Preserving Our History & Culture for Future Generations

Introduction - The First African-Americans in Weirton

In 1909, the Phillips Sheet & Tin Plate Company was established in the northern part of Holliday’s Cove, and a new “Company Town” named “Weirton” was created. At first, the new mill attracted laborers, mostly foreigners, from nearby cities like Wellsville, Chester, Steubenville, Wheeling, Pittsburgh, and Clarksburg. Within a few years, Weirton had become a “Great Melting Pot” of over 46 nationalities with immigrants coming from overseas directly to work in the new tin mills.

Starting in 1913, African-Americans from the southern and eastern states came north seeking jobs in the booming town of Weirton, West Virginia. They eventually settled in two distinct areas of Weirton - Weir Avenue and Sixth Street. Weir Avenue was named “Calico Hill” due to the different colors of people who lived there, including the African-Americans, who resided mainly between Howard and Baker Streets. Those who lived on Sixth Street north of Avenue B were much closer to the mill, and their homes would eventually be overtaken by mill expansion. Schools were established in the above mentioned areas to educate the African-American population.

In 1914 Hancock County’s Independent newspaper printed an article about the first playground in Weirton, situated at the bottom of Avenue C, for the millworkers families: “It was a great sight, here were children of all nations, the American born, the English, the Welsh, the Slav, the Pole, the Italian, the Greek, the Negro, all leaping, sliding, swinging and dancing, bonded together in the fellowship of a single purpose - Extracting from life the joy of springing muscles and the effervescence of youthful spirits.” In general, however, the African-American population, including their educational facilities and sports teams, would be kept separated, or “segregated,” from the rest of the Weirton “melting pot” until 40 years later, when segregation was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

(continued on next page)
History of Dunbar School, Weirton, WV (cont.)

Dunbar Grade School Established - 1917

In 1917, three African-American children, reportedly C. G. Scurry, Mary Alice Williams, and Pecola Southerland (Mrs. John Curenton, Sr.), attended integrated classes in the Weirton Grade School, located along County Road. In the fall of that year, a school for African-Americans was established along Weir Avenue at the corner of Kessel Street. Miss Catherine Cozzens and Alice Payne were reported to be the first teachers of this school, which was named after the African-American poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar. In the 1920's Washington Grade School was established along 6th Street in North Weirton. Elizabeth McDowell taught there for several years. In 1926, the Dunbar School was enlarged with the addition of the former Mt. Horeb School House, which was moved down to Weir Avenue from its Weirton Heights location. J.W.C. Gay became Dunbar School Principal that year, succeeding Alice Payne, who continued as a teacher in the intermediate grade levels.

Attending High School Before 1932

Those students who graduated from eighth grade at the “all-black” Dunbar School were not permitted to attend the “all-white” Weir High School, which was visible just across town. Since 1926, the Butler District Board of Education claimed that there were not enough African-American High School students to justify building a high school for them in Weirton, so they paid the transportation and tuition costs to have the freshman transported by street car to the Lincoln High School in Wheeling. In the following years, the Dunbar Grade School graduates would travel to Steubenville, where they attended Grant High School for their freshman year and then Wells High School for their remaining three years of education. In 1929, Charles T. Leveridge became one of the first three students from Weirton Dunbar to graduate from High School in Steubenville. He then went on to West Virginia State College and later joined the faculty at Weirton Dunbar in 1940.

Dunbar High School Established - 1932

Less that a week before opening school in the fall of 1932, Steubenville’s Board of Education announced that the African-American students from West Virginia would no longer be permitted to attend school in Steubenville, citing overcrowding in their schools. The decision would affect about 40 students, and the Butler District Board of Education, which had jurisdiction over Weirton, sought to quickly find alternative locations. Each city they asked (including Mingo, Toronto, and Wheeling) all had the same overcrowding problem due to rapidly increasing population. The Board finally decided to lease the abandoned Weirton Presbyterian Church building on Avenue F along County Road in Weirton. While the new location was being renovated and equipped for school, the high school classes were conducted at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church on Weir Avenue. On September 28, 1932, the new Dunbar High School was formally opened on Avenue F with Anthony J. Major as the first Principal, and Edith [Genevieve] Lee and Thelma Warrick reported as staff members.

Dr. Anthony J. Major  First Principal of Dunbar High School 1940

(continued on next page)
History of Dunbar School, Weirton, WV (cont.)

Dunbar High School History Timeline

1932 (fall) Joe Hill, volunteered his spare time to organize the first Dunbar High School football team. Assisting Mr. Hill was Will Robinson from Steubenville. The Dunbar football squad turned in a better than expected record of 4 wins, 1 defeat, and 1 tie. They defeated Steubenville Grant, Parkersburg Sumner, and Wheeling Lincoln twice (2 - 0 and 33 - 0). They also held Clarksburg Kelly-Miller to a scoreless tie, while their only loss was to the very tough Fairmont Dunbar team.

1933 (Jan.) Coach Joe Hill tried very hard to organize a basketball team for Dunbar’s first season, but after several attempts throughout December and early January to get team uniforms and schedule games proved unsuccessful, and so it was decided not to have a Dunbar High School basketball team this year.

1933 (May): Principal Anthony Major awarded freshman diplomas to twenty-two (22) ninth graders at Dunbar High School.

1933 (fall) Dandridge Brown, who was very successful coaching at the Gary District in McDowell County from 1922 thru 1931, was hired at Weirton Dunbar. Brown had earlier been captain of the WV State College Yellow Jackets in 1921.

1934 (Jan.) Dandridge Brown and Harry Dennis organized Dunbar’s first basketball season.

1934 (June) Dunbar High School held commencement exercises for graduating seniors. Diplomas were awarded to James Lee Midget (Valedictorian), Julius E. Byrom (Salutatorian), Robert Brown, Eugene Watson, and Bennie Ellsworth Pulliam, the first graduates of Weirton Dunbar High School.

1934 (fall) All-American gridiron star James T. Wares, of WV State College replaced Mr. Brown as the Dunbar Coach. The team was called “The Orange & Black Rovers.” They were later named the “Raiders.”

1935 (Jan.) The Greek AHEPA lodge arranged a deal to purchase the Dunbar High School building on Avenue F. Students and faculty moved to another building, which was formerly occupied by the Weirton Methodists, located at the top of Avenue D along County Rd.

1939 (Sept) A new 3-story brick school building was erected on Weir Avenue for the African-American students. This was part of a WPA project involving several local schools.

1940 (Aug.) Principal Anthony Major received his Doctorate Degree at the University of Pittsburgh becoming the only African-American High School Principal in WV with a doctorate. Charles T. Leveridge also joined the Dunbar High School Faculty this year.

1941 (fall) Weirton Dunbar had one of its best football seasons, as they became State Champs.

1942 ( ) Dr. Anthony Major married Gwendolyn Kisner, a Dunbar faculty member.

1945 (fall) Dunbar went undefeated in football, but finished in 3rd place in state rankings.

1947 (wint.) Dunbar had one of its best basketball seasons - runners up in state championship.

1949 ( ) The Dunbar High School Band was organized and directed by Charles L. Turner.

1949 (Dec.) Before much of his dreams for his community came to reality, Dr. Major suddenly passed away at the age of fifty. His wife Gwendolyn carried on his duties as Principal. (continued on next page)
Dunbar High School History Timeline (cont.)

1954 (Dec.) In December of 1954, the Dr. Anthony Major Auditorium / Gymnasium was erected next to the Dunbar High School building on Weir Avenue and dedicated in his honor.

1955 (May) Dunbar High School held its final commencement exercises before becoming desegregated in the fall. The final 8 graduates were Raeford Lester (Valedictorian), Richmond Gibson (Salutatorian), Thelma Dickey, Lawrence Chester, Fletcher Gregory, George Hopkins, Booker T. Walker, and Daniel Young. Dunbar High School had graduated over 200 students in its 23-year history.

1955 (fall) School desegregation took place in Weirton, with the high school students from Dunbar going to Weir High School. Mrs. Gwendolyn Major continued as Principal at the now desegregated Dunbar Grade School. Coach James T. Wares went to Cove Jr. High School, where he coached the Cove Knights and soon joined the coaching and faculty staffs at Weir High School. Charles T. Leveridge also went to Cove Jr. High School where he taught Science for several years. He would start teaching Science at Weir Jr. High School in 1963. Band Director Charles Turner went directly to Weir High School.

1962 (fall) Elizabeth P. Young succeeded Mrs. Major as Principal of Dunbar School and remained in charge there until the building was no longer used for public education. She later became Principal of Cove Elementary School.

All peoples of all races and ethnicity were now being educated together and also began living together in the same neighborhoods. The great “Melting Pot” of Weirton was complete.

This brief history of Weirton Dunbar School was compiled by Dennis Jones of the Weirton Area Museum & Cultural Center for distribution on February 2, 2013 at the museum’s Black History Month event. Extra care has been undertaken to have accurate information presented; however, if you notice something that does not appear to be factual, please let Dennis know, so it can be verified and corrected for future generations.

Sources for the information included in this history are as follows:

- Weirton Daily Times article (July 30, 1976) “Weirton’s Black Community - Then and Now” by Joseph D. Young
- Hancock County Independent
- Third Dunbar Reunion 1976 Program Booklet
- The Weirton Area History Game
- Several Steubenville Herald Star, Weirton Daily Times, and Weirton Steel Employees’ Bulletin articles.