

The Uncovered History of the Calfee Community and Cultural Center

“The history that I and every child in Pulaski County have been taught up until now is incomplete.” – David Clark, former mayor.

In 1860, almost 90% of the United States' African-American population was still enslaved. At the beginning of the Civil War, Virginia significantly contributed to this percentage by reaching the highest number of slaves in its history, with 400,000.¹ Today, this means the descendants of 4.4 million American people are able to trace their heritage back to slavery. Pulaski County, Virginia is no different.²

Even though most people think of the Appalachian Mountains as being a largely white region, 14% of the Town of Pulaski identifies as non-white, and many residents are direct descendants of slaves.³ In fact, the 1860 census revealed that 30% of the county's population was enslaved.⁴ However, according to Jill Williams, the executive director of the Calfee Community and Cultural Center, the dominant narrative on the topic in Pulaski is that slavery was “more of a Southern thing” and did not have much impact on the community.⁵ Even former Pulaski Mayor David Clark stated in a community meeting that, “it seemed to me we were mostly removed from the racism that plagued the rest of the world in the news.”⁶ That is, until Clark learned of Chauncey Harmon's story and the legacy of the Calfee Training School, a story that he admits brought him to tears.

The Calfee Training School Legacy

In 1929, 16-year-old Chauncey Harmon was forced to search for an out-of-state education when his hometown of Pulaski offered no opportunities beyond elementary school for African



Americans to further their education. As a child, Harmon began his education at the institution in Pulaski known as the Calfee Training School. Although the school was a primary school just as any other, Virginia did not recognize it as such due to the dominantly Black population that attended it.

Despite its lack of funding and resources, the school provided Harmon with a strong preparation for

¹ O'Neill, Aaron. 2020. "Black and Slave Population in the United States 1790-1880." *Statista*. February 12. Accessed February 18, 2020.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1010169/black-and-slave-population-us-1790-1880/>.

² Pariona, Amber. 2018. "Which US States Had The Most Slaves At The Start Of The Civil War?" *WorldAtlas*. September 28. Accessed February 16, 2020.

<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/which-u-s-states-had-the-most-slaves-at-the-start-of-the-civil-war.html>.

³ Williams, Jill, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *Lead Researcher and Team Manager* (September 8).

⁴ Williams, Jill, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *Lead Researcher and Team Manager* (September 8).

⁵ Williams, Jill, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *Lead Researcher and Team Manager* (September 8).

⁶ Calfee Community and Cultural Center Board. 2019. "Calfee Training School Project." Community Visioning Session Report, Pulaski.

future education. When Harmon completed his schooling in Pulaski, he moved on to the Tuskegee Industrial and Normal Institute in Alabama in order to continue his education. Harmon quickly placed out of the ninth grade while many of his colleagues of the same age were assigned to the sixth grade or lower. His superior education continued at Tuskegee as he studied under the supervision of George Washington Carver and other prominent faculty. During his time in Alabama, he continued to live out his hardworking reputation and began working a coal digging job during the school year for only 5 cents a ton. Even during school breaks, Harmon did not return home to Pulaski but instead continued to work through the holidays, so he could save up money to help his friends and neighbors receive an education.⁷

After graduating from college in 1935, Harmon returned to the Pulaski school system and served as a teacher at the Calfee Training School. In the summer of 1938, he was eventually appointed principal.⁸ However, what the Pulaski School Board was unaware of at the time of his appointment was Harmon's newfound relationship with Thurgood Marshall. Only a few months prior to his appointment as principal, Harmon had met with Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund at the Virginia State Teachers Association Conference. Here, Harmon agreed to serve as a plaintiff in a test case for salary equalization. While Harmon and colleague Willis Gravely prepared to fight on behalf of the many underpaid teachers in Pulaski through their petition for equal salaries and facilities, the original Calfee Training School, where Harmon was currently employed, burned down.⁹ The timing of the burning was around the same time that the School Board likely became aware of Harmon and Gravely's petition. According to the local newspaper, "the origin of the fire had not been determined."¹⁰ While Harmon and his colleagues were deeply saddened by the loss of their school, they did not let the tragic event set them back. Rather, they fought for its reconstruction, and in 1939, the Calfee Training School building was erected that still exists today.

