

School boundary map 1963-64, from Reed School *Self-Study Report*.

THE INTEGRATION OF REED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by Sophie B. Vogel

The first school for Afro-American children in Arlington County was opened in 1863 in Freedmen's Village by the Arlington Tract Society. The staff consisted of one principal and four teachers who were responsible for the education of 150 children. In 1870 public school systems became mandatory. They were specified in the 1869 Constitution of Virginia.¹ A year later, in 1871, the Arlington District School Board (the county was divided into three districts, each with its own school board) met with residents of Freedmen's Village. The minutes of the January 11, 1871 meeting read (in part): "There seemed to be quite an interest among colored people, as there were quite a number of the parents and friends present who seemed anxious for a Public School." The school building in Freedmen's Village, which was purchased for \$75, operated as a public school until 1888-89. By that time most of the inhabitants of the village had purchased property and relocated in nearby areas.

For the first 30 years the Afro-American public school population exceeded white enrollment. From 1900-1910 the white student enrollment began to increase. By 1917 the white students surpassed the number of Afro-American children.²

There were eleven public schools in Arlington County in 1911; six were attended by white students and had a 545 pupil seating capacity; five schools with a 555 pupil seating capacity were attended by Afro-American students. Seven of the buildings were owned by the county, the remainder were rented.

There is mention of a "Halls Hill Negro School" in the Washington School District in 1917. It was probably replaced in 1925 by the John Langston School, built at 4854 Lee Highway to provide 'separate but equal' education for the children living on either side of Lee Highway, the areas known as Hall's Hill and Highview Park. Basil Hall, owner and farmer of a large tract of land, subdivided that portion of his farm into building lots which were sold to former residents of Freedmen's Village.³

As the county school population escalated in the post World War II era, three additions to Langston were constructed in 1953, 1959, and 1964. Additions to neighboring schools were also made. Lee School (5722 Lee Highway) was built in 1926 and gained added space in 1957. Cherrydale (3710 Lee Highway), with 12 teachers, was the largest school in the county in 1922.

Additions to it were made in 1927 and 1951. Reed School (1644 N. McKinley Road) was originally built in 1938 as a four classroom school. Additions became necessary in 1946, 1950, 1962, and 1966. Woodlawn School (4720 16th Street, North) was erected in 1940 and enlarged in 1948.⁴

Rapid Growth in the 1950s

School overcrowding in the 1950s brought innovative solutions: double sessions at Reed; some classes were held in the Westover Baptist Church on Washington Boulevard. The quality of education was not affected. Standards remained high and performance levels matched them. In the midst of wrestling with a space problem, the School Board was faced with the Brown decision (May 1954) ordering the integration of public schools. The Brown decision had a direct bearing on the expansion of the county schools. Yet the immediate, unfavorable reaction of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the pressure of increased enrollment did not provide the climate nor the time to draw up a comprehensive plan for school buildings in compliance with the Brown decision once implemented.

In the schools of Arlington County, the process of integration began on February 2, 1959 when four Afro-American students were enrolled at Stratford Junior High by court order. Four years later, in 1963-64, all the secondary schools in the county were integrated. No action was taken to desegregate at the elementary level until 1966.

Lee-Reed School Merger

Until 1966 the north central corridor of Arlington County was served by five elementary schools: Cherrydale, Langston, Lee, Reed and Woodlawn. These were among the first elementary schools in the county to be integrated. By contrast with the secondary schools a whirlwind of changes occurred at Walter Reed Elementary School in the space of seven months. The first, proposed in 1964 by the School Board and Superintendent Ray Reid, to merge Lee and Reed schools, caused dissension in the community. Lee parents wanted to keep their small neighborhood school. Reed parents insisted that a school with over 500 students required a full-time principal. They did not believe that one principal could administer, efficiently, classes in two separate buildings located six blocks apart. Nonetheless, in February 1965, the school administration proceeded with its plan — Lee and Reed were merged. Parents and the community were told that a one-class-per-grade-level school was not educationally sound. In hindsight many parents and staff wondered if the action was taken in preparation for the elementary school integration which followed.

