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A SHORT HISTORY OF WILLOW HILL SCHOOL
By Sarah Cone Lee

The Willow Hill School story was presented to the Bulloch County Historical Society at the Portal Willow Hill Community Development Center (formerly Willow Hill School) on October 15, 2001 by Sarah C. Lee.

Mrs. Lee is a former teacher who attended Willow Hill as a student and taught at Willow Hill School and Portal Elementary School prior to her retirement. The credit for the compilation of this historical reflection goes to Nkenge Jackson, who divided the story into three eras based on significant events occurring in the history of the school.

1874-1920

In 1874, Willow Hill was started on Dan Riggs’ place in a turpentine shanty in Bulloch County, Georgia. Then it was called Willie Hill in honor of Dan Riggs’ son Willie Riggs. Willie Hill was located on a hill among briar and pokeweeds. The first school was crudely made and had only one room, one door, one window, and a privy located outside of the building. The first teacher, Miss Georgianna Riggs, a former slave, was fifteen years old when she started teaching.

The first books were “The Blue Back Speller”, a dictionary, and the Bible. The school year was not long because of the time needed for farm work to be done.

In 1890, Willie Hill moved to Handy Donaldson’s place. The building looked very similar to that of the first school. In 1895, on land donated by Moses Parrish, Willie Hill moved to its present site. By then, the name had become Willow Hill. In 1905, an extra room was added to the school because the school population had grown so rapidly.

1920-1954

On January 3, 1920, the Willow Hill School and its property were sold to the Bulloch County Board of Education for eighteen dollars. The county made drastic changes to the curriculum including a requirement that all teachers have a college degree. Previously, teachers were required to complete the seventh grade plus two additional years at the Statesboro Institute to get a teaching certificate.
During this period, the Willow Hill School grew to include high school grades. It had a strong athletic program and competed well in basketball (girls and boys) and softball.

The parents of the community were very involved. They held a number of fundraisers to provide additional funds for the school and also boarded many of the teachers who taught at Willow Hill.

In the 1930's, Julius Rosenwald of the Sears and Roebuck Co. donated a large sum of money to construct a new building at Willow Hill called the Rosenwald Building, in his honor. This building was the main building until the current Willow Hill was built in 1954.

1954-Present

In 1954, "separate but equal learning facilities" was ruled unconstitutional. This same year the Bulloch County Board of Education built several new separate schools for black children. The new Willow Hill School, once again an elementary school, was very modern and built in the shape of an "L". This new building had indoor restrooms and a library.

It was not until 1969 that the courts ordered the integration of Bulloch County Schools. Powerful people who opposed the court order closed Willow Hill and several other Black schools in the county down. Angry parents of Willow Hill students demanded that it be reopened. Willow Hill was reopened in 1971 and a white principal was appointed to head the school. Many unsuccessful attempts were made to change the name of the school, all with the goal of closing it's doors. Willow Hill remained in operation until the 1999-2000 school year when the Bulloch County Board of Education moved Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade students into a newly built school called Portal Elementary and sixth through eighth grade students to Portal Middle School.

This is the Willow Hill School story. From its inception to its demise, the legacy of Willow Hill will live forever in the hearts and minds of the graduates and future Willow Hill Community generations.