

THE BERRY O'KELLY SCHOOL AGRICULTURE BUILDING

The importance of the Agriculture Building of the Berry O'Kelly School as an historic property lies in its association with that school and with the Method Community and its premier resident, Berry O'Kelly. It is the sole surviving structure of an eight-building complex which comprised the Berry O'Kelly Training School.

The Method neighborhood in West Raleigh has its own unique history which is also part of the history of Raleigh. Its origin and development was one example of the manner in which former slaves - freed but landless after the Civil War - and white landowners, by their own initiative and unaided by the federal government, attempted to build a new economic order in the South to replace the ante-bellum plantation system of agriculture which had been destroyed by the war and its aftermath. Method originated with the decision of General W. R. Cox, a Confederate veteran, to sell part of his plantation just west of Raleigh in small plots to blacks on easy terms, and the use of this opportunity by some of the latter. Called earlier Save-Rent or Slabtown, from the moving there of blacks from Raleigh to avoid high rents and the use of slabs cut from timber there to build houses, its name was changed to Mason Village to recognize the community leadership of Lewis Mason. The latter was the son of Jesse Mason who, along with his half-brother Isaac Kelly, was one of the first purchasers of land from General Cox in 1872. Later, after becoming a railroad stop, its name was changed to Method. (1)

About 1880 a young man came to Method who was destined to become unquestionably its outstanding resident. Born in Chapel Hill about 1860, Berry O'Kelly was orphaned at birth by the death of his mother, Frances O'Kelly whose family name

he bore. He was raised by his mother's relatives and attended school for some time in Chapel Hill. Moving to Method where a member of his relatives lived he became, before his death in 1931, not only its best-known citizen but also the most prominent black leader in Wake County with even wider influence and recognition. (2)

At age 22 O'Kelly secured employment in a general store which a Mr. C. H. Woods had opened in 1879 at Method to supply the villagers with staples - side meat, meal, lard, molasses, etc. He thus began a highly successful business career unusual for a person of humble beginnings and limited schooling - he finished only "the grades." He soon became a partner in the enterprise and the sole owner, purchasing Woods' interest when the latter moved to Oklahoma. The business underwent rapid expansion under O'Kelly's direction. The stock of the store was broadened to include items such as shoes, clothing, yard goods, and fresh meats and it soon became a shopping center for the county. He branched out into commission merchandising selling to area stores and colleges. Being adjacent to the Seaboard and Southern railroad tracks, he built a warehouse where fertilizer, farm equipment and other non-perishable farm goods were unloaded. Proximity to the railroad led him to secure train and postal service for the community. He persuaded the railroad to make stops at Method and in 1890 a post office was opened in his store with O'Kelly as postmaster, a post he held the rest of his life. O'Kelly's business acumen and recognized integrity resulted in his accumulation of considerable wealth. When he died in 1931 his estate, consisting chiefly of real estate in Raleigh and Wake County, was valued at about \$155,000.00 in the depressed property values of that time. That his abilities were recognized by his contemporaries is shown by the fact that he served as President of the Mechanics and Farmers Bank, a black financial institution in Raleigh, as President of the Acme Realty Company and as a trustee of Kittrell College. (3)

O'Kelly did not confine his activities to business. He was a philanthropist as well as being very public-spirited and civic minded, taking an active part in political, religious and educational affairs with particular interest in establishing improved opportunities for the betterment of members of his own race. (4) He became a recognized political leader in western Wake County and at one point succeeded in persuading the highway commission to have the highway cross the railroad in front of his store when paving the extension of Hillsborough Street. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the State Interracial Commission and for some time President of the North Carolina Negro State Fair. With Booker T. Washington he helped found the National Negro Business League. His religious interests were reflected in his being a Steward of St. James A.M.E. Church in Method and a lay member of the General North Carolina Conference. However, the main focus of his philanthropy and civic endeavors was on education, particularly the improvement of educational opportunities for rural black children. To this end he contributed much of his wealth and time, centering most of his interest around the Berry O'Kelly Training School. (5)

