

## **Ponies, panthers, and pantyhose all part of education in Limestone County**

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

With Limestone County students heading back to school this week, it's time for a history lesson! Study up on these facts about schools in Limestone County:

- In 1820, Robert Elliott opened the first known Limestone County school for boys and girls in a log school house next to the old city cemetery. Elliott cut quite a figure, with hair that “hung over his shoulders, away down his back, and occasionally tucked up on the top of his head,” the Athens Post reported years later. Elliott also bought the first log jail when a new brick jail was erected in the 1820s, moved the jail to the other side of the Square, and used it to house his pet panthers. The record does not state whether Elliott’s students shared panther-feeding duties.
- With the erection of a four-room building in 1822, Athens Female Academy was founded. Today that institution is known as Athens State University, the oldest continually-operating college in Alabama.
- Trinity School, the first school for African-Americans in Limestone County, opened in 1865 under the direction of Mary Fletcher Wells. It was in operation until 1970, when it closed due to desegregation.
- The Elk River Cougars were the baseball team of Jones School, opened in 1871 in Athens by Judge W. N. Jones.
- The first Athens Public School opened Oct. 11, 1886, on the west side of the Square, under the direction of Susan Lowe Davis and Ada Walker.
- In 1890, Robert Mason offered a pony to all boys living within five miles of the new North Alabama Agricultural School in Athens if they would enroll in the school. He offered to stable and feed the pony, too, except for when the boy had it overnight.
- Beulah School, an African-American school founded in 1910 in the southern Limestone County community of Beulahland, was the first Rosenwald School built in Alabama. Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute and Julius Rosenwald, philanthropist and president of Sears Roebuck, built schools for African- American children across the South.
- A group of 24 boys founded a boy scout troop at the Rives Academy in October 1926. They called themselves “The Owls.” Maria Walker Rives founded the academy in September 1908 in the Masonic Hall in Athens.
- In the 1930s, the Athens College “earn to learn” program employed students to work in a college-owned silk hosiery mill on campus to pay for their tuition.
- Thirteen men drove school busses for Limestone County schools in 1931. Of them, it was said: “All drivers are reliable, settled and sober men and will use every precaution to take care of the children. Limestone County has the right to be proud of the type of equipment and the type of drives we have. None in the state are equal to them.”
- In 1943, Athens Bible School was founded with the purchase of the former Ryan home on Hoffman Street and fourteen acres for \$3,750.
- In 1954, a modern new Athens Elementary School building was erected. The capital project was funded by the proceeds of a 2-cent cigarette tax.
- Cowart Elementary School is named for James L. Cowart, longtime director of the Athens High School band.

*Note: Information for this article came from Schools of Athens and Limestone County, compiled by Betty Taylor and published by the Friends of the Archives.*

**About the Archives:**

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

**Established:** 1980

**Staff:** Archivist Rebekah Davis and Assistant Archivist April Davis

**Location:** 102 W. Washington St., in the 1905 L&N Passenger Depot

**Hours:** 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

**Phone:** 256-233-6404

**E-mail:** [archives@limestonecounty-al.gov](mailto:archives@limestonecounty-al.gov)

**Web:** [www.limestonearchives.com](http://www.limestonearchives.com)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives](http://www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives)