

Union Academy Schoolhouse: A Brief Introduction

History of Education in Tarpon Springs before Structure Arrived at U.A. Campus

- The 1885 constitution of Florida mandated segregated education.
- A simple wooden structure for white schoolchildren began operating in Tarpon Springs by the 1880s. A small “Negro school” served African American children in Tarpon Springs before Union Academy opened in 1919.
- Original Union Academy campus opened at a time of great racial hostility in Florida; within a few years, brutal attacks and lynchings took place in Ocoee, Perry, and Rosewood. Violence by the Ku Klux Klan increased during the 1920s.
- Despite the “separate but equal” provisions of case law and court decisions (including the 1896 judgment in *Plessy v Ferguson* by the U.S. Supreme Court), a wide racial disparity existed in school facilities, teacher salaries, general funding, and length of school terms for African American schools.
- Many white educators and public officials believed that any educational opportunities for black children should fall within the areas of training for agricultural and domestic service. They often cited Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on practical and manual skills as a proper path for black students.
- Schools for African American children stressed industrial education and welcomed philanthropy to compensate for inadequate funding.
- Despite laws requiring segregation, principals at Union Academy regularly invited “the white friends of the school” to events. White patrons often enjoyed reserved seating for events at Union Academy, an act that was not reciprocated by white schools for African American residents.

Construction Information

- Built circa 1915, possibly as a barracks or other government building. Moved to all-white Tarpon Springs Elementary as an early portable classroom by 1926. Similar structures were often considered “chicken coops” by students of the time.

History of Use

- Used at Tarpon Springs Elementary through the 1941-1942 school year.
- In August 1942, the school board authorized the relocation of two portables from Tarpon Springs Elementary to the Union Academy campus for \$400. This building was one of the two moved near the corner of Oakwood (Wall) and Grosse.

Significant Events/Activities at the School

- Excellent source of school events and extracurricular activities gleaned from the “Negro” news pages and columns of the *Tarpon Springs Leader* (especially those written by U. A. teacher Ruth Lambright) and the *St. Petersburg Times*, as well as occasional columns in the *Florida Sentinel(-Bulletin)*.
- Site of many academic and co-curricular events during over two decades of service as part of Union Academy.
- With the opening of Pinellas High School in Clearwater in 1954, school administrators planned to move upper grades (7th and 8th grades) from Union

Academy. Parents and others protested this move, which came at the same time the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown* decision had invalidated the notion of "separate but equal" education as way of segregating the races.

- By the mid-1960s, the structure moved to Grosse Avenue and Morgan Street and became home to the "Better Boys Club," a club for children that used art, athletics, and other activities to provide a nurturing, supportive environment for young black men.
- By the late 1970s, the building served as a storage facility for a local physician, and later fell into disrepair. Left abandoned, it faced almost certain demolition.

Moving of the Structure to Heritage Village

- Concerned residents in Tarpon Springs, along with county officials and staff at Heritage Village, came together to rescue the structure and have it moved to Heritage Village.
- The building arrived in poor condition, with extensive termite damage and numerous alterations that made many of its original features (i.e., location of exact window outlines, etc.) difficult to detect.

Union Academy Schoolhouse

Overview

The Union Academy schoolhouse, once part of a racially segregated campus for African Americans in Tarpon Springs, represents an early “portable classroom” for schoolchildren. This building, constructed circa 1915 and presently located at Heritage Village, possibly served as a barracks, office, or warehouse for the military during the First World War. Federal authorities sold many structures similar to this building as surplus property after World War I ended in November 1918. On more than one occasion, the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction purchased such structures, derisively known as “chicken coops,” to use as portable classroom buildings.

This structure—and another identical building—became part of the campus of Tarpon Springs Elementary School, an all-white facility erected on Eagle Avenue (now Pinellas Avenue). The community’s original school for white children, located near that site, began in the late 1870s or early 1880s as a simple wooden structure. One pioneer resident remembers that in 1889 or 1890 archaeologists from the Smithsonian excavated an Indian mound near the campus. By 1911, Tarpon residents hoped to replace the outdated and inadequate first structure with a stone and brick building. As part of the debate over the division of Hillsborough County, authorities in Tampa promised to replace the wooden schoolhouse if citizens of western Hillsborough rejected the plan to create Pinellas County. When that measure passed, however, local residents and Pinellas leaders stepped up and allocated \$11,598 to construct the Tarpon Springs Public School. Opened in 1912 with an entrance along Eagle Street, the campus occupied a city block, bordered by Cypress, Hybiscus, and Park streets. The main structure enrolled students through the sixth grade and included seven classrooms, a laboratory, a small library, and a second-floor auditorium. In 1915, the school district added a second building with four classrooms for the primary grades that occupied land to the east of the 1912 building. As early as 1919—and certainly before January 1926—Sanborn fire insurance maps indicate that officials had moved at least four portable buildings (including the Heritage Village building) to the white elementary school campus, along the northeast corner of the block near Park and Hybiscus. By the fall of 1942, the school system spent \$400 to relocate two

of these portables, including the building located at Heritage Village, to the Union Academy (U. A.) campus.¹

For the next two decades, the building presently located at Heritage Village served the black students and teachers at Union Academy. By the mid-1960s, leaders in the African-American community purchased the building from the Pinellas County school district and had it moved to the corner of Grosse Avenue and Morgan Street. From this location, the building provided social and recreational opportunities for black children and teenagers as the site of the Better Boys Club. By the late 1970s, however, the structure fell into disrepair and became a neglected eyesore to many in the area unfamiliar with its past. Due to the creative labors of community leaders and government officials—including local residents, the Pinellas County Department of Community Development, the City of Tarpon Springs, and the Tarpon Springs Area Historical Society—the building won a reprieve from certain demolition as it moved to its present site in Heritage Village.

After renovations and rehabilitation, the Union Academy schoolhouse resembles its 1940s appearance. Considered by many to be the oldest existing portable classroom in the State of Florida, this structure and its proud history of service to the area's African American community offer an important and permanent monument to the struggles and achievements of our county's African American residents.

Challenges to Researching the History of Union Academy

Newspaper articles and other sources traditionally used by historians may paint an incomplete or inaccurate image of an African American community. Some larger newspapers in the South (including as the *St. Petersburg Times*) published so-called “Negro news pages” during the early and mid-twentieth century. However, most of these

¹ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 11 November 1911; R. F. Pent, *History of Tarpon Springs* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors, 1964), 45-46; Patricia Perez Costrini, ed., *A Tradition of Excellence, Pinellas County Schools: 1912-1987* (Clearwater: Pinellas County School Board, 1987), 254-255; Pinellas County, Board of Public Instruction, *The Golden Anniversary of Pinellas Schools, Celebrating 50 Years of Educational Progress; Superintendent's Semi-centennial Report, 1912-1962* (St. Petersburg: Modern Printing & Publishing, 1962), 14; Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps: Florida* (Teaneck, N.J. : Chadwyck-Healey, 1983), January 1926 map, February 1930 map, microfilm reel 16. The 1926 map indicates that a Greek school sat on the other side of Eagle, further emphasizing the segregation of white, black, and Greek children.

periodicals limited the distribution of such pages to the African American subscribers. White readers only read about African Americans when crimes—real or perceived—had occurred. Well into the twentieth century, many white-owned newspapers in the South caricatured the quotations and dialogues of African Americans, emphasized criminal activities while denying accomplishments, and rarely included stories about the educational achievements of those who attended Jim Crow schools.

Newspapers in smaller municipalities, such as the *Largo Sentinel* and *Tarpon Springs Leader* in Pinellas County, occasionally included stories about events at African American churches and schools, but these stories often reinforced racial stereotypes. For example, a 1916 article in the *Leader* with the title “Colored Folks Make Merry” described a gathering by noting that “dancing was the main feature of the evening and the colored folks always enjoy a dance.” Nevertheless, by the 1950s the *Leader* included a “Negro news column” that all readers received. This column provided a wealth of information about students and faculty at Union Academy. Tampa’s *Florida Sentinel-Bulletin*, an African-American newspaper first published in December 1945, also includes occasional articles about black residents of northern Pinellas County.²

Early Educational Opportunities for African Americans on the Pinellas Peninsula

The end of Reconstruction in 1877, subsequent legislation, and court decisions extinguished any hope of equal educational opportunity. For many white Southerners, the compromise over the electoral dispute between Samuel Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes in the 1876 Presidential election offered an opportunity for Southern leaders to entice Northern capital while disenfranchising the African Americans. Soon Bourbon Democrats opened the Florida frontier to railroad speculators such as Henry Flagler and developers including Hamilton Disston. In Article XII, Section 12 of Florida’s 1885 constitution, Bourbon Democrats enacted a provision proclaiming that “white and colored children shall not be taught in the same school, but impartial provision shall be made for both.” By 1895, Tallahassee lawmakers enacted legislation prohibiting schools from boarding or teaching blacks and whites in the same facility. State Superintendent

² *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 1 November 1916. The University of South Florida Tampa library has a fairly complete microfilm collection of the *Florida Sentinel* (later *Florida Sentinel-Bulletin*).

William N. Sheats, in a report to the legislature, claimed that any attempt to integrate schools would harm public funding and philanthropy for black students. The United States Supreme Court's landmark *Plessy v Ferguson* decision in 1896 adjudged that "separate but equal" facilities did not violate the provision for equal protection under the laws mandated by the Fourteenth Amendment.³ A 1914 editorial expressed the beliefs of many white Floridians when it discussed "Negro disenfranchisement":

As long as one can round up four of five hundred negroes (sic) in one city and vote them as he would direct, the negro (sic) is incompetent to vote and is not entitled to the franchise. . . . In Florida, the negro (sic) is well provided for—not by his vote—but by the work of white people. His condition will constantly improve in all matters, but it would be a blessing to the race and a help to the entire state were he eliminated from participating in elections.⁴

Schools along the Pinellas peninsula faced many obstacles long before the creation of Pinellas County. African-American schools struggled for limited resources at a time when education in general ranked as a low priority. Appeals to the larger community often failed to compensate for funding shortages. For example, in early 1902 R. P. Jones—the principal of St. Petersburg's small "colored" school—learned that Hillsborough County authorities would not provide additional funds to keep his school open beyond a shortened five-month term. In a letter published in the *St. Petersburg Times*, Jones courageously offered this plea:

We believe that if any race needs an education it is the (N)egro. We will say that we do not look for anyone to assist us, but we do look for justice to us. . . . (W)e have no power at all over the schools of this state, nor the length of term. . . . We ask you to give us a chance. How can a teacher live with five months (sic) term and loaf seven? . . . We ask you not to look down on us because our faces are

³ For a general discussion of school desegregation in Pinellas County, see: James A. Schnur, "Desegregation of Schools in Pinellas County, Florida," *Tampa Bay History* 13 (Spring/Summer 1991): 26-43. Douglas Fleming, "Toward Integration: The Course of Race Relations in St. Petersburg, 1868 to 1963" (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1973), 4-5, 8-13; *Constitution of the State of Florida Adopted by the Convention of 1885, as Amended—1958* (Tallahassee: Secretary of State, 1958), 31; Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 11-15; Chapter 4335 of 1895 Acts cited in *General Statutes of the State of Florida* (St. Augustine: Record Company, 1906); *Biennial Report* (Tallahassee: Florida State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1897), 51-52, 188; *Plessy v Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

⁴ *Largo Sentinel*, 8 October 1914.

black, but just think that we have souls, and minds, and are in a progressive state, too. . . . We hope that our white friends will look into the matter.⁵

Before the opening of Union Academy in 1919, many African American children in northern Pinellas County attended a small “Negro school” in Tarpon Springs. This and other Jim Crow schools in the county emphasized Booker T. Washington’s model of industrial education with its focus on practical and manual skills rather than intellectual pursuits. An editorial printed in a January 1915 edition of the *Largo Sentinel* captured both the prejudices of many readers and the spirit of Washington’s accommodationism:

[S]ome persons who believe they have the good of the negro (sic) race at heart approve of giving advanced education to negro (sic) boys and girls generally, taking years of the children’s time in a way that could be used with far greater profit in teaching them to use tools and implements of the farm, the shop and the kitchen. . . . Not one in a hundred thousand of them is ever going to have any use for algebra, geometry, Latin, Greek, and similarly advanced studies.⁶

The writer claimed that teaching black children anything beyond use of farm tools, domestic science, and similar pursuits wasted time and money, and would “sow the seeds of future discontent.”⁷

By the mid-1910s, schools for African Americans throughout Pinellas County stressed industrial education and welcomed philanthropy. During the 1914-1915 academic year, seventeen teachers earning a combined salary of \$4,498.75 served an enrollment of 892 black pupils in Pinellas public schools. By comparison, the twenty-five white schools in the county employed 112 teachers who collectively earned \$67,243.25 while teaching 3,333 students.⁸ Pinellas schools for black children certainly received less per capita funding than their white counterparts, though they did benefit from the philanthropy of outside groups, such as the Jeanes Fund. Established by Anna Jeanes, this fund provided monies for industrial education for African Americans. In December

⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, 1 February 1902.

⁶ *Largo Sentinel*, 21 January 1915.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Largo Sentinel*, 16 September 1915.

1915, Superintendent Dixie M. Hollins toured schools with B. C. Caldwell, an agent for the Jeanes Fund. They visited a new industrial building at the Clearwater school (constructed and equipped at a cost of about \$800), an \$1800 addition to the Dunedin school funded by a winter visitor from Cleveland, and the improved facilities at schools in St. Petersburg and Tarpon Springs. A newspaper claimed that these resources provided an opportunity for girls to learn how “to cook and sew, do laundry work and housekeeping.” Hollins boasted that the county had received donations of approximately \$5,000 in funds and supplies for African American schools. Some of these funds came from the black community as well as white “friends.”⁹

Separate and unequal conditions persisted as school officials planned for the expansion of the “Negro school” in Tarpon Springs. While Dixie Hollins recruited many talented black teachers from the Hampton and Tuskegee institutes, these instructors faced formidable curricular and financial challenges. In March 1917, parents and principals at black schools in Dunedin, Clearwater, and St. Petersburg petitioned for an extension of the school term. Despite their pleas, the Board of Public Instruction granted only Dunedin an extra month of classes, yet even Dunedin continued to offer a shorter term than the nine-month term of white schools. By the fall of 1917, the Tarpon Springs facility had enrolled seventy-three students, much higher than the matriculation at schools in Dunedin (seventeen) and Safety Harbor (nineteen). On 16 February 1918, the Tarpon Springs sub-school district approved \$4,000 in bonds for the construction of a new building for African American children. The board purchased a site including lots twelve and thirteen at the southeast intersection of Oakwood (Wall) Street and Grosse Avenue on 11 February 1919. The board provided the building materials to C. A. Gause, who won the bid to construct Union Academy (U. A.) on 10 June 1919 at a cost of \$1,468.¹⁰

⁹ *Largo Sentinel*, 30 December 1915.

¹⁰ *Largo Sentinel*, 15 March 1917, 1 November 1917, 21 February 1918; *Golden Anniversary of Pinellas Schools*, 48; Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 17-20; *Report of the Board of Public Instruction of Pinellas County, Florida* (n.p., 1920), 70-71; *Fire Insurance Maps*, February 1930 map, microfilm reel 16. Note that the February 1945 corrections to the 1930 map incorrectly claim that the original Union Academy structure was built in 1928.

The Early Years of Union Academy, 1919-1942

Union Academy opened its doors in the 1919-1920 academic term, during a period of growing racial hostility throughout the Sunshine State. Florida's governor at the time, Sidney J. Catts, had assumed office in 1917 as an avowed white supremacist who fought against any educational resources for blacks that went beyond manual and agricultural training. Less than two weeks after Catts's term ended in January 1921, the *Tarpon Springs Leader* reported that "a very creditable number of men of the highest type and standing" had organized a Ku Klux Klan chapter in Tarpon Springs. Lynchings, attacks, and violence rocked many areas of Florida during the early 1920s, including the communities of Ocoee, Perry, and Rosewood. By early 1923, reports out of Tallahassee claimed that Catts planned to start a vigilante organization known as the "Rangers," where members who paid \$10 annual dues could participate in a group that saw itself as an "unmasked Ku Klux Klan."¹¹

Local newspapers, most notably the *Tarpon Springs Leader*, documented events at Union Academy. J. Tapley Marks served as the school's first principal, and at least six others held that office before the end of the 1920s.¹² Capt. George M. Lynch, the county school superintendent from 1929 to 1935, brought President A. B. Cooper of Edward Waters College in Jacksonville for a visit to the Union Academy campus in March 1930. That same month, many Academy teachers attended a "better health" workshop in Tampa. Students in the seventh through ninth grades received prizes ranging from fifty

¹¹ Wayne Flint, *Cracker Messiah: Governor Sidney J. Catts of Florida* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 46; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 17 January 1921; *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 February 1923; See also Maxine D. Jones's chapter in James J. Horgan and Lewis N. Wynne, eds. *Florida Decades: A Sesquicentennial History* (St. Leo: St. Leo College Press, 1995). As Klan chapters gained many new members during the 1910s and 1920s, local Klan organizations touted themselves as important social and cultural institutions in their communities. For example, an article in a 1926 Arcadia newspaper celebrates the arrival of a Klan-sponsored circus to DeSoto County. For a day, many Klan members put aside their robes and donned clown costumes to the delight of white children in Arcadia. The newspaper proclaimed: "The local (K)lansmen are in full charge of the big show and they are to be congratulated . . . for underwriting an entertainment of this size, requires no small amount of cooperation and endeavor on the part of the local sponsors. It is safe to predict that the Klan circus will be a big success." This circus also played in other Florida cities, including St. Petersburg, Sarasota, Lakeland, and Orlando. *The Arcadian*, 23 February 1926.

¹² The Board of Public Instruction's *Golden Anniversary of Pinellas Schools* includes a list of principals for each school from its earliest years through 1962. Articles appearing in March 1930 issues of the *Tarpon Springs Leader* mention a J. C. Peel as principal, though Peel does not appear on the list in *Golden Anniversary* and may have served as a supervising "principal" of black schools.

cents to one dollar during the spring term for achievement awards. Pupils and teachers participated in “Rosenwald School Day” activities during the spring of 1930, including a basketball game with 34th Street High School (now Gibbs High School). Though Gibbs defeated Union Academy in that game, the 1935 Academy boys’ basketball team coached by Principal Richard V. Moore compiled a 14-0 record, while the girls’ team went 13-1. The students played their home games on a new court recently funded by the county. Mrs. D. P. Boyer, chair of the school’s board of trustees, often attended such events to recognize the students’ accomplishments. By 1932, the school had replaced the small, informal commencement exercises with graduation celebrations spread over an entire week. Ceremonies for this event included a baccalaureate sermon at Mt. Vernon Baptist Church, an operetta with school children, a gymnastics program sponsored by the physical education department, student oratories, and a play entitled “Graduation Day at Wood Hill School.”¹³

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities at Union Academy increased along with student enrollment during the 1930s. During the spring of 1932, the school also waged a campaign against illiteracy with special evening courses three-nights-a-week for a six-week term. In that spring Alma Myrick—head of the English department—launched a series of student programs open to the general public on Monday evenings. February 1932 events included an oratorical contest, choral singing, a rendition of the “Jolly Juvenile Minstrels,” and the performance of a satirical “Chocolate Wedding.” In May 1935, the thirty-five members of the girls’ glee club offered folk songs, solos, duets, and spirituals before an audience of over one-hundred, “including many white friends.” A few of the white guests spoke briefly after the performance, praising the students for their music, displays, and exhibits. Thus, ironically, in Pinellas’ segregated school system, many programs at Union Academy played before integrated audiences. In *Leader* news

¹³ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 4 March 1930, 11 March 1930, 5 February 1932, 27 May 1932, 8 March 1935. A proponent of Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of self-help, Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) established the philanthropic Rosenwald Fund in 1917, eight years after becoming president of Sears, Roebuck and Company. By 1932, this fund has provided matching funds and assistance for the construction of over 5300 schools and other structures for African American students and teachers in the South. Rosenwald School Days celebrated Rosenwald’s philanthropy at a time when many white school authorities overlooked the needs of Jim Crow schools. See: Jayne R. Beilke, “Rosenwald, Julius,” in *Historical Dictionary of American Education*, ed. Richard J. Altenbaugh (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 316-317.

articles, principals such as Levy Gregg and Richard Moore made it a point to invite “the white friends of the school” to many events, from minstrel performances to graduation ceremonies. Interestingly, a minstrel show in January 1935 had also attracted large crowds to all-white Tarpon Springs High School’s auditorium (now City Hall). In that performance, however, patrons paid a quarter admission to see many leaders of the white community perform songs and skits in black face to raise money for local charities. Blacks could not attend. As classes began in September 1935 for the new school year, Union Academy’s enrollment had climbed to 155 while the number of students registered in the city’s white schools actually declined during that same term.¹⁴

After Richard Moore left Union Academy in the summer of 1937, Eugene H. McLin and Julie B. Bragg, Jr., served as principals into the early 1940s. McLin, a alumnus of Clark University in Atlanta, also did graduate coursework at Columbia University. He came to Union Academy in the fall of 1937 after serving as a teacher and coach in three of Florida’s largest African American high schools (Booker Washington High, Tampa, 1927-1930; Gibbs High, St. Petersburg, 1931-1933; Booker Washington High, Miami, 1934-1936). By October 1939, the campus consisted of the original four-room brick structure from 1919 and a two-room frame building (not the structure at Heritage Village). At that time, McLin kept all student academic records in a cabinet in his office. The library had a collection of recently purchased books valued at more than \$100, the school had just enclosed its lighted basketball court at a cost of \$300, and officials had purchased a scale so “students may keep accurate records of their weight.” Teachers in the 1940-1941 and 1941-1942 terms included: Julius Bradley, Lucile James, J. L. Jones, Ruth Lambright, Annie Mae McLin, and Freddie Sands.¹⁵

The Union Academy Campus Expands as the New Building Arrives

In an August 1942 meeting, the school board authorized the relocation of two portables from Tarpon Springs Elementary to Union Academy. At a cost of \$400, the two structures closest to the intersection of Park and Hybiscus made their way to lots

¹⁴ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 29 January 1932, 5 February 1932, 26 February 1932, 11 January 1935, 26 April 1935, 10 May 1935; 20 September 1935.

¹⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, 29 October 1939; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 3 May 1940, 13 June 1941.

eleven and twelve near the corner of Oakwood (Wall) and Grosse. Sitting to the east of the 1919 Union Academy building, these structures served as a cafeteria, classrooms, and a home economics room to meet the needs of the 115 students enrolled in the 1942-1943 year. U. A. students occasionally offered variety programs at the city's (white) Tourist Club by early 1943, and faculty from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College (now University)—as well as other historically black colleges—frequently visited the campus during their travels to the area. The school held its 1943 commencement exercises at Mt. Moriah A.M.E. Church, where Professor Milton P. Rooks delivered an address to the graduates. One must note that outside visitors and philanthropy remained essential to the school's success into the early 1950s: For example, members of the (white) Tarpon Springs Woman's Club visited the Academy and pledged support for the school at a time when county allocations remained slim. Lois Lenski, a famous author and illustrator who lived in Tarpon Springs, frequently visited the school and supported its educational objectives. A member of a Pinellas pioneer family, cordially referred to as "Mrs. McMullen," also visited on occasion by 1954 to offer Monday afternoon Bible classes.¹⁶

Like their white counterparts, some pupils at Union Academy traveled via chartered bus to Largo to participate in the Pinellas County Fair. In 1948, U. A. students took first prize in competitions against their St. Petersburg counterparts. Indeed, so many African American children attended the fair by the early 1950s that principals at black schools requested a "Negro school day" so that their pupils could enjoy the midway rides. Superintendent Floyd T. Christian asserted that the board approved this plan for the 1953 fair not as a way to promote segregation, but instead to stagger the number of children at the fair. The following year, two busloads of students, teachers, and parental chaperones made an even larger showing at the fair.¹⁷

By 1953, Ruth Lambright—a member of the Union Academy faculty—penned a weekly "Negro news" column in the *Tarpon Springs Leader*. Her articles recorded the important events in Tarpon Springs' African-American community. During the school year, Lambright's column regularly included news about events at Union Academy.

¹⁶ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 1 May 1942, 21 August 1942, 18 September 1942, 15 January 1943, 4 June 1943, 6 May 1954; *Fire Insurance Maps*, February 1930 map February 1945 corrections to February 1930 map, microfilm reel 16; *Florida Sentinel*, 7 February 1948, 6 March 1948.

¹⁷ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 5 February 1953, 25 February 1954; *Florida Sentinel*, 7 February 1948.

These stories described field trips, programs, athletic competitions, student leadership activities, awards, and professional achievements by the faculty. For example, in March 1953, about seventy Academy students traveled to the newly-constructed Sixteenth Street Junior High School (now John Hopkins Middle School) and Gibbs High School. Frederick D. Burney, principal of Sixteenth Street, and his faculty led the U. A. students and teachers on a tour of the campus, followed by lunch in the cafetorium. Later that day, students in the junior high classes visited the Vocational Department at Gibbs. Fourth and fifth graders from Union Academy and Sixteenth Street also appeared in a May 1953 program on WSUN radio. In June 1953, U. A. Principal Ella Mary Holmes joined guests in a crowded auditorium for a student presentation of the two-act musical comedy, “The Belle of the West.” Later that month, members of the Gibbs High School band played and sang renditions at the Academy’s “Springs Cotillion.” Students had decorated the school’s auditorium with pink and green crepe paper, complemented by potted plants provided by Kikilis Florists. That same week, the senior class of Pinellas High School in Clearwater offered a dramatic performance of “This Thing Called Love” in the U. A. auditorium. In early 1954, the Academy hosted Gibbs students who spent time at the campus and visited the city’s Sponge Exchange. In April 1954, over 500 students participated in a countywide music festival directed by Dorothy Johnson, area music teacher for black schools. Students at Union Academy combined with three other north county schools—Curtis, Williams, and Chase Memorial—for their music performances.¹⁸

At the annual Spring Recital and Open House on 14 April 1953, students filled the auditorium with duets, musical selections, and readings. Audience members applauded as boys and girls received their safety patrol badges. Programs often included Bible readings, “Negro” spirituals, or other religious elements. For example, during the chapel assemblies during 1954, students performed the 100th Psalm, the Lord’s Prayer, and renditions of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” On many occasions, teacher William G. Thompson played the piano while students assembled in the chapel for songs and musical performances. In many of her articles, Lambright praised Thompson for his “brilliant ideas” and “his talents in all phases of the school work.” Whether working with primary

¹⁸ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 12 March 1953, 7 May 1953, 28 May 1953, 4 June 1953, 21 January 1954; *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 April 1954.

grades or middle school children—such as his coordination of the seventh graders’ rendition of “The Three Little Pigs” in October 1952—Thompson served as a mentor to children at the Academy. Second and third-grade students under Lambright’s direction offered a February 1954 chapel with accordion solos, trombone solos, and readings. Pupils also celebrated Arbor Day with poems and readings and May Day with performances, a parade of the seasons, and the coronation of class kings and queens.¹⁹

During this era, segregation laws required that students at Union Academy could only participate in athletic competitions with pupils at other African-American schools. In addition to Gibbs and Sixteenth Street in Pinellas County, students competed against those in distant communities such as Dade City, Fort Meade, Lacoochee, and St. Augustine. Coach William Thompson and other teachers chaperoned the students during the long trips to distant schools.²⁰

The African-American community took a strong interest in the education, community service, and academic accomplishments of students at Union Academy. Pupils raised \$22 for the March of Dimes in February 1953. Ruth Lambright, chair of the drive and second-grade teacher at U. A., saw her students raise \$9.50 of that total, with seventh graders in William Thompson’s class coming in second place with \$5.30 raised. An active Parent-Teachers Association that held chicken dinner socials, tag days, and fund drives to provide resources for the school.²¹ Lambright’s articles congratulated students who earned honor roll or other notable scholastic achievements. Commencement exercises offered kith and kin a chance to celebrate. During the 9 June 1953 ceremonies, for example, faculty conferred awards for scholastic achievement, perfect attendance, citizenship, athletics, music, homemaking, and art in the ceremonies held at the school’s auditorium.²²

Black educators in Pinellas County developed close bonds and provided mutual assistance at a time when many whites overlooked their efforts. James A. Bond, the county’s Supervisor of Negro Education, frequently visited Union Academy. Emmanuel

¹⁹ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 23 April 1953, 7 May 1953, 14 May 1953, 21 January 1954, 4 February 1954, 11 February 1954, 25 February 1954, 4 March 1954, 23 September 1954; *Florida Sentinel*, 4 October 1952; 25 October 1952.

²⁰ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 4 March 1954.

²¹ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 4 February 1954, 11 February 1954, 11 March 1954.

²² *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 11 June 1953.

Stewart, U. A. principal during the 1948-1949 year, regularly met with the Ruth Lambright and other Tarpon Springs teachers after he went to Jordan Elementary School, where he would serve as principal from 1951 through 1957. Other notable African-American educators in Pinellas County who visited the school during the 1953-1954 term included: Alvin Benton, Frederick Burney, John Hopkins, Ralph James, and Dorothy Johnson. Academy teachers participated in meetings and workshops at other Pinellas schools including Williams Elementary (Clearwater) and in organizations such as the Pinellas County Progressive Teachers Association and the Florida State Teachers Association. The faculty congratulated and celebrated the achievements of instructors who retired or transferred to other schools. For example, when fourth and fifth-grade teacher Elouise Pierce planned to transfer to Davis Elementary School in St. Petersburg, her U. A. colleagues fêted her in a surprise party with games, delicious food, and two parting gifts: a monogrammed desk pen set and a necklace.²³

The Spring Recital and Open House on 20 April 1954 marked a bittersweet occasion at Union Academy. During an assembly, students learned that county school authorities planned to abolish the seventh and eighth grades at Union Academy, and send those junior high students to distant Pinellas High School in Clearwater. Most members of the U. A. family regretted the plans to limit the school to elementary grades. In response to this difficult news, the administration renamed the annual May Day celebration “Play Day” and encouraged students to participate in a number of events during the week, including a talent show, square dancing, rumba, instrumental solos, and pantomime acts. Many dance routines were arranged by grade level, with “Hambone” first graders, second-grade girls known as “Molasses Steppers,” and third-grade girls known as the “Orange Colored Cappers” entertaining the audience. As the 1953-1954 school year came to an end, the upper grades enjoyed a formal cotillion that included

²³ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 12 March 1953, 23 April 1953, 11 June 1953, 21 January 1954, 11 February 1954; 18 February 1954, 18 March 1954, 25 March 1954, 1 April 1954, 26 August 1954. The Florida State Teachers Association (FSTA) represented the interests of African-American educators in Florida at a time when unions remained racially segregated. During the 1930s and 1940s, the FSTA focused its efforts on salary equalization lawsuits that demanded equal pay for black and white teachers. By the 1950s, this organization—established in 1890 with only thirteen members—watched its membership surge to over 6,000 as it battled to end separate and unequal Jim Crow schools throughout Florida. See: Gilbert L. Porter and Leedell W. Neyland, *History of the Florida State Teachers Association* (Washington: National Education Association, 1977).

music by a Little Zeke and his Flamingoes of Tampa, and a large crowd attended the commencement ceremonies. Former U. A. principal Emanuel Stewart—now leader of Jordan Elementary—offered remarks to the students that emphasized the motto of the promotional ceremonies: “Just Do Your Best.”²⁴

A Supreme Court Decision and the County’s Response

The plan to move seventh and eighth grade classes from Union Academy to the newly constructed Pinellas High School campus was, in part, a response to legal challenges against separate but unequal facilities throughout the South. By the early 1950s, a number of cases challenging the administration of Jim Crow schools created since the 1896 *Plessy* decision had reached the United States Supreme Court. On 17 May 1954, the Court rendered its decision in *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*. Realizing that public education had become an important responsibility of state and local governments during the twentieth century, the Justices unanimously affirmed that dual school systems based upon race were inherently unequal, and thereby violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Blacks in Pinellas County heartily welcomed the decision, though often with a cautious “wait-and-see” attitude. James Bond, the county’s Negro education supervisor, believed that *Brown* would dismantle the caste system that existed in many Southern communities. Others feared a strong, violent response from the Klan and other militant segregationists who considered any attempt at integration as a salvo against the notion of white supremacy. Indeed, since this class action decision involved numerous areas with differing local conditions, the Court withheld its final verdict and implementation decree until states could file legal responses.²⁵

White school officials in Pinellas County anticipated and responded to *Brown* by constructing and improving a number of African American schools. Pinellas High School started as Clearwater Colored Junior High, a concrete block structure built on Madison Street in 1914 for \$2,545. The school did not offer high school classes until the early 1930s, and the temporary structures added to the campus during 1940s lacked adequate

²⁴ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 22 April 1954, 20 May 1954, 3 June 1954, 17 June 1954.

²⁵ *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483; *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 May 1954, 20 May 1954. For a comprehensive discussion of the *Brown* decision, see: Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage: 1975).

lighting or ventilation. As challenges to segregation appeared on court dockets in the South, local school leaders planned to replace the obsolete and unsuitable buildings at this site with a new campus. The goal, of course, was to circumvent or to delay implementation of a decision such as *Brown* by improving facilities that authorities had neglected for years. Pinellas school officials, including Supt. Floyd Christian, believed courts would allow the county to maintain segregated schools if the district acted in good faith to upgrade facilities. To prove their sincerity, before the end of the decade school officials earmarked funds to renovate many black schools and to construct a number of new campuses. New and refurbished structures included the new Pinellas High campus, as well as Wildwood Elementary, Gibbs Junior College, Ridgecrest Elementary, George W. Perkins Elementary, and Lincoln Heights Elementary. Thus, the new Pinellas High campus, built at a cost of \$540,986, opened in the fall of 1954 as officials planned to move seventh and eighth grade students from Union Academy and convert U. A. into an elementary school.²⁶

