



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

Sandwiching in History Tour Ouachita County Training School

750 Ouachita Rd. 589, Bearden

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By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Greater Bradley District Association



*Gymnasium of the former Ouachita County Training School, now the F.O. Jones Christian Center
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2025*

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to our Sandwiching in History tour of the historic Ouachita County Training School campus. If this is your first time at one of our tours, you may be surprised to know that the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program has been doing this tour program for 28 years and

has given over 500 public tours to historic sites all around our state. Arkansas is full of historic properties, and each one tells a story. We're really excited to be *here* today and delve into the history of *this* place.

The Ouachita County Training School came into existence in 1949 when four Rosenwald schools in the area were consolidated on the site where one of them, the Cotton Belt Rosenwald school, had stood since 1929. So let's go back to those early days and set the stage for the story we're going to tell today.

Black Education in Bearden Prior to the OCTS

Black education in Bearden started on a small scale and was probably pretty patchwork in its application up into the early 20th century. We know that, probably around the 1920s, a Mr. Jesse McRae was teaching school for a few Black students in a small room of a lodge hall in town.¹ There were probably various other small, scattered schools like this around the region, but most Black children worked on farms.

The Bearden school board began a program of consolidating school districts at the end of the 1920s, and as part of the process, they purchased 5 acres here at this site to be used for a Black school. At the time, this land was covered by dense woods, so local Black citizens worked to clear it and then helped set up the facilities. The school board provided secondhand buildings from other districts and from a lumber mill camp. This school was partially supported by the Rosenwald Fund and was called the Cotton Belt Rosenwald School.² It opened in 1929.³

The Cotton Belt Rosenwald School taught the first 8 grades and served around 150 students. Beyond the staples of humanities, English, math, and science subjects, its curriculum focused on practical skills like carpentry, soil science and agriculture, and home economics. But in a small community like this, a school functions as so much more than a place of education. It was a place for community meetings, fundraisers, athletic events, and theater performances.⁴

¹ Mary Griffith, "Black History," *Saga of Bearden*, 159.

² Ibid.

³ Pearlie Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," *National Register nomination form*, 8:11.

⁴ Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," 8:15.

Arkansas passed the Initiated Act in 1948 requiring the consolidation of schools with fewer than 350 students in order to concentrate resources and provide better education to students. In the Bearden vicinity there were three other Black schools besides Cotton Belt.⁵ They were smaller and had more limited facilities, so in 1949 they were folded into the Cotton Belt school location, and it was renamed the Ouachita County Training School.⁶

Ouachita County Training School(s)

In this era of segregated education in the South, training schools were a type of school for African Americans that offered advanced education beyond 8th grade and beyond the traditional academic subjects, focusing on the types of careers generally available to Black people at the time. Training schools equipped students with industrial training in farm work, mechanical trades, home economics, and teacher training. They developed in the early 20th century and were intentionally not called “high schools” so as to not draw opposition from segregationists.⁷ But this distinction may have loosened up somewhat by midcentury. At some point early on, Ouachita County Training School was renamed Ouachita County High School (including all grades from first to twelfth), but both names continued to be used.⁸

[As an interesting side note, there had been a prior Ouachita County Training School, which seems to have been unrelated to this one. I've only found passing newspaper references to it, but it existed in Camden at least in 1916 and was one of 5 county training schools in Arkansas offering four-week summer teacher training programs that year. The papers announced that “regular courses offered to white teachers in the summer normal schools will be given and special courses will be given by the state government and university extension forces.”⁹ I don't know what became of the original Ouachita County Training School in Camden; it didn't show up in my searches of newspapers beyond 1916.]

⁵ These were the Center School at White Springs, the school at Eagle Mills, and the school at Eaglette. (Griffith, “Black History,” 160.)

⁶ Newton, “Ouachita County Training School,” 8:15; “Bearden Is Proud of Its Schools,” *The Camden News*, 1950.

⁷ Newton, “Ouachita County Training School,” 8:15-16.

⁸ Griffith, “Black History,” 160; Ouachita County High School, *Wildcat*, 1969; see newspapers from the era for usage of both names.

⁹ “Schools for Negroes,” *The Pulaskian*, May 5, 1916; “Schools for Negroes,” *The Spectator*, May 5, 1916; “County Training School,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, April 30, 1916.

