

Booker T. Washington Night School Sewing Graduating Class of 1950 photograph

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Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

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1950

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Language

English

source

Max Rambod

Creator

Modern Arts Studio (Norfolk, Va.)

Extent

0.03 Cubic Feet One letter-size file folder

Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was a purchase from Max Rambod to the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 4 March 2026.

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Biographical / Historical

James T. West High School, one of Virginia's first accredited public high schools for African-Americans, was renamed in 1917 for Booker T. Washington, educator, author and orator. The school moved to a newly constructed building in 1924 and for decades was Norfolk's only public high school for black students. Its programs were central to the community. In 1939-1940, faculty members Aline Black and Melvin Alston pursued legal action that led to a federal court decision requiring salary equalization for black and white teachers. In Sept. 1963, students marched to protest poor facilities. Norfolk implemented a desegregation plan in 1970, and the school moved into a new building here in 1974.<https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=130360>

Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk became Virginia's first accredited public high school for African Americans in 1917.<https://www.13newsnow.com/article/news/in-session-norfolk-high-school-rich-in-black-history/291-6b3ddb3-8c53-4e2c-a8c0-be7129bc899e>

Dr. Vivian Monroe-Hester graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1965 and is a local wealth of knowledge.

As she tells it, the school began as Mission College when a group of religious women decided to help educate African-American children after the Civil War.

After the turn of the century, David Gilbert Jacox wanted to expand to a full high school and helped transform the school into what it is today. In 1917, Booker T. Washington High School became Virginia's first accredited public high school for African Americans.

The original building, which lacked a cafeteria, was nicknamed "the factory" because of its appearance. Though lacking in aesthetics, the school still had top-notch educators.

"The teachers were excellent in preparing the students for the world," Dr. Monroe-Hester said. "We were always taught that we had to be better."

In 1939, Science teacher Aline Black went to court to try and gain equal pay for African-American teachers. According to historic documents, Black was earning \$1,045 annually whereas white teachers in the high schools teaching the same chemistry science class were paid \$2,100.

Black lost her job during the process but her fight paid off. The Supreme Court in 1940 upheld a lower court ruling that teacher salaries fell under 14th Amendment protection. Black was rehired at Booker T. Washington High School and African American teachers received equal pay.

In 1949, the school's band performed in the inauguration parade for President Harry S. Truman.

During the 60s and 70s, Dr. Monroe-Hester said students participated in several marches at City Hall to protest the city's attempt to change the school name and move locations.

"To now take our name and move our heritage away from us and at that time, there were other black high schools in the state of Virginia that lost their heritage because they turned them into elementary schools or tore them down or made them administrative buildings and we did not want that to happen to Booker T. Washington High School," Dr. Monroe-Hester said.

Students moved into today's present-day building in 1974, located at 111 Park Avenue.

"As of today, we have Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk and Norcom High School in Portsmouth. Out of all the cities, we are the only two African-American high schools left in the state of Virginia," Dr. Monroe-Hester said.

Dr. Monroe-Hester said she and other alumni are still fighting to improve the school's quality of education

while trying to maintain its history and place in the Norfolk community.

"We're working towards keeping it a central part of Norfolk's community and of course, the black community," said Glynis Mason, a 1972 graduate.

Dr. Monroe-Hester said she takes issue with the school being considered a School of the Arts. She said that doesn't make it easy for students when marketing themselves for the workforce.

"We've been talking with leaders in the city, and the proposal has been that we move to a CTE curriculum which will bring in technology, the arts, the mathematics, the science," she said.

Recently, the state awarded Booker T. Washington High School a historic highway marker.

"Our biggest struggle is still to maintain our history, maintain our legacy that we had and support of the city is what we continue to ask for, the city and the school board," Dr. Monroe-Hester said.

CELEBRATION

The school will celebrate its 102nd anniversary February 23 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Booker T. Washington High School and later that evening from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Half Moone at Nauticus.

Content Description

This collection contains a class-composite photograph documenting the graduating class of 1950 from the Sewing Program of the Booker T. Washington Night School in Norfolk, Virginia. The composite features formal studio portrait vignettes of more than seventy graduates, nearly all African American women, arranged in rows around a central image of the Booker T. Washington High School building and photographs of faculty and administrators. Each student is identified by name under their image. The image was taken by Modern Arts Studio, a professional photo studio on Church Street in Norfolk.

The poster highlights the gender and racial dimensions of vocational schooling in segregated communities: sewing programs like this one prepared Black women for both waged labor and domestic economic independence at a time when discriminatory hiring practices sharply limited available occupations. The inclusion of male faculty and a handful of male graduates underscores the community-based, intergenerational nature of the school.

Produced during the Jim Crow era, the poster captures a vivid moment in Black vocational and adult education, when night schools served as crucial sites of opportunity for working class African American women seeking skilled training in domestic arts, tailoring, and garment work.

Related Materials

Related collection: MSS 15389 (Boxed with MSS 15275)

Keywords

African Americans -- Education

African American schools

African American women

African Americans -- Photographs

Max Rambod

Booker T. Washington High School (Norfolk, Va.)

Norfolk (Va.)