Parents and community members fought attempts to move classes from Union Academy. At an 11 August 1954 school board meeting, Supt. Christian argued that it made little sense to keep smaller seventh and eighth grade classes at Union Academy at the same time white children attended crowded classrooms in Tarpon Springs. Christian planned to offer bus service so the upper grades at Union Academy could merge with the junior and senior high classes at the new Pinellas High campus. When Rev. J. W. Murphy spoke out against the plan, board members questioned whether other blacks in Tarpon shared his “last ditch” fight to save the upper grades. Murphy persisted, telling board members that blacks had learned from “you white people” that “majority rules.” He claimed that at least two-thirds of the affected families wanted their children to remain at U. A., adding that this majority of parents included many poor families that would face economic hardship if their children traveled to the Clearwater school. Murphy posed an alternative: If the school district remained unwilling to provide

²⁶ Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 86-88; *Golden Anniversary of Pinellas County Schools*, 61-69.

separate and equal schools for blacks in Tarpon Springs, he encouraged the board to allow these children to attend nearby white schools.²⁷

By early September, many parents had refused to enroll their seventh and eighth grade students at Pinellas High. Seeing this transfer as a hardship, they contact Francisco A. Rodriguez, an attorney with the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Rodriguez took the position that his clients “be allowed to go to whatever local school available or keep Union Academy.” A newspaper article notes that the NAACP attorney had advised students not to register at the Clearwater school. He had also collected a petition of parents representing many of the children. In light of the *Brown* decision and to forestall litigation, Supt. Christian agreed to hold a conference with Rodriguez to discuss this matter. Though he expressed disappointment that “parents don’t recognize the advantages of the other school,” Christian nevertheless agreed to a compromise that allowed U. A. to retain the upper grades. Due to low enrollment, however, he said he could not “justify putting two teachers back because there are too many overcrowded conditions in the county to warrant giving twenty-five children two teachers.” In an early attempt at “school choice,” Christian allowed the affected pupils to attend either Union Academy or Pinellas High, but not nearby white schools.²⁸

Although local blacks succeeded in their fight to preserve upper grades at Union Academy, the struggle to desegregate and improve facilities faced many obstacles during the 1954-1955 school term. In May 1955, the United States Supreme Court released its implementation decree in *Brown*. Instead of establishing a fixed schedule for the end of segregated schools, the Justices mandated “prompt and deliberate compliance . . . with all deliberate speed.” By allowing local courts to consider conditions in their communities, this ambiguous decision failed to establish when desegregation measures should begin, how school systems should abide by the verdict, and when “unitary status” should become mandatory. As a result, the only “integration” in Pinellas County schools immediately after *Brown* occurred when the 1955-1956 school system directory listed

²⁷ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 19 August 1954. For images of the new Pinellas High campus, see the “Negro news” page in the 8 September 1954 *St. Petersburg Times*.

²⁸ *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 September 1954, 10 September 1954; *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 16 September 1954.

faculty and staff in alphabetical order, rather than separating white and “Negro” schools. Boasting of recent construction, Christian hoped to prevent local court cases by claiming that recent improvements made Pinellas schools “separate but really equal.”²⁹

Despite the uncertainty of the times, members of the Union Academy family continued to persevere during the 1950s. Parents supported fundraising activities and March of Dimes drives (which totaled \$71.91 in 1955). They also played in recreational basketball games with students and teachers. Teachers nurtured their students and prepared them for the responsibilities of adulthood at a time when Americans witnessed the beginnings of the civil rights movement. Students excelled in their displays at the County Fair, enjoyed field trips to the Sponge Exchange, participated in Negro History Week events, and performed in many dramatic and musical programs. Chapel assemblies and entertainment by the school’s United Children’s Chorus filled many afternoons and evenings on campus and in local churches. Some boys in the upper grades even expressed their happiness in staying at U. A. rather than attending Pinellas High by planting trees around the campus for Arbor Day as members of the faculty and younger children watched.³⁰

A Better Place for Boys and Subsequent Years of Decline

The educational landscape in Pinellas County changed dramatically during the 1960s. Ranch houses replaced citrus groves across the peninsula. Yet, for the most part, the *Leader’s* “Negro news” column indicated that little had changed at Union Academy. Students still attended chapel and talent shows, birthday parties for children remained community gatherings, and parents and teachers worked closely to guide and shape the

²⁹ *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (frequently referred to as *Brown II*), 349 U.S. 294 (1955); Raymond O. Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk: Donning Co., 1988), 306; Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 30; Schnur, “Desegregation of Public Schools,” 29.

³⁰ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 27 January 1955, 3 February 1955, 10 February 1955, 24 February 1955, 3 March 1955, 10 March 1955, 28 April 1955, 12 May 1955, 16 June 1955, 30 June 1955. Many teachers believed that their commitment to students required them to participate in organizations that hoped to end previous injustices. For some, this certainly meant membership in their local NAACP chapter or the Pinellas County Progressive Teachers Association, an organization under the excellent leadership of Olive B. McLin. Before the end of the decade, some educators would face harassment and legal challenges to their membership in such organizations. See: James A. Schnur, “Cold Warriors in the Hot Sunshine: The Johns Committee’s Assault on Civil Liberties in Florida, 1956-1965” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1995).

next generation. Although boycotts and similar protests had led to the peaceful desegregation of lunch counters and other accommodations by early 1961, schools throughout the county remained segregated. One Union Academy student did, however, receive a prize in an “integrated” contest sponsored by the Tarpon Springs Woman’s Club. U. A. student Eddie Cole won honorable mention for his water color painting in a competition open to all Tarpon Springs students. Cole was the only Academy student to receive an award. Within the next year, token desegregation came to some south Pinellas schools. Longtime Tarpon resident R. F. Pent’s 1964 history of the community claimed that St. Petersburg’s Carlisle Construction Company had received a contract for \$180,470 to improve Union Academy, then with an enrollment of 300 students.³¹