Unfortunately, the new school did not bring a new perspective on the then frowned-upon idea of African American education, and the Calfee Training School teachers were still underpaid. Harmon's concerns regarding the equalization of salaries and facilities remained strong, and he and Gravely continued the fight, with assistance from prominent attorneys Thurgood Marshall, Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robison. Although Harmon and Gravely were fired from their positions at the end of that school year, local community leader Dr. Percy Corbin continued their struggle in the *Mahatma Corbin v. County School Board of Pulaski* (1947).¹¹ Soon to become Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall felt that the lessons he learned through the Pulaski County case helped him shape his legal logic for the *Brown vs Board of Education* case (1954).¹² The series of Pulaski cases directly led to *Brown v. Board of Education* and helped to end segregation in America.

⁷ Tripp, N. Wayne. "Chauncey Depew Harmon, Senior: A Case Study in Leadership for Educational Opportunity and Equality in Pulaski, VA." Dissertation submitted to Faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. (December 1995).

⁸ Harris, Robbie. 2020. "From Segregation to Community in Pulaski." *wvfi*. February 4. Accessed February 17, 2020. <https://www.wvtf.org/post/segregation-community-pulaski#stream/0>

⁹ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

¹⁰ "Fire Destroys Calfee School," *The Southwest Times*, November 11, 1938.

¹¹ "School Desegregation and Civil Rights Stories: Pulaski, Virginia," National Archives, October 29, 2019.

¹² Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

How could I live here for almost 60 years and not know this happened in our town?" - David Clark.

Former Town Mayor David Clark, and many other Pulaski residents, were never taught the significant role Chauncey Harmon and their county played in the fight for Civil Rights.¹³ In February 2020, Clark said, "I've been here for soon to be 61 years. And a year and a half ago, I heard for the first time in my life the story of Chauncey Harmon and the lawsuit."¹⁴ After the lawsuit, Harmon remained a "very strong community advocator" for 25 more years and continues to serve as an inspiration for many as they come to learn his story. Although Harmon passed away in November 1993 at the age of 80, he was able to witness the evolution of Civil Rights in his hometown and watch as the new Calfee Training School provided educational opportunities to African Americans in Pulaski, such as Dr. Mickey Hickman.

A Resurrected Vision

Dr. Mickey Hickman attended the Calfee Training School during the 1950s and has since been a long-standing member of the Pulaski County community. In an interview conducted in 2020, Hickman reveals his journey through the Pulaski County Public School System and why he wants to get the story of the Calfee Training School out into the world.¹⁵

After elementary school, Hickman, like Harmon, was forced to travel outside of Pulaski County in order to continue his education. "It was deliberate back then that Black students would only go to the ninth grade." Mickey Harmon.¹⁶ Rather than falling into what he describes as the low income trap, Hickman instead traveled to the nearby regional Black high school, the Christiansburg Institute. However, he made it clear that there was a choice. At that time, Black students were allowed by law to transfer to Pulaski High, but the fear of being condemned on the basis of color led most to continue on like Hickman.¹⁷



Hickman stated, "the white teachers took an interest in me and so they encouraged me to go to college," but not everyone was that lucky.¹⁸ After finishing high school, Hickman was fortunate to begin his college journey at Wytheville Community College, and he eventually was accepted

¹³ Calfee Community and Cultural Center Board. 2019. "Calfee Training School Project." Community Visioning Session Report, Pulaski.

¹⁴ Harris, Robbie. 2020. *Years Before Brown v. Board Of Education, There Was A Lawsuit For 'Equalization'*. February 29. Accessed September 20, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/810643892/years-before-brown-v-board-of-education-there-was-a-lawsuit-for-equalization>.

