

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

School's Out

Much of early education in nineteenth century America occurred in one-room schoolhouses. Incredibly small, they were replaced in the 1900s with much larger, brick-and-mortar buildings. School's out permanently for one-room schoolhouses of yesteryear. Their doors are forever closed.

Decades before school desegregation, there were several schoolhouses in Bucklesberry that educated black students and white students, albeit separately. La Grange resident, Ms. Helen Mae Philpot, born and reared in Bucklesberry, remembers two schools for black students in the early- to mid-1900s. She was a student at both schools. One was located off of Dawson Mill Road. The other was situated along Kennedy Home Road, between Jenny Lind Store and White Oak Grove Church.

Rural schoolhouses were often named after nearby churches, signaling a close relationship. Hickory Grove School in Bucklesberry was a prime example. The current Hickory Grove Church, established about 1860, is within hollering distance of where the former schoolhouse originally stood.

Burned beyond further use in the 1920s, all that remains of Hickory Grove School today is its foundation, according to locals. Encircled by thick brush in a heavily wooded area, the schoolhouse was directly off of Kennedy Home Road. It suffered an earlier fire in 1914, and was rebuilt by the county. Dubbed a "model 'double' school-house," the reconstructed Hickory Grove School was "one of the handsomest and best-equipped buildings in the county," (*Kinston Daily Free Press*, August 19, 1914).

The late Clellan Thomas Sutton (1908–1999) of Bucklesberry attended Hickory Grove School for most of his grade school years. After consolidation of seven area schoolhouses in 1925, Clellan was among scores of students who transferred to the new two-story bricked school in La Grange. In a 1995 interview with Glenn Fields, Clellan shared his recollections of the two-room, two-teacher Hickory Grove School. First through fifth grade students were taught in one room; sixth and seventh grade students received lessons in the other. School committee members were Clellan's father, Herman Sutton (1876–1950), Charlie Andrew Sutton (1883–1945), and John Franklin Barwick (1852–1929).

Hickory Grove School did not always enjoy full support from the public. In 1882, *The Daily Journal* of New Bern reported that there were "those who are disposed to speak of this school as a failure." Back then, such a charge could have been levied against many rural schools. Educational resources were few, and school funding was pitifully lean. The South as a whole

struggled to bounce back economically years after post-Civil War Reconstruction ended in 1877. Describing the bleakness of the times, author, Allen Guelzo, wrote, “the South remained an economic backwater” (p. 526).

Far from a failing school, Hickory Grove proved to be highly successful over the years, amassing a sterling record of educational success and service to the community. Local newspapers from Goldsboro and Kinston reported on the following school activities: box parties and fundraisers (1914, 1915, 1916, 1918, 1922); Lenoir Concert Company musical program and spelling bee (1915); student participation in the county-wide Educational Day parade (1915); installation of a school library (1917); special school exercises, Robert E. Lee commemoration program (1917); special school exercises, Liberty Loan program (1918); Liberty Loan rally (1918); Red Cross collection drive (1918); free hookworm exams, typhoid vaccinations, and dental treatment provided by a health officer (1918); special school exercises, NC Day with war savings theme (1918); Armenian-Syrian Relief Fund collection drive (1919); typhoid immunizations provided by a physician (1920); lecture on tuberculosis (1920); farmers’ cooperative marketing pledge meeting (1921); and educational-agricultural movies (1922).

Hickory Grove School students were high achievers. The school’s honor roll was published in the *Kinston Free Press* in 1918: “Primary grades, Miss Sue Belle Sutton teacher: Ethel Herring, Hazel Sutton, Prentice Sutton, Alpha Herring, Claudie Sutton, Florence Rouse, Pauline Sutton, Earl Anderson, Wesley Hill, Lola Carter, Verna Barwick, Kinsey Elmore, James Foss, Carlyne Hill, Zelle Sutton, Lillie Rouse, Horace Sutton. Grammar grades, Miss Glenn Sutton teacher: Fannie Herring, Lucy Herring, Julie Rouse, Herman Herring, Hodges Sutton, Cleo Sutton, Helen Sutton, Allie Sutton, Luddie Sutton.”

Lenoir County operated 44 one-, two-, and three-room schoolhouses in the early-1900s. The students at Hickory Grove School were highly competitive. Of the County’s eleven commencement contests held in 1918, Hickory Grove students won the lion’s share of four awards: chorus, with the song, “The Old Folks at Home”; storytelling, Frederick Branch, first-grade; storytelling, Clarence Belcher, third grade; and hundred yard dash, Hilliard Elmore.

Caption to accompany photograph:

Hickory Grove School students, circa 1896. Left to right, top row: Julian Sutton, Milton Sutton, Unknown, Sallie Sutton, Roy Sutton, Bettie Barwick, Teacher Unknown, Johnny Barwick, Lucy Benton, Clarence Sutton, Unknown, Major Herring, Robert Sutton, Charlie Sutton, Mary Sutton, Sadie Sutton, Jim Sutton. Middle row: Unknown, Unknown, Hebert Sutton, Amy Sutton, Emma Sutton, Eula Barwick, Martha Sutton, Lola Sutton, Walter Sutton, Johnny Benton, Frank Barwick, Dempsey Barwick, Major Barwick, Lilly Sutton, Unknown, Unknown. Bottom row: Ben Sutton, Unknown, May Sutton, Unknown, Mamie Barwick, Unknown, Unknown, Unknown, Clifton Sutton, Carmon Elmore. Names identified by the late Clellan Sutton. Photograph courtesy of Jack Randall Sutton of Bucklesberry.

