

A HISTORY OF  
AVERY NORMAL INSTITUTE  
FROM 1865 TO 1954  
(Revised and Enlarged)



*Avery Building circa 1868*

by  
Edmund L. Drago  
Eugene C. Hunt



*Principal Benjamin F. Cox addressing Avery students in Chapel, 1916. Principles of self-respect, pride in family, in school and community were espoused at such times.*

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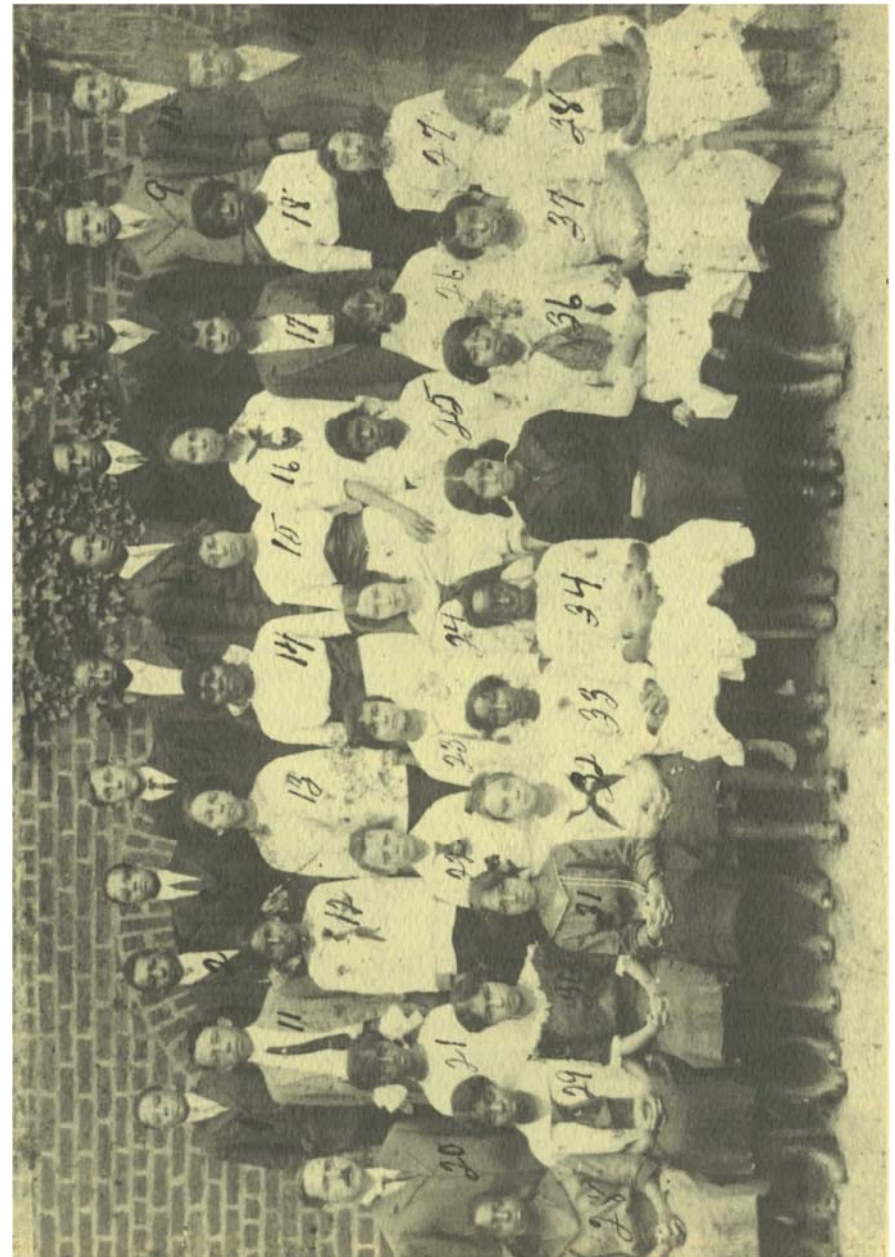
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Dr. W.E.B. DuBois and Sight-seeing Party, Charleston, SC, March 1917.

The Avery Normal Institute sank deep and branching roots into the sandy soils of the Carolina Lowcountry. The school was established by the American Missionary Association in Charleston, South Carolina, in the spring of 1865. In the dawn of emancipation, many ex-slaves eagerly grasped their first opportunity to break the mystery of the primer. Other former slaves saw a chance to continue in the open the studies they had been forced to begin surreptitiously. Students and teachers from the private schools and literary societies maintained by free persons of color in antebellum Charleston hoped their educational programs would expand now that they were freed from the constraints of slave society. Northern philanthropists and teachers, to whom the instruction of blacks was a vital element in the social reconstruction of the South, embarked on a program to mold their scholars in the Yankee image. Perhaps somewhat more slowly than other groups, native whites also elected to play a role in the education of the local black population. Avery's educational mission was to evolve in response to a wide range of social forces that converged on Charleston during the near century of the school's existence. For most of its history, it was the area's sole college preparatory institution open to black students. In that role, Avery emphasized training whose object was to produce a liberally educated, politically active, socially responsible black leadership.

First named in honor of New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan, an original member of the AMA, the school was placed under the direction of Thomas Cardozo and later, his brother Francis, both products of Charleston's antebellum free black community. Born in 1837 and educated in a Charleston school for free blacks, Francis Cardozo became a carpenter by trade. A "communing" member of Thomas Smythe's Second Presbyterian Church of Charleston, Cardozo pursued his theological studies abroad. He was graduated with honors from the University of Glasgow in Scotland and spent three additional years in London and Edinburgh studying at Presbyterian seminaries. In 1864, he



*Avery Class of 1918*

returned to the United States as pastor of the Temple Street Congregational Church in New Haven, Connecticut. In August of the following year he replaced his brother Thomas as principal of the AMA school in Charleston. Two months after his arrival in Charleston, Cardozo sensed that the issue of education was inextricably meshed with the political struggles of Reconstruction; "These people [Southern whites] have been entrusted with power too soon, they are still disloyal at heart and most are treacherous; they are trying their best to have civil power fully restored, and are willing to adopt any means for that purpose. The feeling of hate and revenge toward the colored people seems to be fiendish. They are throwing every obstacle in their way...one thing especially provokes them...our Schools."

Before he could begin to develop his educational program, Cardozo first had to find a permanent home for the new school of one thousand students and twenty teachers. In late 1865, General Rufus Saxton of the Freemen's Bureau offered the use of the State Normal building on St. Philip Street, and the school was promptly renamed "Saxton School." However, this building, and several others appropriated for military use, was eventually returned to their former owners. From E.P. Smith, the AMA's Traveling Secretary, Cardozo learned that the trustees of the estate of the late Reverend Charles Avery of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were expected to pledge \$10,000 for the establishment of a black college in Atlanta. At Cardozo's urging, Smith and the AMA persuaded the Avery trustees to make a similar contribution in Charleston to purchase a residence for the teachers at 121 Bull Street and an adjacent lot for the erection of a permanent school building. Built by the Freedmen's Bureau at a cost of \$17,000 and renamed Avery in honor of the chief donor, the school was dedicated on May 7, 1868. A local newspaper described the new structure: "The building is 88 feet long, 68 feet wide, 50 feet high, and to the top of the flagstaff 90 feet. It is raised on brick pillars, with spacious brick basements, and a large cistern underneath. On the first floor are four large classrooms,



*Frank A. DeCosta, Avery's Principal, 1936-1940*

two for the first class of boys and two for the first class of girls...on either side of the buildings are spacious piazzas running the entire length, and opened from the classrooms."

Cardozo early decided that Avery should be a "normal" or teacher training school, offering a classical education and college preparatory training. The curriculum included courses in Latin, Greek, algebra, geometry, botany, natural philosophy, civil government, political economy, and English literature. In 1866, one quarter of the school's students came from antebellum Charleston's free black community and about three-fourths of the scholars were freedmen. A year later, the percentage of freeborn students increased after Cardozo reduced the number of students to less than four hundred as part of his attempt to establish a "normal" school. Many of the early black teachers came from antebellum free families, among them William and Mary Weston, Richard S. Holloway, Catherine Winslow, Amelia Ann Shrewsbury, Harriet Holloway, Rosabelle Fields, Charlotte Johnson, and author Frances Rollin, who later wed black Reconstruction politician William J. Whipper. Most of Avery's students came from modest backgrounds and struggled to pay the \$1.00 monthly tuition. In 1869, principal M.A. Warren noted, "By far the greater number are in needy circumstances." Warren pledged that no qualified student "too poor to pay" would be denied admission.