¹⁵ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

¹⁶ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

¹⁷ Paine, William. 2019. "Dedicated to Education: Neighbors Michael and Marva Hickman." *The Southwest Times*. February 11. Accessed September 20, 2020. <https://www.southwesttimes.com/2019/02/dedicated-to-education-neighbors-michael-and-marva-hickman/>

¹⁸ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

into Virginia Tech, from which he graduated with a double major in Political Science and History in 1971. After graduation, Hickman originally wanted to work for the government, but the Pulaski School System reached out to him, as they were seeking Black teachers to work for the county. Hickman accepted the position and ended up teaching both US history and US government at the desegregated Pulaski High School for 42 years.¹⁹

After he retired in 2014, Hickman was approached by leaders in the community to help with the reinvention of the old Calfee Training School building as something that could serve the entire community, both Black and white. This vision appealed to Hickman. In 1966, the Calfee Training School shut down as a segregated school and was utilized for other educational purposes for a few years. But it has been sitting abandoned for the majority of the past 3 decades. Like many others in the community who have been impacted by the Calfee Training School, Hickman says, “I want to see this building come back to life.”²⁰

In Fall 2019, Hickman became the Board President of the Calfee Community and Cultural Center (CCCC), a community group equipped with the vision of transforming the building into a place of service to the entire community. The group’s resulting vision statement reflects their dream for the center:

“Inspired by the proud legacy of the Calfee Training School, we reopen the doors as the Calfee Community and Cultural Center to serve the present needs of our community and to create a stronger future for Pulaski County.”

This statement was created through a community visioning process that invited community members from all backgrounds to provide their feedback on the statement structure and the priorities of the community’s present needs. One of these needs is to preserve the legacy of the building and its people. The CCCC plans to create space for a museum in the building partly dedicated to the legacies of the African American teachers and students at the Calfee Training School. Hickman stated that he is very excited about this aspect, saying that “[T]hose teachers didn’t even make the same salaries as the white people, and I just think those legacies of the people at the school should be remembered.”²¹ While both preserving and advocating for the African American community in Pulaski is on the minds of the CCCC, community feedback raised awareness of another major issue – the county’s Child Care Desert.

The United States defines a child care desert as “an area or community with limited or no access to *quality* child care.”²² A 2017 study determined that 51% of Americans live in areas meeting this description. The stark percentage encompasses 22 states, including Virginia, that contain roughly two-thirds of the US population.²³

¹⁹ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

²⁰ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

²¹ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

²² Casura, Lily. 2018. *What's a Child Care Desert? And Why It Should Matter if You're Living in One*. March 31. Accessed September 20, 2020. <https://medium.com/@lilygc/whats-a-child-care-desert-and-why-it-should-matter-if-you-re-living-in-one-519ee26ceb66>.

²³ Hamm, Rasheed Malik and Katie. 2017. "Mapping America's Child Care Deserts." *Center for American Progress*. August 30. Accessed September 20, 2020. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2017/08/30/437988/mapping-americas-child-care-deserts/>.

When the Weathering Springs Play School for pre-school attended by her two young children announced its plans for closing in Summer 2019, Jill Williams became involved with the initiative to revive the Calfee Training School. After the preschool closed, her daughter started going to the childcare center at the YMCA of Pulaski County, which is one of only two licensed preschools in the County. In Pulaski, only 8.5% of children ages 0-5 have placement in licensed childcare facilities.²⁴ According to Williams, the absence of child care facilities keeps people from working and providing an adequate income for their families, a cycle of economic depression that has affected the Pulaski community as a whole. In order to address the current childcare desert in Pulaski, the CCCC plans to house an innovative child care center with computer labs and outdoor learning spaces.

Given the nature of the current social and political climate, paired with a lack of child care services available in the community, Hickman remarks that the CCCC's "project is a beautiful statement of peace and harmony" in a time of so much unrest.²⁵ Williams and Hickman agree that the whole community has embraced their project. "We just hope to be a multifaceted entity for the town of Pulaski and Pulaski County," Hickman said. "That's our mission, and I just completely subscribe to it."²⁶ The CCCC is continuing to work on sharing its legacies and stories in the hopes that the community will respond and see the "good and inner beauty" of what they are trying to do with this building. "There's never a 24 hour period that passes by that I don't think about the CCCC," says Hickman, as he and all the Calfee Cultural and Community Center members fight for the history of their county to be remembered.²⁷

²⁴ Williams, Jill, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *Lead Researcher and Team Manager* (September 8).

²⁵ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

²⁶ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).

²⁷ Hickman, Mickey, interview by Amber Alam. 2020. *CCC Board President* (September 15).