The new Ouachita County Training School in Bearden was formed in 1949, and five years later, in 1954, the US Supreme Court declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional. So it could have had a very brief history. Some Arkansas communities, like Charleston, Fayetteville, and Hoxie, began the process of integrating their schools starting immediately that year. In Bearden, the NAACP sued to force integration and won a federal court order in 1955. A federal judge ordered the district to “work toward integration and report its progress back to him before the start of the 1956-57 school year.”¹⁰ But there must have been strong enough political interference or a successful legal appeal, because the district didn’t submit an integration plan in 1956. In fact, it held off on issuing a plan until 1965, after a nationwide deadline mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making Bearden one of the last districts in Arkansas to file integration plans.¹¹ The desegregation process was gradual over three years or so—a few grades at a time—so that full integration was finally realized in the 1969-70 school year, at which point all Bearden students attended the formerly white schools, and the Ouachita County Training School was closed.¹²

Twenty Years of Bearden Wildcats

Public schools are bedrock institutions in a community. They educate the next generation and prepare them for a productive life and citizenship. They also bring the community together around shared experiences and shared causes. For twenty years, Ouachita County Training School served this purpose in Bearden’s Black community, and former Wildcat alumni still remember it fondly. I won’t take a lot of time to detail all that the school did, because we have some alumni here that can make it much more vivid by sharing their first-hand knowledge, which they will do later. But I’ll mention some highlights.

¹⁰ In fact, this suit had initially been brought in 1952 requesting that the Bearden district either integrate or at least equalize its Black and white school facilities, since “separate but equal” was still the law of the land. Federal Judge John Miller delayed the case pending the outcome of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Following that precedent, Judge Miller ruled that Bearden must integrate. “Hoxie (From Page One),” *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record*, January 10, 1956. See also: “Four Negroes Ask Board to Desegregate Schools,” *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record*, August 25, 1954; “Judge to Order Integration in Bearden Schools,” *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record*, October 2, 1955; “Bearden Told Order Coming for Integration,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, October 5, 1955.

¹¹ “Tiny Bearden Community Seething with Problem of School Integration,” *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record*, December 26, 1955; “Bearden Strives to Meet School Integration Order—Does it Calmly,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, December 26, 1955; “Foe of Integration Says Statements ‘Misconstrued,’” *The Arkansas Gazette*, December 27, 1955; “‘No Dice’ Is NAACP Attorney Answer to Camden Lawyer,” *Arkansas State Press*, September 30, 1956; “The 11 Holdout Districts and Enrollment by Race,” *The Arkansas Gazette*, September 5, 1965; “Bearden School Plan Approved,” *The Camden News*, December 22, 1965.

¹² “Bearden School Plan Approved”; Griffith, “Black History,” 164.

When the Ouachita County Training School was founded through the consolidation of the Cotton Belt Rosenwald School and three others, it started with limited facilities, specifically a main school building, a shop, the principal's house, and a teachers' house. Additional structures were soon built, including four classrooms, a lunchroom, and a gymnasium, which was constructed using materials from the Eagle Mills School. Over the course of the 1950s, the old Rosenwald-era buildings were demolished and replaced with newer facilities. At some point in the 1950s the principal's house burned down. And then the original gym burned down too, and a new one was built in 1965. Its roof was originally flat and lacked the gambrel-style top section, which was added after 1966 to prevent water leaks.¹³

Sports were an important part of school life, especially basketball. When the Ouachita County Training School first started, basketball was played outdoors on an open court until the gym was built. Basketball became a source of income for the school. Elementary students paid 5¢ to watch a game, and high schoolers were charged 10¢. The homecoming queen each year was crowned based on who had raised the most money during the "Queen Drive."¹⁴

But basketball didn't just make money; it was a source of pride. When the Arkansas Athletics Association integrated its state high school and junior high basketball tournament in 1966, African American players were allowed to compete for the first time. Just two years later, in 1968, Bearden's junior high boys' team became the first team from an all-Black school to win the Arkansas state championship.¹⁵

Students participated in many other activities through the school as well, such as boy scouts and girl scouts, FFA, FHA, student government, cheerleading, and—in the final year of the school's existence—yearbook. These opportunities, along with the academic education and vocational training that the school provided, helped to develop the character and abilities of the young generation to set them up with a strong foundation for excellence in life.

It's evident to me from everything I've read about the school and from the conversations I've had with locals that they have a great sense of pride in Ouachita County High School and the

¹³ Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," passim; Griffith, "Black History," 160.

¹⁴ Griffith, "Black History," 160; Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," 8:17.

¹⁵ Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," 8:18; Griffith, "Black History," 162.

role that it served in the community, especially in equipping young Black citizens for success in a world that was reluctant to give them the same kinds of opportunities that it offered white people. Alumni remember their teachers with reverence—they were firm and demanding, with rigorous standards and high expectations, interested in molding the character of each student as well as the mind. The school produced many fine graduates who continued to excel beyond the classroom and into productive careers.

The End of an Era

So the closure of the Ouachita County Training School in 1969 was a difficult loss for the Black community. The idealistic goal of integration was finally realized, but it came with the loss of this institution that had meant so much to the community's identity, tradition, and way of life. And Black students in the newly integrated schools often felt misunderstood or treated unfairly by white teachers. The transition was painful for many.