The very existence of a school offering a classical education and academic excellence challenged many tenets of antebellum race relations. The spectacle of a school staffed by black and Yankee schoolmarm, offering a "Northern dispensation", hardly endeared itself to many white Charlestonians, especially those who passed the school while the students were singing such "patriotic" songs as "John Brown's Body". According to Cardozo, "One woman, very finely dressed, and apparently quite ladylike, stopped at the door...while the children were singing and said: 'Oh, I wish I could put a torch to that building! The niggers.'" Although most local whites

boycotted the school during its first year, by 1867, Cardozo and the school had gained the support of several prominent white South Carolinians, including Governor James L. Orr, Charleston's mayor P.C. Gaillard, Charleston *Courier* editor Thomas Simons, and the former Treasurer of the Confederacy, George Trenholm. Nevertheless, hostility towards Avery was never completely absent in the nineteenth century. In 1893, the *American Missionary* reported that Avery was not "heartily approved by the older and native white Charlestonians, because they do not believe in Negro education, anyway, beyond a very limited extent."

Thus, Avery challenged many nineteenth-century white supremacist conventions. But some legacies of the nineteenth century lingered. Divisions in Charleston's black community that were engendered by slavery promoted tendencies toward intra-racial segregation within the school itself. Distinctions based on skin color, antebellum free status, and wealth fostered a spirit of caste whose influence was lamented as late as 1938 by The American Missionary Association: "It is hard for an organization which was created to destroy caste to have to admit that Avery has not escaped the temptations of aristocracy."

After Cardozo stepped down in 1868 to become South Carolina's Secretary of State, the AMA appointed a series of white principals to head Avery between 1868 and 1913, the most important being Morrison Holmes, who took charge of the school in 1886 and remained its principal until his death in 1907. Under Holmes, "the school gained in well-earned reputation for high standards...until it came to be known as...second to no other school of its kind in the entire system of educational institutions under the watch and care of the American Missionary Association." Avery perhaps came to embody principles later associated with W.E.B. DuBois's belief that the struggle for racial equality would be waged most effectively by a "Talented Tenth", a college-trained, politically active, and socially responsible black

vanguard. Through its graduates, the school exerted a profound impact on black education in the Lowcountry. In 1900, a survey of Avery's four hundred graduates revealed that two-thirds had become school teachers. According to the report, "There is not a county in the state to which our graduates do not go as teachers, and in the lower counties along this malarial coast nearly all the schools for colored children are taught by Avery graduates."

In the city of Charleston, however, only Miss Sally O. Cruickshank (Avery, 1873) and Miss Esther Alston (Avery, 1894) taught in the city's black public schools. Miss Cruickshank and Miss Alston taught at Shaw Memorial School (on Mary Street), which has been financed by the relatives of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the white Union officer killed while leading a black regiment's assault on Fort Wagner in the Charleston Harbor during the Civil War. Shaw School became part of the city's public system in 1874.

In 1886, a black Charlestonian asked, "Is it fair to our sons and daughters that after graduation from the city schools and other high schools, they are not allowed even to teach their own race?", especially since the city schools were staffed with "white graduates of Memminger school...the daughters of ex-Confederate soldiers and broken-down aristocracy, whose fortunes failed with the 'Lost Cause.'" According to the same observer, "These young ladies teach simply for their pay; there is no interest manifested in their scholars after regular hours...Some of the teachers have gone so far as to forbid the scholars speaking to them on the streets when they meet." Such practices no doubt caused black parents who could afford the tuition fees to send their children to private schools, many of which were organized by Avery graduates like Ellen Sanders and Anna Magrath (graduates of the class of 1889). In 1895, John L. Dart, the valedictorian of Avery's first graduating class (1872), built and operated the Charleston Industrial Institute for black youths. Pastor of Morris Street Baptist Church since 1886, Dart also

established a newspaper, *The Southern Reporter*, devoted mainly to news of the Baptist church.

