

I. BILOXI SCHOOLS—THE BEGINNING

The history of the Biloxi Public Schools should first be viewed in the larger context of the state school system. Although Mississippi did not become a state until 1817, the matter of schools had concerned its people long before statehood. That concern received expression primarily in a large number of small and generally inadequate private schools; but quite early in their history, Mississippians expressed a desire for public schools.

The problems faced by the state in establishing and maintaining a system of public schools might have defeated less determined people. Though most of the state's citizens at the time of adoption into the family of states were uneducated themselves, they knew at firsthand the inconvenience, sometimes the despair, of being uneducated. They passionately desired schools for their children. Scattered population, poor roads, some of them impassable in winter, inadequate sources of revenue, poor communication—these things made the creation of a system of largely rural schools a forbidding task. Several cities, however, established public schools in the early 1800s. "Columbus had one of the best known, Franklin Academy, which was opened in 1821. By 1840 its enrollment was more than four hundred. Natchez Institute had more than six hundred students in 1845. Jackson, Vicksburg, Woodville, and Shieldsborough also had good public schools before 1860" (McLemore 141, 142).

The legislation providing for publicly supported schools prior to the War Between the States was entirely permissive; but in 1868 the newly-adopted constitution called for a state-wide system of public schools, creating at the same time the office of State Superintendent of Education (Associated Consultants 2).

This constitutional provision was activated by the legislature of 1870. The county was established as the educational unit. Provision was made for a four-month term to be supported by state appropriations and poll tax collections. The law provided that any municipality containing 5,000 or more population might constitute itself a school district separate from the county provided it taxed itself for the support of its schools and operated the schools beyond the state provision of a four-month term. (Associated Consultants 2)

After the Civil War, most attempts to establish public schools faced problems that are still faced by all Mississippi school districts—finding ways to finance the system and putting those methods into effect. With provisions allowing attendance from ages five to twenty-one, and with school terms set at a minimum of four months per year, most of the money at first went for building and equipment. The new laws included sections requiring some kinds of textbooks, but enforcement provisions did not exist (McLemore 224, 225).

State money previously used for schools would continue to be used under the new provisions, as would money from liquor license fees; in addition, supervisors were required to levy school taxes to operate the dual system of education now established for both races (Betterworth 251).

Under the new laws, Vicksburg became a separate school district. And in 1873 the population requirement for school districts was lowered to 2,000; to 1,000 in 1880; and to 750 in 1886 (Associated Consultants 2).

According to the report of the State Superintendent of Education, there were 35 separate districts during the scholastic session 1888-89. The number increased to 43 in 1890 and to 58 in 1892. The State Superintendent's report for 1891-93 states that four mills was the average tax levy in the separate districts with some districts running as high as seven and one-half mills. The maximum county levy permitted at that time was three mills but very few counties saw fit to impose any tax whatever for school support. (Associated Consultants 2)

The educational progress of the state during the latter part of the 1800s was very slow, but there were several important steps forward. In 1875, for example, the state's teachers organized in an association which held annual meetings; the organization was a first move toward cooperative ventures in education that would eventually result in the strong and progressive Mississippi Education Association. Formal organization under the name of State Teachers Organization came in 1875, giving professional leadership to the movement for better schools (McLemore 352).

A revision of school laws in 1886 provided for uniform examination of teachers and adjustment of teachers' salaries based on school size, types of licenses, and ability (Betterworth 252). "In the first teacher examinations given under the new laws, seventy percent of the applicants failed; but the situation gradually improved" (Betterworth 252). A report by the State Superintendent of Education from 1891-93 noted that Mississippi towns were not satisfied with four-month terms and, under the organization of separate school districts, were providing terms up to ten months, with an average eight-month school session (Associated Consultants 3).

Mississippi schools, however, did not begin to move forward with any speed until the 1900s, although some significant changes were made in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These gradual changes included the establishment of continuous school terms, rather than broken sessions for winter and summer; the start of improved teacher training, with summer normal schools; the establishment of graded schools; the construction of more than 2,300 country schools between 1886 and 1895; and the growing public support of schools (McLemore 346-350).

Gradually courses of study were broadened and textbooks were selected by state commissions, although it was not until 1940 that free textbooks were provided for the first eight grades—two years later for high schools.

With a better school system it became necessary to have well-trained teachers. Until 1903 only one of five teachers in Mississippi had gone beyond the seventh grade. This state of affairs was changed through the work of educational leaders and the high school and elementary accrediting commissions. The commissions were created by the Mississippi Education Association, which set up standards for the schools (McLemore 350).

In many respects the development of the Biloxi Public Schools closely parallels that of schools throughout the state. In some important areas, however, the history of the Biloxi schools goes its own way in keeping with the background and interests and needs of the people who have directed the schools or who have been served by them and of the community itself.

Among the interesting items connected with the history of the Biloxi schools is an unpublished article that was found in the files of the *Daily Herald* newspaper in 1969. The author of the article is unknown and the notes were somewhat sketchy, lacking particulars that might pinpoint stories about early Biloxi schools with greater accuracy. It is detailed enough, however, to give evidence of research on the part of the writer, to suggest that interviews were conducted with some of the people mentioned, and to be a valuable addition to this history of the Biloxi schools.

Of particular interest are the accounts of private schools which flourished before the city began to provide public schools for Biloxi children. The fact that several such private schools existed in a town as small as Biloxi prior to the Civil War seems ample evidence of the great concern of the community's citizens for the educational well-being of their children. In addition, the writer of this article quoted from the first town ordinances establishing schools for Biloxi. He noted that the first record of a city ordinance creating a public school in Biloxi was written in 1866, titled "To levy Taxes for all school purposes."

