

John S. Dawson High School History

John S. Dawson High School is locally significant under Criterion A in the areas of education and ethnic heritage because it provided very important educational opportunities for African Americans in West Feliciana Parish. Most significantly, it was the first high school in West Feliciana Parish for African Americans. John S. Dawson High School provided students with a well-rounded educational foundation that enabled them to progress to college and pursue many different professions. The period of significance begins with the construction of the school in 1951 and terminates in 1969, the year John S. Dawson High school was closed.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, public education in Louisiana was in a terrible state of affairs. The state constitution of 1898 had legally mandated the already status quo segregation of schools by race, and at that time students of all races were severely underserved.¹ The state's public school system was characterized by crude, deteriorating school houses and abysmally low attendance. During the first two decades of the century, great improvements were made in school house construction, curriculum standardization, and attendance through transportation advances and consolidation. However, these developments generally applied only to the white schools. In Louisiana's underfunded dual school system, African-American schools received little to no investment from their parish school boards. The disparity this created between the two separate and supposedly equal school systems was blatant.

The few schools that did exist for African Americans in rural areas were typically taught in churches or associated buildings on church property. Most of West Feliciana Parish's African American schools developed from Baptist church bases. Among them were Elm Park, Sage Hill, Old Hollywood, Independence, and Afton Villa.² The earliest known publicly organized school for African Americans in West Feliciana Parish was the Laurel Hill School. It was to this school that African American educator, John S. Dawson came from Mississippi in January of 1890.³ Recalling his first days at Laurel Hill, Dawson later wrote, "Before the week was over, one-hundred twenty-five children were enrolled. I had to figure out a way to teach this large number of pupils. Among this large number, not more than twenty could read at all."⁴ From this time forward, Dawson had a profound impact on education for African Americans in West Feliciana Parish. As remembered by John S. Dawson High School alumni, "He was the father, the teacher, he was everything to the Laurel Hill community."⁵

At the time Dawson began teaching in West Feliciana, the school board provided for four months of schooling for African Americans. Dawson noted that at the end of that four months, parents would then raise money to send their children to school for another three months. Rev. Roosevelt Wilkerson, a graduate of John S. Dawson High School's first class recalls that his father had to attend three different schools in order to complete a full year: Laurel Hill, Solitude, and Hollywood.⁶ School at Laurel Hill continued until the seventh grade. The most exemplary students to graduate from the seventh grade were in turn selected to go and teach other schools.⁷ That graduates of the seventh grade would be appointed to teaching positions illustrates the severe lack of secondary education for African Americans.

High school education, which was being so improved for white students, remained non-existent for black students in Louisiana until the second decade of the twentieth century. It is indicative of the statewide circumstances that in 1900, the school board of the relatively progressive city of New Orleans

officially reduced education for African Americans to just five grades.⁸ Throughout the state, particularly in rural areas like West Feliciana Parish, there had never been much opportunity for secondary education for African Americans and the sentiment against it by parts of the white population was strong. A compromise between the demand of African Americans for secondary education and the reluctance of certain whites to provide it was found in the concept of "county training schools." An African-American educator, Professor A. M. Strange of Louisiana's Tangipahoa Parish, first proposed the idea of a school that would emphasize agricultural training and home economics in 1910. Through his efforts, the Tangipahoa Parish Training School was opened in 1911. Many others across the south were soon to follow, but over a decade later, in the 1923-24 school year, just sixteen of Louisiana's sixty-four parishes had a parish training school.

During the following decades, secondary education for African Americans in Louisiana slowly but steadily expanded. In 1929-30, there were still thirty-seven parishes without state approved black high schools. In 1944-45, the number of black four-year high schools had grown to eighty and one was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, but thirteen parishes remained without approved high schools for African Americans. Among them was West Feliciana Parish. Until the 1950s, West Feliciana Parish African Americans who completed the seventh grade and wished to continue their education had to look beyond their parish. Those who could manage the travel and accommodations went to schools such as Baton Rouge's McKinley High School (NR 1981), which opened in 1927 and is nearly thirty-five miles to the southwest of St. Francisville.