After two decades of service at Union Academy, the portable was no longer needed. By the time Leon W. Bradley and other plaintiffs launched a legal attack on Pinellas County’s segregated schools in May 1964, the old portable moved from Union Academy to its next location at the corner of South Grosse Avenue and Morgan Street. Purchased from the school board for approximately \$350, the building became home to a group known as the “Better Boys Club.” This club, started by longtime residents Samuel and Elizabeth Archie, provided African-American boys and teenagers a social venue at a time when many organizations denied admission to blacks. The club used art, athletics, and other activities to motivate and to provide a nurturing, positive environment for the boys. By 1968—the same year the school board publicly debated closing the Union Academy or turning it into a special education center—the Better Boys Club boasted over eighty members from eight to eighteen years of age. With dues set at ten cents per week, the club’s policy never turned children away if they could not pay. Fish fries and other fundraisers kept the club afloat.³²

The Better Boys Club provided a foundation for future leaders of Tarpon’s black community. Members of prominent African-American families, including the Singletarys and Archies, sent their children to the club during the 1960s and early 1970s. Heeding the club’s motto—“Building Boys is Better than Mending Men”—many members applied the lessons learned in their youth to activities in their adult life. Harry Singletary,

³¹ *Tarpon Springs Leader*, 23 February 1961, 13 April 1961, 20 April 1961, 27 April 1961, 18 May 1961, 15 June 1961; Pent, *History of Tarpon Springs*, 46.

³² *St. Petersburg Times*, 18 January 1968, 28 May 2000.

Secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections from 1991 through 1998, had fond memories of the club and the adults who emphasized that the young men should lead responsible and productive lives. In a 2000 interview he remarked that people “need symbols . . . And that is a symbol of a time when people cared.” Tarpon Springs City Commissioner David Archie, son of Samuel and Elizabeth Archie, also recalled the club as “an opportunity to come together . . . to really socialize.”³³

Preserving the Union

By the late 1970s, the Better Boys Club stopped holding meetings at the former Union Academy building. At some point, the site served as a storage area for x-ray and other medical equipment belonging to an African American physician who lived in Tarpon Springs. By the 1980s, however, the old building’s condition had steadily deteriorated. Soon, drug users and other derelicts squatted in this former classroom building. A May 2000 newspaper article noted that Elizabeth Archie, wife of Samuel Archie and mother of David Archie—a city commissioner in Tarpon Springs—had contacted the city police about retrieving materials from the long abandoned structure. As she entered the building with Officer Ed Hayden, she lamented the terrible condition of this building, an important part of Tarpon Springs’ history that had recently become a target for demolition.

Archie, members of the Tarpon Springs Area Historical Society, management at Heritage Village, and the city and county governments collaborated in a move to save the Union Academy structure. Archie had approached the board of the historical society at the same time that Heritage Village hoped to add a significant structure, such as a church or school, to represent African Americans in Pinellas County. In an interview, former director Kendrick Ford claimed that he had been in contact with some pastors and African American leaders about possible structures in the past, but that none of those efforts came to fruition. According to correspondence and meeting minutes, historical society board member Julie Keffalas contacted Ford about the structure. Sensing the value of the structure, Ford told a reporter in a May 2000 interview that he “jumped right in the van,” worked with city officials to stop the demolition order, and secured

³³ *St. Petersburg Times*, 28 May 2000, 22 February 2002.

approximately \$8,500 to move the structure to Heritage Village. Meeting minutes from the Pinellas County Historical Commission note that Ken received an \$8,500 estimate from Roesch Housemovers to bring the structure to Heritage Village. With permission from county government administrators and consent from the Historical Commission, Ford moved funds from personnel services into the operating budget to cover moving expenses and secured necessary permits.³⁴

The building arrived at Heritage Village in very poor condition. Ford noted that extensive termite damage had weakened the structure, and numerous reconfigurations of the walls and windows made it difficult to determine the original layout versus subsequent renovations. Ford also stated that at one time, a door existed along the present-day north wall and that workers had to demolish and restore much of the present-day west wall, where the windows are located. George Unrue, a carpenter involved in the restoration efforts, claimed that “everything was completely falling apart” when the building arrived at Heritage Village. During the project, Unrue and others applied some “tender loving care” by repairing and replacing floor joints, replacing most of the original siding (except on the front of the building), and substantially rehabilitating the interior. Floor boards are original to the structure, and the ceiling fixtures in the building remain the same, though they were probably added to the building much later than its original construction.³⁵

Although the restoration of the Union Academy schoolhouse preserved an important structure that documents Pinellas County’s African-American heritage, many questions and uncertainties remain. Stephanie Ferrell, an architect with a background in historic preservation, observed that earlier renovations and past neglect have obscured many of the original elements and features of this largely reconstructed building. One can only speculate on the size and location of doors and windows on the original structure. Frame vernacular structures similar to the Union Academy schoolhouse provided an inexpensive solution to school districts in the South with limited funds, or limited interest in devoting funds to Jim Crow facilities. While modifications to this building during the

³⁴ Ibid.; Judith B. LeGath, interim manager, Tarpon Springs Area Historical Society, to Ellen Babb, 5 August 2003; Interview of Ken Ford, former director of Heritage Village, by Stephanie Ferrell and Jim Schnur, 3 May 2003, Heritage Village, Largo; Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

³⁵ Ken Ford interview; *St. Petersburg Times*, 22 February 2002.

past eight decades have obscured architectural elements on this one-story, wood frame building, documentary sources from alumni, local African Americans, and microfilm newspapers can recapture this school's value as a cultural and nurturing institution in the community.³⁶

³⁶ For more information about the architectural history of this structure, please consult Stephanie Ferrell's overview of Union Academy included in the Heritage Village archives.