

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

From a long-haired teacher in a log building, to a brand-new elementary school funded by a 2-cent cigarette tax, to an upcoming vote on whether or not to fund new construction, the growth of Athens City Schools has mirrored the growth of Athens for nearly two centuries now.

One of the first acts of the town of Athens, incorporated 1818, was to establish a city school. In 1820, the same year that the first Limestone County Courthouse was built of the logs from the trees that were felled to clear The Square, a man named Robert Elliott opened the first Athens school in a log building on Washington Street, in the same spot where now stands the “little red school house” that was home to the Athens Board of Education for many years. Elliott, who wore his hair long like the trend-setting preacher Lorenzo Dow, taught both boys and girls in the building that had no glass windows, only logs sawn out at intervals for ventilation.

Over the next half a century, Athens students attended a variety of schools, with many girls going to Athens Academy at what would later become Athens State University, boys attending school in the Masonic Hall, and African American students attending Trinity School beginning in 1865.

It wasn't until Dec. 17, 1875, that a school was officially named “Athens High School.” That name belonged to a brick house south of town erected by J.L. Coman, originally called Coman Male Institute.

In 1888, Athens was one of only two cities in the Alabama chosen to build an agricultural school. The Eighth District Agricultural School was built near the Donnell House, where Athens Middle School is today, and by 1904, Athens Public School for grades 1-6 was meeting in the same building. Students paid a tuition of \$2.50 to cover coal and janitorial service for the year. With the building bursting at the seams, the new Westmoreland Hall was built in 1907 for \$10,800 to house the Agricultural School. The elementary and junior high students moved in 1921 to the old Greene University School, which the city had bought for \$17,500, and the Agricultural School became Athens High School in 1937.

High school students continued to meet in Westmoreland Hall for nearly 40 more years, and in the meantime, a new Athens Elementary School was built in 1954 with another wing added in 1956; a new junior high school was erected in 1952 right next to the high school; and another new elementary school was completed in 1968 on the east side of town. While several names were kicked around for the new school, including Robert E. Lee Elementary, it was ultimately decided the school would be named after the superintendent, Julian Newman. Another new elementary school was erected on the west side of town in 1966, named for James Cowart.

In 1974, Athens High School students moved into a new building on U.S. Highway 31, and Westmoreland Hall was ultimately torn down to make room for Athens Middle School expansion. The next 40 years saw the addition of Brookhill Elementary School on Athens' south side in 1988, and Athens Intermediate School in 2002 for all Athens students in fifth and sixth grades.

Today, about 3,300 students attend Athens City Schools.

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: Rebekah.Davis@limestonecounty-al.gov or April.Davis@limestonecounty-al.gov

Web: www.limestonearchives.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives