

WHAT ONE YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN COULD DO: THE STORY OF DR. CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN AND THE PALMER MEMORIAL INSTITUTE

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Palmer Memorial Institute, located east of Greensboro, began in 1902 as a rural African American school and succeeded as a unique private school for more than 60 years. Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown was its founder and leader for 50 of those years.

She was born in Henderson in 1883 to descendants of slaves. In 1888 the family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, near Boston, to escape Jim Crow practices of the South and to obtain a better chance at social, economic, and educational growth. Though she was one of few blacks in Cambridge's schools, young Brown was an excellent student, and by chance she met educator Alice Freeman Palmer, who became her mentor.

Palmer was so impressed by Brown's diligence at pursuing an advanced education that she helped sponsor Brown's schooling. Palmer also introduced Brown to many important people in Boston society—people she would later approach to help with her school.

THE BEGINNING OF A DREAM

After a year of junior college, Brown accepted a 25-dollar-a-month job from the American Missionary Association (AMA) and returned to her home state to teach poor, rural blacks.

She arrived at a run-down Bethany Institute in Sedalia in 1901. Her desire to help African Americans in the South drove her to begin repairs, but the AMA decided to close the school. Without a job, Brown was encouraged by local African Americans to start her own school. The young 18-year-old virtually single-handedly made it happen.

She secured money and encouragement from her friends in the North and moved the school across the street to a blacksmith's shed. Brown soon raised enough money to build a campus with more than 200 hundred acres and two new buildings. She selected an initial board of trustees who were all African American, unlike the trustees at other schools of that era—even African American-oriented schools. After hiring a small staff and securing the additional support of local black and white leaders, Palmer Memorial Institute (Palmer) began operations.

Palmer offered to rural African American youth an unusual opportunity for cultural learning. The school's goal was to provide a facility where blacks could escape the then common assumption that African Americans were innately inferior to whites and did not need any schooling beyond vocational training.

In 1900 North Carolina had more than 2,000 privately operated schools for African Americans. But most teachers had only an elementary school education and could instruct their students only up to that level.

Palmer was different because Brown was offering college preparatory instruction in a junior and senior high school setting. Classes included drama, music, art, math, literature, and romance languages. Students were divided into small circle groups with teachers who served as counselors and advisers. Each student received personal training in character development and appearance. All students had to work one hour per day for the school.

TROUBLES AND VICTORIES

By 1915 Palmer had gained support from national figures such as educational leader Booker T. Washington, Harvard University president Charles William Eliot, and Boston philanthropists Carrie and Galen Stone.

After a major fire destroyed two of six main buildings in 1917, Brown's determination to raise enough money to offset the loss prevented the school's closing. This successful effort also encouraged increased biracial, or both black and white, cooperation for Palmer and its community.

The Stones, white northerners, became Palmer's largest donors. They were the first large donors to support Palmer because its holistic approach to total education and its quality liberal arts programs to educate black Americans beyond basic training levels.

Renewed biracial support and fund-raising efforts and increased contributions from across the nation resulted in Palmer's first major brick building and a new status as the only accredited rural high school, for African Americans or whites, in Guilford County. When another key building burned in 1922, a financially stronger and more community-oriented Palmer continued normal operations.

Brown introduced more liberal arts classes and advanced math and science courses to students at Palmer. She introduced the study of African American history at a time when no other high school in North Carolina was teaching it.

A HOLISTIC EDUCATION TO UPLIFT THE INDIVIDUAL

Brown took a year off to travel and study. In Europe she shared ideas with black educators Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Helen Burroughs. Together, these three women were known as the "Three Bs of Education." The Three Bs believed in combining a holistic triangle of ideas and lessons to achieve racial equality: Brown's triangle combined education, religion, and deeds; Bethune's triangle was "the head, the heart, and the hand"; Burrough's was "the book, the Bible, and the broom." By the mid-1920s Brown was a nationally known speaker who stressed teaching these concepts through culture and liberal arts for racial uplift.

At the state level, she helped create the first school for delinquent African American girls. As time passed, Brown started a junior college and built a new boys' dormitory. Palmer's growing

reputation increasingly drew middle- and upper-class students from outstanding families in the United States, Africa, Bermuda, Central America, and Cuba.

In 1937 Brown closed the elementary and junior college departments and convinced Guilford County officials to open the county's first public rural high school for African Americans. She became known as the "first lady of social graces" after appearing on national radio and publishing the book *The Correct Thing to Do, to Say, to Wear* in 1940. In the mid-1940s Brown raised a 100,000-dollar endowment, and *Ebony* magazine published a feature article on prestigious Palmer as "the only...school of its kind in America."

In 1952 Brown retired after 50 years. She handpicked Wilhelmina M. Crosson of Boston to succeed her as Palmer's next president. Following a long illness Brown died in 1961 and was buried with great honor on the campus she loved.

Palmer Memorial Institute has become a state historic site. It was the first state-supported site to honor the contributions of African Americans and women. Ongoing programs depict the history and development of African American education in North Carolina.

The school's legacy also lives on through generations of students and graduates who have been influenced by Palmer's philosophy: "Educate the individual to live in the greater world." They have become known around the globe as writers and singers, teachers and professors, doctors and lawyers, actors and actresses, scientist and mathematicians, and government officials.

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