

A Tribute to Dr. Anthony J. Major

by Dennis R. Jones

Discovering a Forgotten Community Leader

Several years ago, while performing research for the Weirton Area History Game, I came across several old newspaper articles about Dr. Anthony John Major, who was Principal at Dunbar High School in Weirton from 1932 until his untimely death in 1949. From these many articles it became very clear what a great influence this man was in our community. He began his career as an educator in the schools of Tampa Florida and came north to further his education, receiving an A.B. Degree from West Virginia State College.

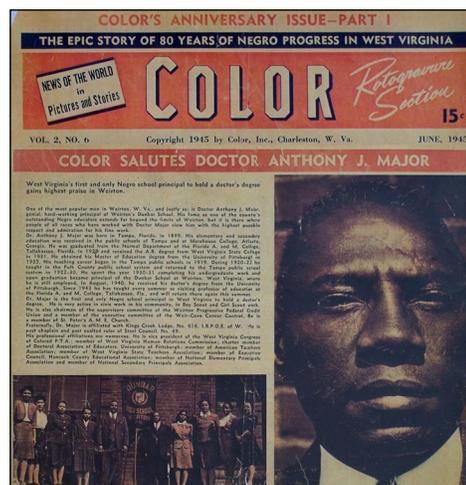
Dunbar High School Established

At the time of Mr. Major's arrival in Weirton in 1931, the African-American students were required to travel by street car to Steubenville for their high school education. In the following year, 1932, the Board of Education decided to establish a high school in Weirton for the African-Americans. Anthony Major was hired as the school's Principal, and his leadership in the community for the following 18 years deserves permanent recognition in the history of Weirton.

Inspiration at University of Pittsburgh

While Principal at Weirton's Dunbar School, Mr. Major continued his education at the University of Pittsburgh and, in 1935, obtained his "Master of Education" degree. The following year, while studying there for his doctorate, the class was discussing Dr. Dubois' book, "Black Reconstruction." Mr. Major, the only African-American in the class, was inspired and wrote to Dr. W. E. B. Dubois, who among many other things, was the first African-American to earn a Doctorate Degree from Harvard University. In the letter Mr. Major stated "We must do something constructive in our community to save ourselves." In 1940, Anthony Major became Dr. Anthony Major, receiving his doctorate there at the University of Pittsburgh. His thesis was titled "An Investigation of Supervisory Practices for the Improvement of Instruction in Negro Public Schools." He became the first African-American High School Principal with a Doctorate Degree in the State of West Virginia.

(continued above right)



A Civic Leader and Educator

Dr. Anthony J. Major went on to become one of the country's foremost African-American educators. From 1943 through 1949 he was invited to address high school graduations in Ohio, Virginia, Missouri, and Florida. In 1946, Dr. Major was offered the Presidency of a College in Daytona Beach, Florida, but declined the offer saying, "I have come to like Weirton so well that I have decided, after long consideration to remain here and try to finish some of the projects we need so badly. The college presidency naturally carries more prestige, but I believe the greater responsibility rests with the educators dealing with youngsters in the grades and high school. The Negro people in Weirton have come a long way during the last score of years. We have no such thing as a crime problem or juvenile delinquency, it just doesn't happen. My ambition in Weirton in future years is to campaign for a gymnasium, auditorium and other recreational facilities. The people of Weirton have always been most cooperative and generous and we intend to continue promoting that relationship." Dr. Major was involved in over 18 community and state organizations including Boy & Girl Scouts, Weirton Planning Commission, WV Human Relations Commission, Weirton Cancer Control Committee, and Co-chairman of the United Negro College Fund drive in Hancock County and Steubenville. Representing the Dunbar PTA, he became one of local civic leaders to serve on the Executive Committee of the Weir-Cove Community Service Council, beginning plans for the new Weirton Community Center that was later opened in 1952. *(continued next page)*

A Tribute to Dr. Anthony J. Major (cont.)

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Sadly Missed After 1949

On December 20, 1949, the announcement of Dr. Major's untimely death at the age of 50 shocked the community of Weirton and entire area. The *Weirton Daily Times* newspaper was flooded with testimonials from community leaders who knew Dr. Major, starting with Mayor Millsop and scores of others. His legacy lived on when the Dr. Major Gymnasium/Auditorium was built in his honor adjacent to Dunbar High School and dedicated on Dec. 17, 1954. The following year, in 1955, school desegregation took place and many of the students and faculty of Dunbar High School went to Weir High School. Dr. Major's influence in the educational system and civic organizations of Weirton led to a peaceful and certain desegregation process 5 years after his death. Perhaps the last public recognition of Dr. Major came in 1961, when the Dr. Anthony J. Major Chorus was organized at the St. Peters A.M.E. Church.

Recognizing Dr. Major Today

Today it is hard to find any public recognition that is due to this great civic leader and educator. Even back in the 1960's, as a student at Cove School, I recall that we would often go on a bus ride up Weir Avenue to the "Dunbar Gym" where we received our physical education playing dodge ball. There was no mention or recognition of the name "Dr. Anthony Major" for whom the building was named and dedicated. I would not see or learn about his name until about 40 years later, when I looked through the old newspapers on microfilm. As a result of this research, he is certainly recognized in the Weirton Area History Game, and perhaps it is time that the name of Dr. Anthony J. Major be given the permanent public recognition it deserves in our city and state for future generations.

Black History Month Observed

Black History Month will be observed at Weirton Area Museum & Cultural Center this year with a special event on February 2. That is day that fit into the guest speaker, Heather Cline's schedule, and it also just happens to be the birthday of Dr. Anthony Major, who was born Feb. 2, 1899 in Tampa Florida. What a special day it will be!

Testimonials for Dr. Major

As mentioned earlier, the Weirton Daily Times printed scores of testimonials from area leaders who considered his death as the loss of a great friend who did much to improve our city. Those submitting memorials included Mayor Thomas E. Millsop, City Manager Dan Sweaney, John A. Jones (Weirton Steel Publications Director), Coach Carl Hamill, Rev. A. R. Mansberger, Police Chief Roy Pilette, Coach James T. Wares, Walter Bambrick (Postmaster), and many others (see *Weirton Daily Times* Dec. 21, 1949 issue). Perhaps the article by *Weirton Daily Times* columnist Mille Martin said it best (see below).

Death of A Champion

by Mille Martin, reprinted from *Weirton Daily Times*

"I have lost a dear FRIEND. A FRIEND whose handclasp was cherished; a FRIEND whose words of wisdom were treasured; a FRIEND whose exemplary life shall be a beacon and guiding light to me; a FRIEND who I shall never forget. To me, Dr. Anthony Major was the exponent of all that was good, fine and honest. I never thought of the great educator and benefactor, without thinking of the great emancipator - Abraham Lincoln. Both were humble men. Both were men of wisdom. Both had the courage to fight for what they believed was right. Both were near and dear to the heart of the people. Both primarily fought for the same thing - equality and freedom. Lincoln to free the negro from bondage, and Dr. Major to free them from the fetters of intolerance and racial hatred - imposed on them by peoples steeped in ignorant racial discrimination. Both men died in the service of the people. Dr. Major, a man of deeply religious character, lived for the day when he would see his people received with kindness and understanding as God intended they should be. He fought untiringly for his people to fall into their rightful heritage - to be free and equal as other men. While much of his life was devoted to this purpose, he did not confine his interests to this aim. He was a great champion of his people - HE WAS A CHAMPION OF ALL PEOPLES, regardless of race, creed or color. The beloved gentleman took great pride in Weirton, its people, and all their doings. He sacrificed his life to serve others. There wasn't a selfish thought or motive in his whole body. He died with his boots on, still fighting for the rights of others, to make this a better place to live in and to bring harmony and understanding among all people, whether they were black or white, Jew or Christian. To this man of wisdom, God had created only one race - the human race. I like to think of Dr. Major walking on to his reward. Of receiving his star studded crown. FOR A JOB WELL DONE. The man is gone, but his spirit prevails - for men such as Dr. Major never die."

All this information and much more about Dr. Major will be on display at Weirton Area Museum starting in February 2013. See details of WAMCC's Black History Month event, which will be held on Feb. 2 starting at 12:00 noon. See event schedule on page 8 of this newsletter and also check for updates at www.weirtonmuseum.com.