Some believed that Bearden should have continued to use the facilities for the newly integrated school district's needs, perhaps as a campus for the elementary grades to keep the formerly white school from being overcrowded. At the same time, some feared that if the Ouachita County Training School campus was reopened as an integrated school, the district would take the opportunity to staff it entirely with white administrators. As it was, very few of the Black teachers and staff had been rehired, and this felt like a discriminatory slap in the face to at least one of them.¹⁶

All of these complaints and allegations were brought in a lawsuit by a former sixth grade social studies teacher named Eve Hegler against the Bearden school board. She had lost her job when the district integrated. The case was resolved partially in her favor when the federal judge ordered the school board to offer Hegler a job for the upcoming school year, but it denied the back pay that she sought for the year she was out of work, and it did not require the Ouachita County Training School to be reopened.¹⁷ As the 1970-71 school year opened, Hegler was back on staff as an upper elementary social studies teacher.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Teachers, Administrator File Court Suits," *El Dorado Times*, June 30, 1969; Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," 8:18.

¹⁷ "Teachers, Administrator File Court Suits"; "Offer Job to Teacher, Board Told," *The Arkansas Gazette*, May 17, 1970.

¹⁸ "Bearden Schools to Open Aug. 26," *The Camden News*, August 26, 1970.

But the future of the Ouachita County Training School was uncertain. The agriculture building and two new mobile buildings, which had been added to the school in 1966 for the counselor's office and for commercial classes, were relocated to Bearden High School to accommodate the influx of students. Audiovisual materials and equipment were brought over to the Bearden schools for continued use as well.¹⁹ But other features of the school were frozen in time. You can still see a late 1950s-era copy machine in an office, desks and blackboards in the classrooms, lunch trays in the cafeteria.

The district superintendent took out a newspaper ad at the close of the 1969 school year inviting bids for the school property. The ad read, "Modern tile building containing office, cafeteria, 11 classrooms, and modern gym, about 7 acres of land. This site and building is an idea for a housing development, nursing home, or industry."²⁰ There were no immediate takers, though, and the property sat vacant for four years.²¹

A New Life with the Greater Bradley District Association

In 1973, representatives from a regional association of Baptist churches called the Greater Bradley District, which was led by Moderator Floyd Osbourne Jones, purchased the property from the district to use as a ministry center. Thus began the longest chapter in the history of the former Ouachita County Training School, because the Greater Bradley District Association still owns it and uses it for ministry purposes as it has for over 50 years.

Now called the F.O. Jones Christian Center, it has continued the school's legacy of being a space for many in the Black community of Bearden and beyond to come together for social life. The gymnasium, cafeteria, and classrooms have hosted youth rallies and revivals, worship and banquets, weddings and funerals, conventions and association meetings, Freedom Day assemblies and health fairs. Classrooms are rented out as meeting spaces for local clubs and civic organizations. The cafeteria was expanded by opening up the wall into the home ec room, and this has been a key to their hospitality.

¹⁹ Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," 8:4, 8,18; Griffith, "Black History," 164.

²⁰ Roark, "Notice to Bidders," *Arkansas Democrat*, 1969.

²¹ Newton, "Ouachita County Training School," 8:19.

The flagship space has long been the gym. It can accommodate some 400-500 people and is useful for any kind of large gathering. Unfortunately, a few years back the roof began to leak to the point that it has become unusable until it can be repaired. But repairs are going to be expensive. There is no other facility in the Greater Bradley District network that is as spacious and conducive to large assemblies as the gym, so its absence is really hampering their ability to do some of the things they are used to doing. They hope to get it fixed as soon as possible.

They have big ambitions for the rest of the school too. Not all of the other spaces are in a shape to be used, either. Some of the classrooms need rehabilitation and renovation. It's a daunting challenge, but when they look at those locked classroom doors, they don't see obstacles, they see "windows of opportunity." All of this will take lots of money, with the gym being the most urgent.

In pursuit of this goal, they've taken some steps to raise the profile of this historic property. In 2023 they got the Ouachita County Training School listed on the National Register of Historic Places. And just recently they received a historical marker that they had ordered to visibly mark this as a place with an important history.

Now here we are, acknowledging the significance of this site, while we see it deteriorating before our eyes. If we frame this narrative in the form of a story arc, we have our protagonist—the Greater Bradley District Association—facing its greatest challenge yet. It has already successfully rescued the Ouachita County Training School from an uncertain future once. But now 50 years later, the ravages of time are taking a greater and greater toll on the facilities, and the risk is greater than ever. This moment is the climax of the story, a critical juncture where the Association faces a turning point in the preservation of this historic school. They are working against the clock to secure funding and do the restoration work needed before the damage becomes too great and it's too late to save the gym. They are pouring their efforts into writing a happy ending to the story: where the gym is repaired, the classrooms are renovated, and all parts of the property are put to full use, to the benefit of the community. And the legacy of the Ouachita County Training School will live on for coming generations.

Now I'd like to welcome some Ouachita County High School alumni to briefly share some of their memories of this place and the impact it had in the community. And if you have questions, feel free to ask; we can mix in some Q&A.

After that, we'll get to walk around and tour the campus.

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