The quality of Louisiana school buildings for African Americans saw some improvement in the early twentieth century, mostly through the support of the Rosenwald Fund, a national philanthropic foundation. Four schools were constructed in West Feliciana Parish with partial funding from Rosenwald: Independence, a three-teacher school built before 1920; Afton Villa, a two-teacher school built in 1920-21; Polk, a two-teacher school built in 1921-22; and Solitude, a two-teacher school built in 1925-26.¹² These wood-frame schools were based on Tuskegee and Rosenwald Fund plans that were carefully designed to provide an effective learning environment through details such as good daylighting. None of these school buildings remain. The historic Independence Baptist Church is the only associated building of this period to survive. Each of the other churches have been replaced and a later Polk school building has been converted into a residence.

In the 1950s, further strides were made in the construction of quality school buildings for African Americans. By this time, the wide disparity between the number and quality of public school buildings for African Americans versus those for whites was undeniable. The 1950s were ushered in by the filing of multiple lawsuits across the country challenging the constitutionality of "separate but equal" schooling and calling for the integration of schools. In 1952, New Orleans attorney, A. P. Tureaud filed Earl Benjamin Bush et al. v. Orleans Parish School Board for the integration of New Orleans schools. A suit was also filed for the integration of schools in St. Helena Parish, which lays two parishes west of West Feliciana. In the meantime, suits from other states were coming before the Supreme Court. Five became consolidated as Brown v. Board of Education of

Topeka, Kansas. As the case awaited review by the Supreme Court, some states, like South Carolina and Mississippi made a last ditch effort to protect segregation by implementing programs of school equalization.

Louisiana did not institute such a statewide program, but whether individual districts attempted to hold off integration by improving black schools is unclear. New modern facilities constructed for African Americans in the 1950s in Louisiana appear to have been derived from African American demands for equal facilities and from acknowledgement by school officials that new buildings were truly needed, even if white voters didn't always agree. Regardless of the impetus behind it, the construction of new modern schools in the 1950s provided African Americans with long awaited quality learning environments and were a source of pride for communities. John S. Dawson High School is an example of such a school.

The land for the school is believed to have been secured through the efforts of John S. Dawson before he passed away in 1950 and the school is deeply associated with his legacy. His sons carried on the family dedication to education with John Dawson serving as the first principal from 1951 to 1961, and Thomas Dawson teaching English and serving as principal from 1962 to 1969. The ten-plus acre site provided plenty of room for school activities and the additional building campaigns that expanded the physical plant in later years. The opening of John S. Dawson High School in 1951 was a tremendous advancement of education in West Feliciana Parish. The opening of the elementary wing for lower grades in 1962 was also significant. It consolidated the elementary education that had previously occurred at the disparate church based schools in one new, modern facility. The separate gymnasium, band building, home economics/ industrial arts wing, and agriculture shop further expanded the curricular and extracurricular capacities of this modern school plant.

John S. Dawson High School provided a diverse curriculum that included: Algebra, American History, Agriculture, Art, Biology, Chemistry, Chorus, English, Geometry, History, Home Economics, Industrial Arts, Louisiana History, Music, Social Studies, Trigonometry, and Vocal and Instrument studies. Alumni remember some of the educational disadvantages that the unequal public education created at John S. Dawson High School, such as old text books passed on from the white school that were missing pages and had names of white students written inside. Let the record show that students at John S. Dawson High School received a quality education and credit the excellence of their teachers. The teachers were concerned about the education of African American students and taught them everything they knew. Alumni note, "Everyone who went to Dawson learned something. There was no one who learned nothing."¹⁴ Because of the education they received at John S. Dawson High School, many alumni were able to continue to college and have pursued a variety of professions. John S. Dawson High School alumni include: approximately two-hundred college graduates; two doctorate degrees in mathematics; one doctorate in agriculture, chancellor at Southern University in Baton Rouge; a Judge in South Carolina; and two retired Army Generals.¹⁵ Because of the proximity of West Feliciana Parish to Southern University (thirty miles), a notable number of graduates went to college to become teachers. Thus, the John S. Dawson High School that began in 1951 truly had a profound impact on education for African Americans in this part of Louisiana

John S. Dawson High School closed in 1969 following the Supreme Court ruling in the case of Carter v. West Feliciana Parish School Board, which mandated all the area's schools be desegregated by February 1, 1970. Instead of using the John S. Dawson facilities for an integrated school, the parish school board reassigned its students to another school and closed the doors of John S. Dawson. Rather than attend a

different school, a number of John S. Dawson's students dropped out.¹⁶ Less than two decades after opening, this crucial part of

African American education, like many of its contemporaries across the state, was left empty. Therefore the period of significance for this nomination terminates in 1969, until which time John S. Dawson High School was vital in its historical role for African American education in West Feliciana Parish.