

Nelson - Merry

Former black institution

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Nelson Merry is a product of Jefferson County. The timbers for the first building were hewn from trees on the land. The bricks for two of the buildings were made from the campus clay and burned there. Much of the money for all of it came from the citizens. The school has literally sprung from the soil. Since 1890 it has contributed to the cultural heritage of the county. According to an early catalogue, visitors often said that God himself must have selected the spot for the school.

For this and other reasons, Judge Teddy Willocks has requested that the Tennessee Historical Commission consider including the buildings and grounds of Nelson Merry School in the National Register of Historical Places.

The Reverend Peter Guin first conceived the idea of establishing a school on the present campus, although the school is named for the Reverend Nelson Merry, a pioneer Negro Baptist in Tennessee. Reverend Guin carried his dream to both Negro and white Baptist churches and con-

which was the much discussed Nelson Merry debt.

At one time, the school's enrollment was roughly two hundred, but as some of the enthusiasm for the new school cooled and other sections began building their own high schools, the enrollment of the school declined and finances became a problem. Local ministers stood by the school and at one time when the school property was in danger of being lost, the trustees of Carson-Newman College took over the school mortgage until satisfactory adjustments could be made.

The school was officially listed as a training college for many years, although it was a college preparatory school. Elementary grades along with instruction on the secondary level was given. One of the areas of instruction on the secondary level was the normal school department. Students in this department were trained as teachers. In the early 1900's high school graduates were eligible to teach school.

The annual catalogue of 1919-1920 contains interesting facts. The school's location was listed as

make their own graduating dresses. A carefully graded course is given in sewing, commencing with the third grade and extending throughout the normal course."

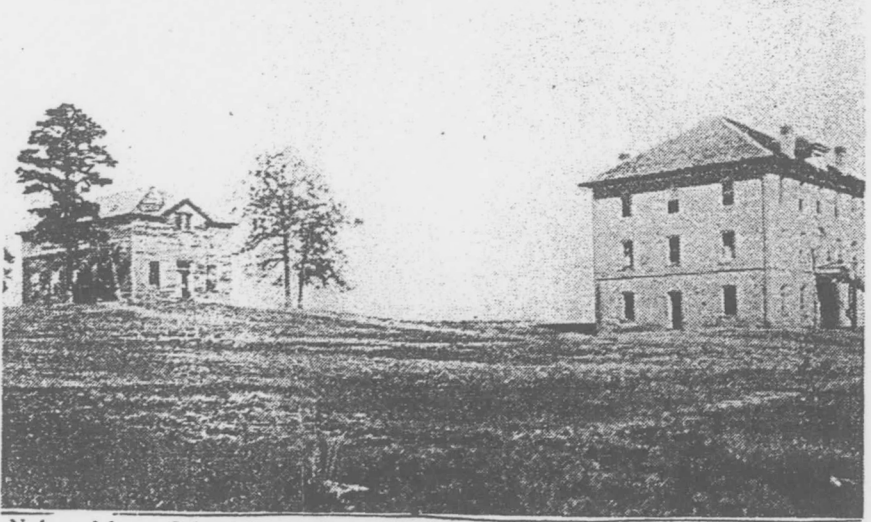
A note to parents was included stating that "parents remember that students consume in a well regulated school as they would do in... a model home, hence you are to consider their needs and be parents to the students in school as at home." The note asked parents to send all money to the president of the school, "for we deem it wise to have all students' money deposited in the bank and let them draw it as they may need it... All outgoing and incoming mail will be inspected by the matron or President so that no irregular mail reach your sons and daughters."

College students of today will be interested in the rates students paid at Nelson Merry. Board was \$10.00 per month and tuition was \$1.00 per month. A \$1.50 entrance fee was paid and the breakage fee was \$1.00. Students were charged 25 cents light bell each month.

The rules at Nelson Merry, as at all schools of that day, were drastically different than school policies today. The first rule in the catalogue stated that "Students immediately upon their arrival must report themselves to the President and adjust their bills at the office; and in no case must the student leave the College (it was still referred to as a Training College at this time) without permission from the President."

Another rule was that students' rooms be accessible to members of the faculty and each student carry his own coal and water to his room. No student was allowed to leave campus after 7 p.m. and girls could not leave campus unless accompanied by a teacher. One rule made it clear that "no gentleman, whether connected with the college or not shall visit any person in the ladies' department without permission of the matron or president."

Rev. H.J. Bailey, who became president of the school in 1924, saw the "handwriting on the wall" for private high schools, according to the 1943 yearbook, *The Nelsenor*. He began negotiating with the county to take over a certain portion of the school property and erect a modern school building. In 1932 Nelson



Nelson Merry School began in two buildings. Thompson Hall, on the left, was first called Peter Guinn Hall. The top two floors of the brick building served as dormitory for girls and women faculty members. The office was on the second floor. On the first floor, the two front rooms on either side of the hall were classrooms. The two back rooms were dining hall and kitchen. A second floor was added to the frame school building on the right and boys were housed there. Thompson Hall remained standing until 1956 when it was torn down and the gymnasium built on the same spot.

ventions and was able to purchase the twelve acres that comprised the original Nelson Merry property. This

"occupying the commanding site on a beautiful hill overlooking the City and facing one of the largest institutions

land was purchased on April 3, 1870 for \$850.

To aid in constructing the school building, Rev. Guin put up a saw mill on the back campus and cut timbers from the wood on the campus itself. The first head of the school was Prof. G.N. Bowen. Later another building, first called Peter Guin Hall, then Thompson Hall, was constructed. When the building was built, the only houses near the campus were those of John Moore, Louie Ingram, the Colemans, and the Rosses. The local Methodist church was then a frame building. To finance the construction of the dormitory the land and buildings were mortgaged for \$3,500,

referring to Carson-Newman. The statement went on to say that the school's setting was an "ideal place; especially being situated away from the temptations and allurements and vices of the City in a place where the environmental influences are conducive to effective work."

There were first and second year students in the normal course and first, second and third year grammar students. Upon finishing the grammar course a certificate of attainment was awarded, which is comparable to completing the eighth grade.

The catalogue said that the "girls in the senior course are required to

black high school.

In 1956, while Eugene Peck was principal, the gym was built. Later a science room and connecting hall was added under the direction of attorney J.D. Hale, who Mr. Peck described as a "true friend" of Nelson Merry. The cost of the gym was estimated at \$80,000. Mr. Peck also mentioned the encouragement and support that Carson-Newman and the community gave the school from the very beginning. In 1965, the school was closed and abandoned due to school integration, and was bought by Jefferson City on May 17, 1976.

In the petition for nomination to the Historic Register, Nelson Merry is cited as an historical site, because it serves as a monument to the Rev. Peter Guin who traveled throughout East Tennessee to raise money to buy the property and begin the school, to the Rev. Nelson Merry, a pioneer Baptist preacher for whom the school was named, to Nelson Bowen, Jeremiah Thompson, B.A. Nance and H.F. Bailey, presidents of the school who made great sacrifices to bring culture to people in this area. It is an historical site because it is the only original site of an academy that has been in continuous use in the county; and for many year, has made very significant contributions to education and culture of both black and white people.

The timbers for the first building were hewn from the land.

