been slowly lengthening all over the State, however, and since 1924 the teachers in this same building are paid by the county for eight months' teaching, although it has been necessary to supplement this remuneration with funds raised elsewhere in order to keep the type of teacher which meets the standard set for the county training school.

Meanwhile children were coming to the school some of whom walked a distance of five miles night and morning to take advantage of the graded school. They were ready, some of them, to stay on in school beyond the seventh grade. Those who wished to go on to higher schools must be prepared at home. Something had to be done to meet this need for classes on the high-school level. So Mr. Walker went to the school board and told of his need. But, it seemed, there was no money. Nothing could be done about it at the time. Could Tom Walker have permission to put up another building? He could if he found the money. Simple permission was enough and a year later the lumber was piled near the site selected and the second school building was erected with the help of the Rosenwald and Jeanes Funds, from each of which Mr. Walker succeeded in securing \$600. It contains two large classrooms and two small rooms used, before the purchase of the old Robbins plantation house, for domestic-science practice.

Throughout the evolution of the training school the idea of some teaching of domestic arts and agriculture had been held to, for, almost from the first, at least one-half day a week had been devoted to practical instruction in these subjects. In 1921 the Smith-Hughes Bill made it possible to secure a qualified teacher of agriculture, with salary paid by the State and Federal Governments, who could devote all his time to the teaching of agriculture, farm shop work, and the strengthening of the farming practices of the school community through part-time classes for adults. This opportunity was seized upon at once and the teacher of agriculture came, making five teachers. At about the same time the Jeanes Fund offered to pay one-half the salary of an instructor in domestic science, and a teacher with Hampton training was secured to develop this end of the work. Just where the other half of her salary was to come from was at the time not known. The point was that the school needed the teacher and the expense was justified. The money would be secured from somewhere. It was, and still is.

Anticipating the time when the training school would be doing more than one year of work on the high-school level,

and realizing the distances some of the girls were traveling—in some cases fifteen and sixteen miles—T. C. Walker began agitation for the purchase of the old Robbins house and its adjoining forty-three acres, which would be useful in connection with the agricultural work. First he went as usual to the school board. Now T. C. Walker is an orator. His eye fires when he pleads for one more step in the development of education in his home county. He had known the characteristics of the members of the board, with one exception, since childhood. He went before them and, no doubt, warmed to his subject. The answer came. They were not in a position to help. But the words of the board only increased Walker's determination to complete the facilities of the school. The date for the sale—it was to be sold by the county for cash—was fast approaching. There was little time to get in touch with and interest private sources of help. The location of the old "Big House" and the land in relation to the school buildings already erected was ideal. The chance must be taken advantage of and the property secured for the colored people.

The day of the sale came and, without a dollar to pay for it, Lawyer Walker bid in the property. That night he left the county. Meanwhile the county officials were looking for the cash, with the deed in their hands. It was during this enforced trip that, while walking across the Hampton campus, he ran into the late Dr. Buttrick. Friends that the two were, they exchanged greetings. But the school was always on the mind of the black man. His geniality suddenly broke and he said, "Dr. Buttrick, I'm in trouble." Then he told his story. The upshot of this chance meeting was that the General Education Board sent through Mr. Jackson Davis a check for \$1000. This was immediately paid over and good intentions established, but the unpaid balance still jeopardized the entire project. Later on \$800 came from the same source and with \$600 borrowed on his personal note, using twenty acres of the farm as collateral, Mr. Walker finally secured the property. He then presented the county with the deed for twenty-three acres of land and the house and barns upon it and was ready for the next step: renovating and adding to the structure, providing for heat and light, installing the equipment for domestic-science work and for the dormitory for both teachers and students. Hard work, single-handed work, was ahead. It would have been much simpler to practice law or meet his many calls for educational addresses throughout the State with talk alone. However, strange to say, word leaked out of the county that help was



THE ROBBINS HOMESTEAD, NOW THE TEACHERS' HOME OF THE COUNTY TRAINING SCHOOL

needed in building a home for the teachers of the training school. The Rosenwald Fund heard of it, considered it essential in the development of this plant, sent \$1000 for the teachers' home—and an addition was built. Equipment throughout the enlarged and renovated building was, in the main, donated by friends in the North. The kitchen equipment came through a special fund of the General Education Board. And so, from one source and another, necessities were obtained until today the old place takes care comfortably and safely of teachers and girls and provides a sewing room, a kitchen, and a dining-room all of which are used in the domestic-science training.

While all this was going on it became necessary for the school to meet the requirement for a separate building to house the farm shop work, and Mr. Walker made a trip to Philadelphia to enlist the interest of the Negroes of that city in his project. He spoke at the church of Rev. W. F. Graham, in one night raising \$400 for the teaching of carpentry in the training school. Other talks to colored audiences in the same city brought in more money. The building was put up and now houses the classes in agriculture and the work with tools. But despite these efforts no help came from the county and there is still \$400 owing on this building.

The heating and lighting equipment was for a time a formidable obstacle to be overcome. Small wood stoves would increase the fire hazard as would also kerosene lamps. But out of a clear sky a well-known friend of Negro education



MR. WALKER AT THE DOOR OF
THE POWER PLANT

gave \$2400 with which a heating and lighting plant was installed. Now electricity lights the school-rooms, the agricultural shop, the the dormitory, and the four-room house used by the men teachers. This last-mentioned building, by the way, was an old farm structure out of which, by judicious use of laths, plaster, paint, and clapboards, a comfortable place has been made for the men teachers and the young men students.

The renovating of the farm building for the men made a total of six buildings now used for educational and housing purposes. No use is at present made of the big barn which, as it now stands, was a part of the original purchase, but the plan is to have a couple of cows and some hens when funds and organization make it possible.

Mr. Walker gives one-half of his time to the school when he is in the county, and the school board has appointed him principal, to serve without pay. As he visits the eight classrooms, notes the calibre of the teaching, and supervises each detail in the school experience of the three hundred pupils who daily attend the training school, which now carries its pupils up to the fourth year of high school, satisfaction in his building must surely outweigh the trials of campaigning for funds, rebuffs from those in authority, and misunderstandings on the part of the patrons themselves.

Take Tom Walker, and the work he has accomplished, out of Gloucester County, and many of its splendid qualities would shrink. But most of all his interests his work with the Gloucester County Training School reveals a leader, a man of vision, and one who gets things done.

THE question with the Negroes is not one of special proficiency, of success in one direction—the pursuit of knowledge—but of *success all around*. It is one of morals, industry, self-restraint; of power to organize society, to draw social lines between the decent and indecent, to form public sentiment that shall support pure morals, and to show common sense in the relations of life.

—Armstrong

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EMORY D. ALVORD of Mt. Silinda, South Rhodesia, has recently been appointed by the Government as agricultural specialist in charge of the agricultural education of the natives throughout the whole South Rhodesia. His principal duties will be to organize better the instruction in agriculture in the mission schools and the various native reserves. Mr. Alvord has been a teacher in the Mt. Silinda School for many years.

DR. E. L. ORR of Nashville, Tenn, is a member of the white section of the Tennessee Committee on Interracial Co-operation. His address, reproduced in this issue of the *Southern Workman*, was given at the annual meeting of the State Conference of Social Work in which the Interracial Committee participated.

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