The appointment of Benjamin F. Cox as principal in 1915 marked a watershed in Avery's history. Cox, a graduate of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, with experience in running AMA normal schools in Georgia and Alabama, was the first black principal to head the school on a permanent basis after Francis Cardozo. Cox's wife, Jeannette Keeble Cox, also a Fisk graduate and an AMA teacher, became matron of the Teachers' Home. The arrival of Cox family precipitated Avery's transition to an entirely black teaching corps. Septima Poinsette (Clark), a graduate of the class of 1916 who taught at Avery during the period, later recalled:

"Benjamin Cox was a Negro and his coming to Avery as principal brought complications. A few Negro teachers, too, had come into the school and these Negroes were living in the same dormitory with the white teachers from New England. This situation provoked considerable talk in Charleston and the city's board of aldermen ruled that white and Negro teachers could not live in the same dormitory. So to our great sorrow they began to get rid of the white teachers and Negro teachers were employed to take their places. I remember two of the most beloved of the white teachers, Miss Marsh and Miss Tuttle, were permitted to remain two years longer."

By 1916, the entire administration and faculty were black. In that year, *The Pinnacle*, the school's yearbook, was dedicated to "Avery's First Colored Faculty."

During his tenure as principal (1915-36), Benjamin Cox instituted far-reaching changes. "He had been there only a short time," Mrs. Clark remembered, "before he cleaned up the buildings, added new facilities and put additional courses into the

curriculum." Mrs. Clark particularly remembered Cox's decree that "your graduation dress...could not cost more than \$1.25 and could have no lace or fussy trimming whatsoever on it. Bless his memory! That was godsend to my struggling parents, and to many others, some perhaps even less able than mine to provide their daughters with commencement finery." Cox instituted a variety of cultural improvements. He displayed a portrait of Frederick Douglass in the school, encouraged various senior classes to perform Shakespeare, and introduced his famous "rhetoricals", whereby students were required to render the readings of speeches of well-known orators or give speeches on assigned topics they had researched. Avery's glee clubs performed concerts for northern tourists at the Villa Margarita, at The Citadel, and at the Fort Sumter and Francis Marion Hotels, as well as for the city's Inter-Racial Commission. Cox's administration also brought a surge in athletic activity. The first basketball team was started with his arrival, and football followed nine years later. The students' commencement speeches between 1918 and 1935 reflect the influence of such black educators as Carter G. Woodson and suggest that Avery, under Cox, was intimately concerned with black history, the role of women, political involvement, and international affairs. During those years, graduating students spoke on such themes as "The NAACP", "The Negro as a Factor in American History", "Women's Importance in the World's Affairs", "The Inter-Racial Movement in the South", and "Must There Be Another War?"

In 1919, Reconstruction-era congressman Thomas E. Miller approached Benjamin Cox with a proposal sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to replace white teachers in Charleston's black public schools with black teachers. With Cox's blessing, Avery teachers and students undertook a massive and unprecedented canvas of Charleston's black community. They obtained ten thousand signatures on a petition supporting the proposal. One year later, the city's black public schools had both black teachers and black principals. Mrs.

Clark, who was to become a leading figure in the civil rights movement, later recalled the importance of this petition drive in her own development: "Looking back more than four decades to that year 1918-19, I realize now that the experience of teaching at Avery was one of the most important and formative experiences of my life. It was then that I first became actively concerned in an organized effort to improve the lot of my fellow Negroes...That's when I got into the fight. I volunteered to seek signatures and started visiting the grass roots people."

When Benjamin Cox retired in 1936, he and Avery could boast of a series of triumphs. In 1925, Avery's excellence led to a reincorporation of the school with the purpose of upgrading it to college level. Although the Great Depression brought financial difficulties, the improvements continued. The library expanded its holdings. The science department acquired new equipment; and in 1933, the school added a fifth high-school year for teacher trainees.

Under Benjamin Cox's successors, Avery alumni Frank A. DeCosta, a graduate of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and L. Howard Bennett, a graduate of Fisk University in Tennessee, Avery attracted a highly qualified teaching corps. Many of the young teachers had advanced university degrees. World War II profoundly affected Avery's student body, some of whom were soon to be drafted. The 1942 Commencement speeches reflected how deeply the school was becoming involved in the war effort: "Women's Opportunity in Maintaining Morale among Service Men", "Negro School and Colleges Arm for Defense", "Negro Pilots Win Wings", "The Negro Youth in Defense Work". Noted black scholar Charles Wesley urged 1942 graduates attending their baccalaureate services, "to free themselves from the chains forged by the schools and in the textbooks that theirs is an ignoble heritage, that the homeland of their ancestors is a land for conquest and oppression."

The irony of fighting for democracy and against racism abroad when there was too little democracy and too much racism at home was not lost on Avery's senior class of 1944. Seniors in Miss Julia Brogdon's "Problems in Democracy" class decided to tackle a local problem—the segregation of the nearby tax-supported College of Charleston. Their leader was a returning veteran, John Wrighten, president of Charleston's Junior NAACP chapter. Without informing acting principal Miss Florence A. Clyde (and much to her consternation), thirty-two of the forty-four graduating seniors sent letters of inquiry regarding admission to the College. Local newspapers saw the action as part of a conspiracy hatched in Washington by "The New Deal", aided by "colored agitators". While the Avery administration and the American Missionary Association feared possible repercussions, several white Charlestonians responded to the incident by discussing with black leaders the conversion of Avery to a junior college as an alternative to integration."

The war years were administratively turbulent ones for Avery. The school lost principal L. Howard Bennett to the USO in 1943. In keeping with its avowed policy of withdrawing from secondary education in areas where a public school system existed, the AMA announced that Avery must become entirely self-supporting. Consequently, an administrative council was elected in 1944 to reformulate school policy and to choose a new principal. The parents and patrons of Avery undertook a fundraising campaign that netted over \$10,000, thereby enabling the AMA to reduce its contributions to the annual budget to \$5,000.

The council's new choice for principal, John F. Potts (B.A., Benedict College; M.A., Cornell University), faced a real challenge. Shortly before he came in 1945, a fire struck the Avery building, resulting in \$29,000 worth of damages. Later, Potts would preside over Avery's transition from a private to public school in 1947. A product of the liberalism of the 1930s and a

former officer of the Navy, John Potts eagerly endorsed the changes that the war was bringing to the South in race relations. "It is really a pleasure to be living in the South during this history-making period," he wrote in 1948. A year later, Potts shared the podium with Dr. Benjamin E. Mays as the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity presented an achievement award to Judge and Mrs. Waring. According to Potts, Mrs. Waring, whose maiden name was Avery, was a descendant of the Reverend Charles Avery for whom Avery was named!"

Closed ostensibly for financial reasons in 1954, over the objections of the Avery Parents-Teachers' Association and many alumni and friends, Avery continued to exert its influence. Averyites and their children were prominent in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Avery alumna, Septima Clark, became a trusted lieutenant of the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Avery alumnus J. Arthur Brown served as president of both Charleston and the state NAACP branches. His daughter, Millicent Brown, was in the vanguard of black students who desegregated Charleston County's public schools in 1963. During the Second Reconstruction, several Averyites were appointed judges, including Richard Fields, L. Howard Bennett, and H. Carl Moultrie.

In 1978, a group of Averyites and others organized The Avery Institute of Afro-American History and Culture. Its purpose was to obtain the old Avery buildings and establish in them an archives and museum dedicated to preserving African-American history and culture in the Lowcountry. Its first presidents were the Hon. Lucille S. Whipper, a member of the SC House of Representatives from Charleston County; and Eugene C. Hunt, a College of Charleston professor.

To fulfill its long term goals, the organization realized it had to affiliate with an academic institution. The College of Charleston provided that link. The two groups jointly sought and obtained a federal planning grant in 1981 to plan programs and explore future options. Out of the planning grant came the



concept of a center, "a cooperative project of the Avery Institute of Afro-American History and Culture and the College of Charleston." The College was subsequently deeded the Bull Street property (#123 and #125). In 1985, the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture was established as part of the academic program of the College of Charleston. Dr. Myrtle Glascoe became the Center's first director. The College of Charleston president at the time, Harry M. Lightsey, Jr., created an Advisory Board for the Center to guide him. It included members of the community, the Institute, and the College. Despite delays caused by the ravages of Hurricane Hugo (September 21, 1989), the grand opening of the building took place on October 6, 1990. On January 10, 1991 the restored Avery building received the prestigious Carolopolis Award from the Preservation Society of Charleston. After twelve years of strenuous effort, the Avery Institute of Afro-American History and Culture saw its dream finally realized.