The mayor and selectmen voted to establish a public school permanently within the corporate limits of the Town of Biloxi and to levy taxes for its support. Taxes and/or license fees were placed on all real estate, all sales of auctioneers, all classes of businesses including shows and menageries, billiard tables, nine and ten pin alleys, hotels, beer houses, and itinerant peddlers. The ordinance, according to the writer, was written in the old ordinance book by J.R. Nixon when John L. Henley was mayor; it was dated March 20, 1866. In Ordinance Number 2, the unnamed historian continued, the mayor and selectmen ordered that public schools "shall be carried into effect for the Education of White Children whose parents or guardians reside within the limits of the Town of Biloxi under such rules as may from time to time hereafter be provided." The ordinance also provided measures for relief for those children whose parents and guardians were unable to pay the fees required.

Despite the limited sources of revenue, the Biloxi public schools were begun with the kind of vision and courage that would one day result in a system of schools of which these foresighted men would have been proud indeed. In addition to their recognition of the need for schools, they showed a deep compassion for people who had suffered the privations of war and military defeat and by

providing ways for the city to help, they exhibited commendable sympathy for children whose parents could not afford to pay the small fees to support the school.

Perhaps it is useful here to note a few details about the community itself during the last part of the nineteenth century. In 1880, for instance, the population of Biloxi was only 1,540; in 1890 it had grown to 3,234. According to the *Daily Herald Anniversary Edition* of 1934, quoting a history written by W.L. Guice, the town was granted a charter as a city in 1896. (An article about Biloxi in the same edition of the *Herald* noted that Biloxi was incorporated as a town by the Mississippi Legislature in 1850.)

In 1884, when the *Daily Herald* began publication, Biloxi's streets were lighted by kerosene lamps on posts, and the lamps were lighted each evening by a city employee. There were mule-drawn streetcars, later changed to electric trolley cars and only much later to buses. The horse and livery stable eventually would give way to the automobile, and the stage shows in Dukate's Theatre would be replaced by silent films. Several corners in the downtown section were occupied by saloons.

In 1886 Biloxi city officials declared the town of Biloxi a separate school district. "Biloxi's Act was approved and adopted in Ordinance #21 on April 3, 1888, and this ordinance, along with Ordinances #22 and #24, formed the formal basis of our public school system (Guice *et al.* 11). From that time through the early 1900s, the city's public schools were the product not only of official support through the city government but also—and possibly even more important—the generosity and vision of individual men and women whose names became synonymous with the Biloxi schools.

The Growth of the Biloxi Public School System, published in 1979 as part of a series of historical documents sponsored by the city under the direction of City Historian Julia C. Guice, traces the progress of the school system from its beginnings to 1924. The chronology developed by editor Guice and researchers David A. Wheeler and Stephanie C. Richmond begins with the donation in 1860 by Gaspard Didier, Arne and Adele Bernard, and Joseph Roussell of a lot on the corner of Main and Railroad Streets for school purposes (Guice 6).

It continues with a carefully researched account of the Biloxi schools as they grew through the early 1880s and into the 1900s with the invaluable help of Biloxi philanthropists Frank Turner Howard and Harry Howard, Lazaro and Julia Lopez, W.K.M. Dukate, and William F. Gorenflo, whose devotion to education and to the children of Biloxi was manifest in their donation of land and buildings forming the nucleus of the school system that exists today. It is impossible to assess the ultimate good which grew from the generous civic impulses of these prominent Biloxians, whose names rightfully are memorialized in Biloxi's schools today.

One of the most important sources of information about early Biloxi Public Schools is the *Twentieth Century Anniversary Edition of the Biloxi Daily Herald*, published in 1900. The special publication contains photographs of the schools in 1900 and details the history of a school system

the *Herald* praised: "Now every ward of the city has its commodious, beautiful and completely equipped school building, bringing the best facilities within reach of every home" ("Biloxi Graded School System" 15). In 1912 Biloxi made the most significant step forward in the history of the schools up to that point when construction of the central high school building on East Howard Avenue was financed through a bond issue. And the early 1920s began a progressive period for the schools that would not be equaled until the 1950s.

Among the actions that seem symbolic of the city's comparatively liberal stance—certainly in comparison with other cities in Mississippi—was the appointment of the first two women to serve on the Biloxi City School Board—Mrs. E.C. Tonsmiere and Mrs. T.K. Devitt (Guice 59). One should remember that American women had been permitted to vote only after passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution on June 4, 1919. In addition, as student enrollment continued to increase, far-seeing administrative changes were made. Among them, in an attempt to keep pace with the demands on the time of the superintendent, was the appointment of Miss Margaret Speir as supervising principal of the ward elementary schools (Guice 59).

The city, recognizing and reacting to its need to provide a better school environment for its children, made plans in the early 1920s to construct three new schools. It is a measure of the resolve and the support of Biloxians that a first bond issue providing for construction of these schools was followed before the 1920s ended by another bond issue to fund construction of a fourth white elementary school and a school for the colored children of the city. Biloxi residents were acutely aware of the deficiencies in the present system and determined to improve the school lives of their children.

It was in 1924 that the Board of Trustees voted to give the new schools the names of three Biloxi families whose contributions to the school system had been immeasurable: Lopez, Gorenflo, and Dukate. The three elementary schools bearing the names of these Biloxi school system benefactors would survive long into the future and be a part of the living history of the Biloxi Public Schools for many years. It is also in 1924 that Volume I in the history of the Biloxi schools, *The Growth of the Biloxi Public School System*, ends and this continuation of that history begins. (Pictured – Biloxi High School – Built in 1912)

