

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Winyah High School ©

The Georgetown Times article of November 10, 1981 gives us a glimpse of one of the landmarks that for years nurtured the minds and hearts of thousands of Georgetown students, but was tragically lost to fire on November 5, 1981. Written by Ethlyn Missroom, the article states, "Winyah High School was more than a place of learning. Georgetown placed this educational center on a pedestal and accorded it a prestige, status and affection that remains with graduates and students stemming from its first year. That affection deepened this weekend in the wake of a fire that leveled the building.

Winyah High School became a separate educational entity in 1939 when its first graduating class was headed by its president, L.H. Siau, Jr. Georgetownian Arthur I. Hazzard was the architect, according to Mrs. Frances Clary. Her father, the late William C. Bynum, was superintendent of city schools for the first Winyah school, later to become the Winyah Junior High School next door to the recently burned building.

Back in the earlier expansion of the school system, it appears that differences of opinion regarding school matters were surfacing even back then. The new Winyah building was endowed with a small decorative cupola atop its main structure, but Mr. Bynum felt that funds might better be spent for more classrooms. The board of trustees, however, liked the effect of the cupola and thereby hung the opening controversy...but the cupola remained. Mrs. Clary said that Winyah High School was too small, even when it was first built. "It was obsolete, even then," she declared. Mrs. Mabel Hamilton, one of the career teachers of Bynum, said that the prior Winyah School had 10 grades at one time and only became an 11-grade facility after the new building was completed.

Joseph L. Bull, Jr. was the first principal of Winyah School and "he was a good leader; he was a disciplinarian, but a fair educator," according to Lillian Rosen. She was a member of the class of 1938 and served on the Winyah Journal, the first yearbook to have a hard-back cover.

The new school building was not quite completed at the end of 1938 and therefore, the first to graduate in the new building was the class of 1939.

Mrs. Hamilton said that the school opened with a faculty of 12 members and 320 students.

It appears in the wake of the fire [November 5, 1981] which saddened faculty members, the board of trustees and other officials, the current class was not alone in its distress. Mrs. Rosen said that her son, Mark, who graduated 10 years earlier, and was currently working on Columbia, immediately came to Georgetown when he heard the news.

Mrs. Stuart Chandler, a graduate of that first class in which students garnered diplomas in the new Winyah Building, was typical of those "classmates who expressed their disbelief and remarked that they celebrated a 40th reunion only two years ago. "

Winyah does have a distinct and very close tie with classmates of many years. When Skinner Jayroe, the only prisoner of war from Georgetown County, held by the Vietnamese for seven years, came back home, he stopped by Winyah High School before he went home to see his family.

Mrs. Hamilton said that among early teachers were Mrs. Aleen Simpkins, Mrs. Norma Sellers, Mrs. Kitty Steinhart, Mrs. Florrie Olliff, Miss Elizabeth Farrelly, Miss Frances Farrelly, and Miss Mary Parrot.

'When the Plantersville school closed so that the area could be used as a bombing range, I came to Winyah and Mrs. Steinhart and Miss Parrott joined the Winyah Junior High Staff, later coming to Winyah senior school,' she said."

Forty-three years later, the call came into the Georgetown Fire Department at 12:55 a.m. Winyah High School was on fire. The blaze drew firefighters from Georgetown, Midway, Murrells Inlet/Garden City and Andrews. Flames were shooting 80 to 90 feet into the air when firefighters arrived. The main building on the west side, housing the administrative offices, attendance office, guidance office nurse's office 13 classrooms, the library, teachers' lounge, typing room and book room was a total loss. A second fire was started in the east side of the building in the science wing, but was small and contained by a fire extinguisher. The damage was estimated at \$2 million.

By 2 a.m. students began to gather on Highmarket Street to watch as firemen battled the blaze. Word spread fast and current and former students of all ages stood together. They cried, they sang the alma mater, and by 7:30 a.m. everyone knew. Some had no idea of what had happened until they arrived to attend classes that Friday morning. By 10 a.m. black smoke was still rising out of the wreckage.

Today, former students proudly display a brick, a piece of the building, a book with charred edges as part of their history. The Georgetown County Museum recently received a masonry rosette from the top of the building from Rene King. It is proudly displayed along with a picture of the school in all its former glory.