## Notes

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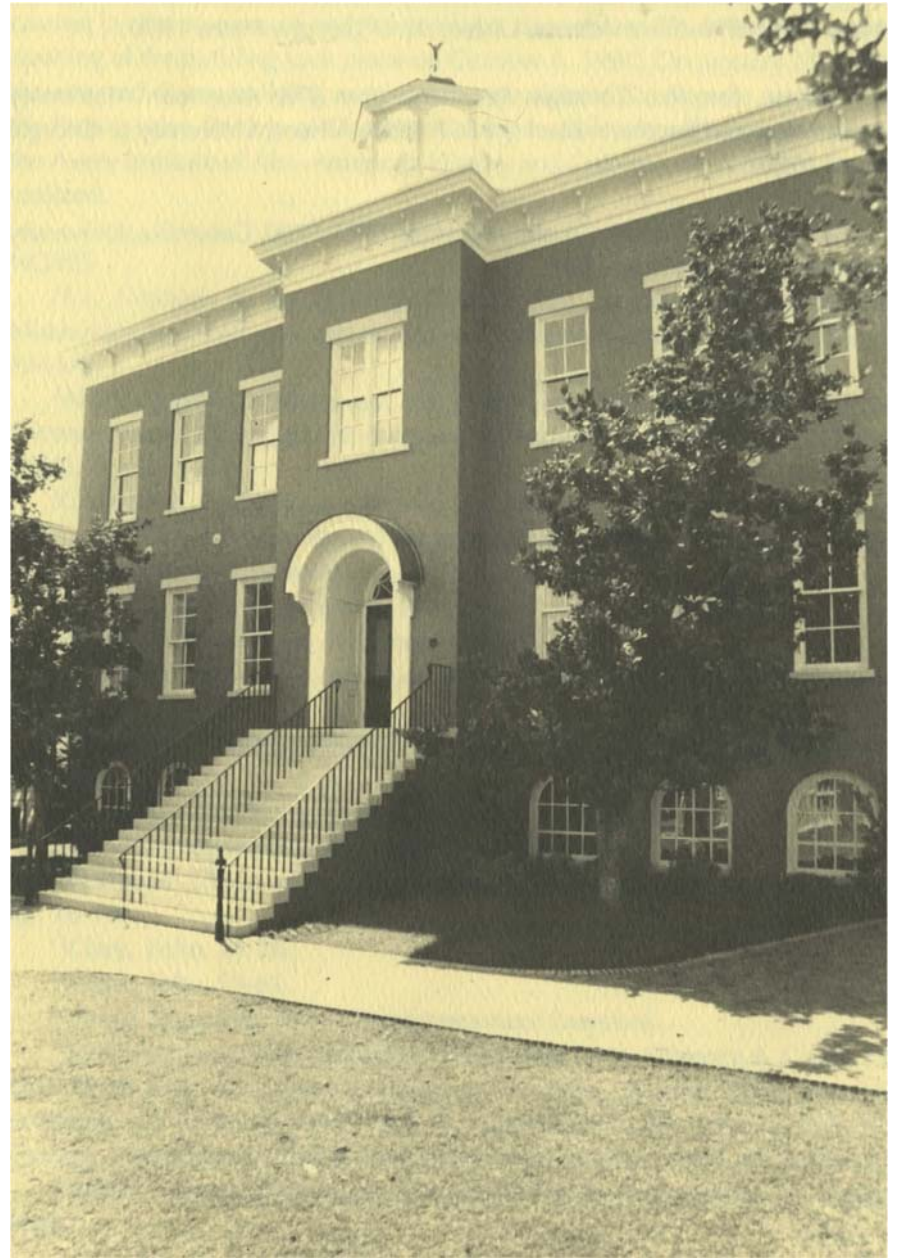
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