A one-room private "pay school", located in a log hut and offering a two-month term for \$4 tuition, apparently existed in Method as early as 1871. This school was replaced by a two-teacher school in 1873, and in 1895 a new school was built on the site which later became the Berry O'Kelly High School campus. With periodic additions to buildings and faculty this school served as the community school until 1914. In that year from these modest beginnings began the real growth to what became by 1931 the largest rural black school in the state, the Berry O'Kelly Training School for Negroes. (6) That growth resulted largely from the leadership and support of O'Kelly who had become familiar with progress in education for blacks throughout the South by his continued attendance at the Tuskegee Conference. O'Kelly was aided in his efforts by several of the school's principals, notably

C. H. Hunter, J. H. Bias, H. L. Trigg, and E. A. Cox, and by other community leaders. He had been instrumental in having a county training school established at Method by the consolidation of three schools in the county and accordingly it was named the Berry O'Kelly Training School. The school had ceased to serve just the Method village but became the main educational facility for blacks throughout Wake County. The next step in its advancement was securing accreditation by the state, a major goal O'Kelly had for the school and one to which he devoted his efforts as chairman of the school committee. Working with the principals and others he succeeded in improving the school's physical facilities, faculty and curriculum sufficiently that by 1923 it was placed on the list of accredited high schools, one of three rural black schools to be thus recognized. (7)

By that time O'Kelly had become aware that the education furnished by the school was narrowly vocational compared to the programs of high schools which prepared students for further academic and professional areas. In the early 1920's he began to make plans to complement the Training School with that type of high school. This would involve additional buildings and to help finance their construction he sought and secured the help of the philanthropist, Julius Rosenwald, with whom O'Kelly had become friendly at the Tuskegee Conferences. The Rosenwald Foundation contributed significantly to the financing of the new high school. O'Kelly donated ten acres of land adjacent to the existing school plant. The building program included a girl's dormitory with dining facilities for students and faculty built in 1922, a general classroom building for the new high school in 1923, and a new vocational building in 1926. The latter included fully-equipped shops, a vocational agriculture laboratory, rooms for home economics, and a poultry incubation room in the basement. This building, with an addition built in 1949-1950, is the one now referred to as the Agriculture Building of the Berry O'Kelly School. It is the only remaining structure of the original campus complex which by 1927

comprised eight buildings. (8)

The school now reached its highest level. It had achieved a reputation as probably the best school for rural black children in the state with particular leadership in vocational agriculture. Consequently, it attracted students from many parts of the state. However, the state-wide movement from improved black educational facilities produced an increasing number of schools in Wake and other counties. The result was a steady decline in the number of boarding students and closing of the boarding department. The school now concentrated its efforts in Wake County and especially in Method, where it conducted not only regular classes for enrolled students but also a program of extension education for non-enrolled residents of the area. The high school program was continued until 1955 when the last class was graduated. (9) The elementary school program continued until 1967. By this time it was no longer a private school but was part of the Wake County public school system. The school was closed largely as an aftermath of the 1964 Supreme Court decision outlawing public school racial segregation. Since it was in an all-black community, the school was an obvious target as a place to begin school integration by reassignment of pupils. More and more Method children were assigned elsewhere and, with declining enrollment, the Board of Education decided to close the school at the end of the 1966-1967 school year. (10)

Bibliographical Note:

The material for this sketch has been secured from the following sources:

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Edwards, Bertha Maye: The Little Place and the Little Girl. N.Y. 1974,
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Wake County, Board of Education, Minutes.

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File No. 6960, Estate of Berry O'Kelly; Administrator Bonds, Book R,
p. 27.

Conversation with Garrett Laws, Garner, N. C., former Vocational Agriculture
Teacher, Berry O'Kelly School.

Conversation with Edward Curtis, Raleigh, N. C., President, Method Civic
League.

L. Walter Seegers
August, 1981

LWS/mcd

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NOTES

1. Edwards, Bertha Maye: The Little Place and the Little Girl, pp. 11, 14, 29.
2. Ibid., pp. 27, 30-31; Berry O'Kelly obituary, in Raleigh, N. C., News and Observer, March 15, 1931.
3. Edwards: op. cit., 26-31; Berry O'Kelly obituary, in Raleigh, N. C., News and Observer, March 15, 1931; Wake County, Clerk of Superior Court, Estates Division, Estates File, File No. 6960, Estate of Berry O'Kelly; Wake County, Clerk of Superior Court, Estates Division, Administrator Bonds, Book R. p. 27; conversation with Edward Curtis, President, Method Civic League.
4. Edwards: op. cit., pp. 28, 30.
5. Ibid., p. 31; Berry O'Kelly obituary, in Raleigh, N. C., News and Observer, March 15, 1931.
6. Ibid., Cox, E. A.: "The Berry O'Kelly Training School: a Tribute and a History", North Carolina Teachers Record, Vol. II, No. 3 (May 1931).
7. Ibid., Edwards: op. cit., pp. 22-25; Berry O'Kelly obituary, in Raleigh, N. C., News and Observer, March 15, 1931.
8. Edwards: op. cit., pp. 32-33; conversation with Garrett Laws, Garner, N. C., former Vocational Agriculture Teacher, Berry O'Kelly School; Wake County

Board of Education, Minutes, August 3, 1925, August 14, 1925; September 7, 1925; February 7, 1927; June 14, 1927; February 6, 1928.

9. Berry O'Kelly obituary, in Raleigh, N. C., News and Observer, March 15, 1931; Cox: op. cit., Edwards: op. cit., pp. 33-34.

10. Wake County Board of Education, Minutes, January 23, 1967.

The Agricultural Building of the Berry O'Kelly School is the only remaining original component of the school complex. The building is undoubtedly representative of the kind of construction that characterized the other school buildings. It is a very straightforward, simple brick box, approximately 25 x 25'. Of an orange-red brick, laid in common bond, it has the plain, tall proportions that are associated with the commercial and institutional types from which it originated.

The main entry faces north and is placed symmetrically between six windows, now infilled with another shade of red brick. These six windows, flat-headed and resting on a broad, deep sill and those of an equal number down each side, would have given the building a liveliness which is now missing. Other elements which lessened the building's purely utilitarian character are the attached shed roof on heavy curved brackets which shelters the entry door and the decorative "cornice line" of bricks placed on end under a pulled row of headers approximately 18" below the parapet which is finished with a wide, flat concrete coping. This parapet conceals the built-up roof which slopes gently to the south end of the building.

A later addition, attached directly to the south wall, is somewhat larger in size, but repeats the original patterns established in the main block, except that seven windows fill the east and west sides and the parapet is stepped down twice to give the roof line additional interest and the roof sufficient slope for drainage.

The most significant feature of the building is that it represents a type of school building construction which was once characteristic of the area and the region.

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The main entry faces north and is ~~is~~ placed symmetrically between six windows, now infilled with a darker shade of red brick. These ~~six~~ six windows ^{apparently, flat-head but} and those of equal number resting on a broad deep sill down each side would have given the building a ^{view} character which is now missing. ^{Other elements} ~~The~~ but which is ^{alluded to by} the attached shed roof on brackets which shelters the entry door and the decorative "cornice line" of bricks on end under a pulled row of headers approx. 18" below the flat, cemented parapet of the roof. ^{which is found in other schools} The ^{original} built up roof ^{is} slopes gently to the south.

conceals a

A later addition, ^{attached to the south side of} of somewhat larger ^{main} size repeats the original pattern established in the ^{main} block except that seven windows fill the east and west sides and the parapet is stepped down twice to give the roof line additional interest.

The most significant feature of the building is that its design is of a type & kind of school building construction which was once known as the American type of school building.



Abstract Bldg. Terry O'Keller Sept 1970

25 x 25 square block approx. ^{tail} ~~foot~~ on
~~the~~ basement entered - 1/ west side under shed ^{and gate}
main entry on n side center under attached
shed on heavy machete - 3 low steps on n
depth on each side -
3 windows on each side ~~to n side~~ & w side

Common bond lead red, soft, tan joints -
flat roof built up - parapet ^{blocks} ~~stone~~ capped
stone -
decorative band of bricks at "cornice" line

later addition stepped down from ridge. 7 windows
30 x 25' 7 windows along sides - & across back -

interior in accessible. whole large space w/ d.
p. 11. 11. 11.

November 30, 1981

The owner of the Berry O'Kelly School Agricultural Building:

Wake County Board of Education
601 Devereux Street
Raleigh, North Carolina 27605

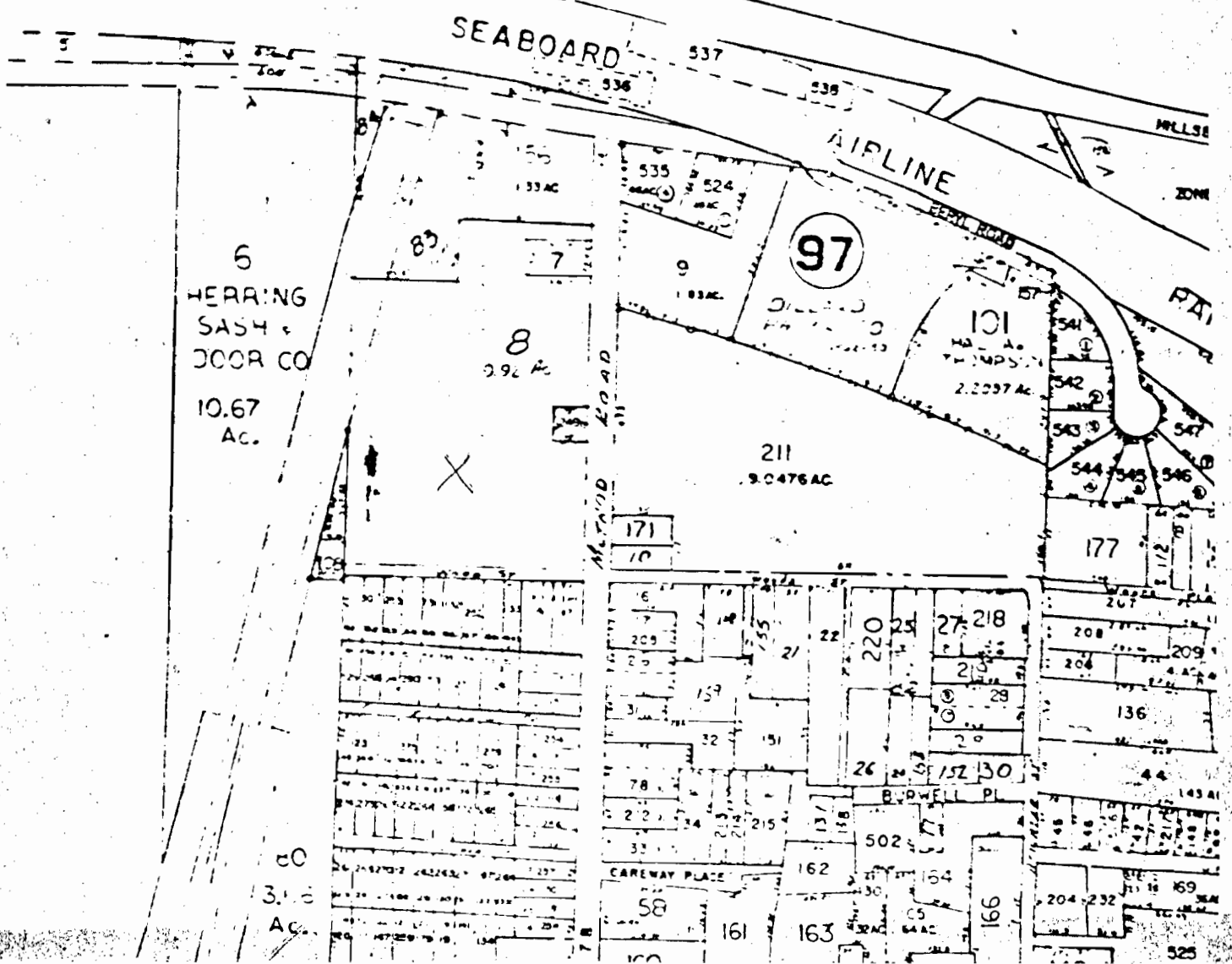
(919) 755-6959

The current deed book reference for the property:

Book Number 2415

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BELTLINE

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