**Reed and Lee-Reed Enrollment
1952-1970**

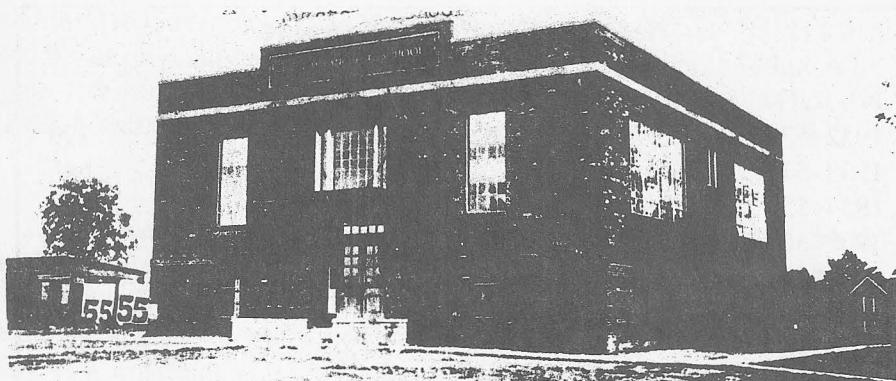
1952-53	720
1953-54	645
1954-55	599
1955-56	588
1956-57	610
1957-58	589
1958-59	509
1959-60	525
1960-61	510
1961-62	503
1962-63	501
1963-64	554
1964-65	617
1965-66	691
1966-67	751
1967-68	743
1968-69	768
1969-70	813
1970-71	801

Both buildings, Lee and Reed, continued to be used because the enrollment, now at 691, could not be accommodated in the Reed building. The two facilities were administered by the principal of Reed, Mrs. Ruth Kovacevich.

The greatest challenge was to divide the student body in a manner least traumatic to the children while maintaining a workable "whole school" atmosphere. Prior to receiving Lee's students Mrs. K (as she preferred to be called) held many staff meetings and grade level conferences to examine the pros and cons for assigning each level to Lee School. Mrs. K and staff decided that for the remainder of the 1965-66 school year the Lee building would be designated as a kindergarten center.

Integrating Langston Students into Lee-Reed

Several months before school closed for the summer of 1966 the Lee-Reed staff learned that in September, Langston, the sole elementary school for Afro-American students in the northern part of the county, was to be desegregated. More than 150 students were assigned to Lee-Reed; those remaining were



From a faded 1932 photo taken for insurance purposes.

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divided between Woodlawn, Cherrydale and Taylor. Lee-Reed's boundaries, which were contiguous to Langston and Woodlawn's, were enlarged to include Langston children who lived within walking distance of Reed. Some parents at Langston were reluctant to give up their neighborhood school. Although the principal and staff at Reed were still coping with the Lee-Reed merger, they took time to reach out to their neighbors at Langston.

The two principals made plans to ease the transition for students and staff of both schools. Joint staff meetings were held to air concerns about the merger and to find ways to prepare the children of Langston for their new school. Langston parents came to Reed PTA meetings to meet Reed parents. Many contacts between members of the two Student Councils were arranged: Reed students went to Langston and Langston students came to Reed.

May Day at Langston

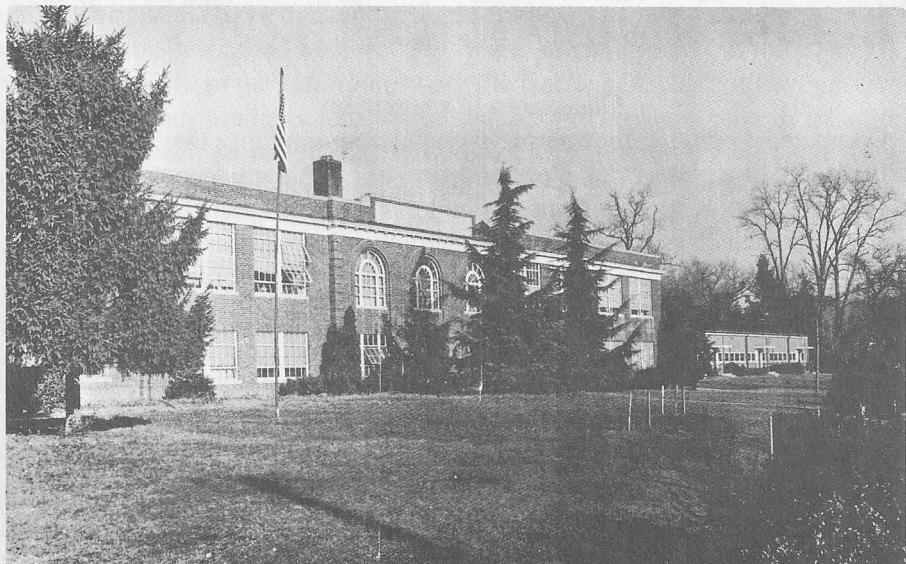
One beautiful May morning Mrs. K and I drove members of Reed's Student Council to attend May Day exercises at Langston, where Willie Jones, who had played professional basketball, was in charge of physical education. His May Day program, which spectators and participants will never forget, was equal to a Broadway production. Outdoors, on the grounds of Langston, he staged a calisthenics program replete with costumes and musical accompaniment. Each segment had a theme and the most memorable was *Batman*. Every boy taking part wore a mask and a black cape and every boy knew he was the real Batman and performed accordingly. Neighbors on their way to the shops on Lee Highway or to the bus stop paused at the fence to watch and applaud the youngsters. It was the children's farewell tribute to their school which was an integral part of a warm and caring community.

Lee-Reed-Langston

With this second influx of students Lee-Reed's enrollment jumped above 750 students. The two buildings could not house all the students. Langston school had to be used as well. There were now eight sections of third grade in Lee-Reed and five sections of kindergarten. Since all eight third grades could be accommodated at Lee School, they were assigned there. For the first three years Audrey Wilcox was the head teacher responsible for the day-to-day operation of the facility and implementation of the program. When Mrs. Wilcox retired Marcia Harmony took over as head teacher at Lee. The Kindergarten Center that was at Lee was moved to Langston — a move that required busing most of the youngsters. So many buses were needed that the little people often got confused and boarded the wrong bus. One hectic afternoon parents were on the phone trying to locate their children. It was almost four o'clock and they had not come home. The children, meanwhile, were riding around Arlington, having boarded the wrong buses! All were located and returned home safely the same day.

Reed Building

Grades 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 were billeted at Reed. Willie Jones, the physical education teacher, Alice Fleet, reading teacher, Claudia Pitts, social studies supervisor, Esther Halstead, librarian and William Vollin, sixth grade teacher



Walter Reed Elementary School, 1964.

were transferred from Langston to Lee-Reed.

Every available space was used at Lee-Reed after the second merger. The library at the Reed building became a large sixth-grade classroom, without partitions, housing two classes. Only a small glassed-in office space was retained for the librarian. It was team-teaching of a unique sort. Both teachers were in the classroom at all times and both were responsible for all the students, about 60 of them. One of the teachers, Mrs. Shytle, had come to Reed via the Lee-Reed merger, while Mr. Vollin came from Langston. Both were experienced sixth grade teachers. It was a difficult situation but like many difficult situations there were benefits to be derived, and this one had an additional bonus. A white teacher was sharing instructional responsibilities with an Afro-American teacher. The students learned about gender and race equality as they watched their "duo-team" at work.

Mrs. Halstead and I, two librarians serving almost 900 students, moved books from the Reed library suitable for the third grade curriculum, and at reading levels that spanned second to sixth grade, to augment the Lee library collection. Mrs. Halstead worked three full days at Lee. Reed's library was inaccessible to students. The solution there was to take the library into the classrooms. We purchased several plastic laundry baskets which we filled with books at the beginning of the day. Mrs. Halstead carried the books into the first and second grade classrooms. Reference books were placed in two small storage rooms; one was next to the library, the other was in a central location on the second floor. In these two spaces I was free to work with small groups from grades four through six.

Classroom Management

Compared to physically housing the students, assigning them to classes turned out to be a greater task. Reed scrapped its prior homogeneous grouping of students. Mrs. K was adamant that no less than four Langston students be assigned to each class and that each classroom accommodate a wider spread of abilities than heretofore. Mrs. K had been exposed to other cultures, having lived in Turkey for several years before coming to Reed. She experienced being a minority in a foreign country first hand.

She had much to learn about her new students, especially those who were "sent to the office" for a reprimand or whatever. Her usual style was to ask the students to tell her what happened. When this request was met with dead silence by former Langston students, Mrs. K realized she needed a different approach with her new charges. Mrs. K began to "hang around" the lunchroom and listen to students as they talked to each other. She resorted to a new method of inquiry and a slight change in language. When she asked in a light,

rhythrical voice, slurring over the ‘have,’ “What have you been sent here for?” she received a response and a dialogue was underway.

Mrs. K was very visible in the building. She walked the halls, she was in the cafeteria, she was at the bus stop to welcome students and to see them board the bus at the end of the day. Only one bus was needed for the safety of the children who had to cross dangerous intersections. The rest of the children from Langston could walk safely to Reed. Mrs. K made a special effort to recruit former Langston parents to join the PTA Executive Committee. About three or four Langston parents were on the PTA Executive Committee continuously from 1967 until 1984 when Reed was closed. Some Afro-American fathers spoke eloquently before the School Board in 1979 and again in 1982 in favor of keeping their neighborhood school, Reed, open.

Performance Levels

The weekly staff meetings at Lee-Reed seldom ended before 6 p.m. There were many observations to share as teachers sought ways to improve communication with the new students. The staff was dedicated and determined to be fair to all students without lowering standards. Expectations remained high and on grade level. Not surprisingly, almost all the students worked hard to measure up to them. After the year ended teachers had a better grasp of the students’ abilities and were able to narrow the grouping the following year.

Teachers became more resourceful without compromising standards. Special materials had to be created for some classes, and as librarian/media specialist I was often called upon to help. With the sixth grades in the library, I was free to work in the classrooms with the teachers. A class of fifth graders containing many students labeled as ‘low performers’ was able to raise its reading and math scores by 2 and 1 1/2 grades respectively in one year. Their teacher, Marianne Monfils, who had taught in France and Saudi Arabia, reassured her students that they were able to do the work that was assigned. Her strategies were positive reinforcement, fairness, and an offer to help anyone who wanted it. Often the kind of materials Miss Monfils needed were not available; she and I created them especially for that group of children. Reed children felt good about themselves and about coming to school. The staff wanted all the newcomers to share that feeling.

‘Ebonics’ is a fancy new name given to Afro-American dialects, which are not the only dialects in American English. Dialects abound in all cultures and languages. For this reason languages have been standardized and the standardized versions are taught in the schools. A sixth grade teacher at Reed and I saw a need to concentrate on the students’ sentence patterns to conform to the standard. We began by playing games. The first game was *Animal, Veg-*

etable or Mineral? The boys and girls enjoyed the game and were beginning to use simple sentences automatically when one very intelligent girl asked, "Why we talking like this?" The teacher and I were taken by surprise.

"That's the way it's written," I explained. Apparently that explanation was acceptable and understood. We continued with the game and added other strategies akin to those used in teaching a foreign language to American youngsters.

Lee-Reed's success at integration came to the attention of the Office of Education across the Potomac. Two officials came to one of our staff meetings to find the secret of our success. All of us were hard pressed to identify any particular strategies. Teachers began to talk about some of the procedures they used and the two men were taking copious notes.

Additional Space

Anticipating the need for more space at Reed before the mergers started, a group of staff members met with Dr. Richard Wiggin, the head of the art department who was also an architect, to plan an addition to Reed. The structure had to be financed on a pay-as-you-go basis from capital improvement funds in the budget. No mortgage was taken and no school bond was floated. The object was to get as much space as possible with the funds available. A circular building was the least costly to erect. We designed the Round, a circular plan that allowed 9,000 square feet for four partitioned classrooms without doors and a common area, plus a 3,000 foot library/media center on the other side of the curved wall. The new addition was completed in January 1967; all of Lee-Reed's 861 students were finally under one roof in Walter Reed School, except for the third grades which remained in the Lee building.

Woodlawn Requests Merger with Reed

The Langston students that were assigned to Woodlawn, a small school with only one section per grade level, could all walk to their new school. Some Woodlawn parents chose to send their children to private schools after the decision was made to include Woodlawn in the desegregation process. The race ratio at Woodlawn became evenly divided, 50%-50%, and the remaining Woodlawn parents were fearful that more "white flight" would take place and jeopardize not only the school but property values. In the spring of 1967 they requested a merger with Reed. Every space in Lee and Reed was used and there was no capacity to accommodate approximately 200 more students. The merger was not approved; Woodlawn remained a self-contained school.

In the summer of 1967 Mrs. K was stricken with Guillaume-Barre's Syndrome and was not at the helm of Lee-Reed for the first half of the year. When

she returned to Lee-Reed in the second part of the year she was assisted by Floyd Gravitt, an Afro-American. Mrs. K was assigned to Woodlawn elementary school in 1969. Under her able administration the race ratio in Woodlawn began to improve when white students returned to the school.

Mrs. K now divides her time between Arizona and Arlington. She frequently meets former Langston parents who stop to talk with her. They thank her for educating their children and tell her that she and her teachers were not afraid of them as teachers in some of the other schools seemed to be. Mrs. K considers that a great compliment and so do former staff who are grateful for the opportunity to have played a part in this important piece of American history -- desegregation. Yet, a number of Afro-American parents voiced their preference to return to 'separate but equal' schools because they felt they (the parents) had better control over their children in Langston School.

Notes and References

Sophie B. Vogel was the librarian/media specialist at Walter Reed Elementary School from September 1957 to June 1980. During her tenure growth and change came to Reed. She feels privileged to have been part of the school's history, particularly when the elementary schools were integrated. Mrs. Ruth Kovacevich, Marcia Harmony, and Marianne Monfils contributed their recollections to this article. In addition to the specific references noted, much information for the preparation of this article was taken from the Reed Elementary School *Self-Study Report, 1975-76*.

¹ C.B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Virginia, A History* (Arlington: Arlington Historical Society, 1976), p. 132.

² Kemp, Fletcher, *History of Public Education in Arlington County, Virginia, 1870-1936*.

³ Lee, Dorothy Ellis, *A History of Arlington County, Virginia* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1946), pp. 123-137.

⁴ Stiss, Seymour B., "School Buildings in Arlington: 1922-1979" in *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 3, October 1979, pp. 3-12.