

Black alumni of Starkville's Moor High School fight to preserve its property, heritage

By Earnest McBride
JA Contributing Editor

Oktibbeha County and its county seat, known today as Starkville, can trace their history back for more than 2,000 years. But Black institutions in the central northeast Mississippi area are in danger of being erased from history in less than half a century with no trace left behind to link the future with their past achievements and memories. The alumni association of the closed Moor High School has complained publicly for the past six years.

Moor High opened in 1960 and closed its doors in 2015, after 55 years of service to the greater Starkville community. In its last years, Moor High's name was changed to East Oktibbeha County High School. School

property attached to the 16th Section land has strict laws governing the dispossession of such property.

"The East Oktibbeha County High School building is on Moor High Road in

the southeast part of Oktibbeha County," the *Starkville Daily News* reported on May 27, 2016. "It is technically on 15th Section land but legally falls under the same regulations as 16th Sec-

tion land, which means it cannot be sold by the school district."

DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Jackie Ellis and the other members of the Education Association of East Oktibbeha County Schools (EAEOCS), a 501(c)3 organization, felt that they had the law on their side and were anxious to present their proposal for the use of the now-closed Moor High School facilities for a community center, a history and cultural center, health and fitness programs, educational and mentoring programs, and training facilities for a variety of other community activities.

Meeting during an outdoor celebration in the Sessums

See Moor High School on 9A



Starkville's Moor High Alumni Board members: Rev. Willie Earl Thomas, left; Josie Malone Redmond, center; and Jackie Ellis, President, at a June 12 rally in the Sessums community of Starkville.

community in Starkville on Saturday, June 12, a group of 40 Moor High alumni and their associates told of their determination to pursue a number of goals for the Moor High property they have been planning since its closing in 2015.

"We started out by trying to make a contract with the school district to continue educational and needed services to the community," Ellis said, "We were aware of the rules governing the use of school property built on 16th Section lands. So, we followed the advice of some of the experts on this matter. We sought to bring in the Oktibbeha County Board of Supervisors as a partner in the proposal because we saw a greater need for these services in the outlying county areas rather than just inside the city of Starkville alone."

Bettye Thomas, Class of 1974, said that shortly after Moor High first closed, she had developed a plan that would involve Mississippi State University in setting up an amphitheater on the old school grounds.

"We met with the board of supervisors," Thomas said. "But then they stopped meeting with us. When they got a new superintendent of education, Peasant, they stopped talking to the people from the community altogether."

"With a lot of our focus being on providing sports and recreational programs for our youth, the Superintendent of Education and the supervisors at first seemed willing to join with us and took a hold of our idea and said they would partner with us in developing the format for our B. L. Moor School, which also was known as East Oktibbeha High during its last years of existence.

"They were involved for about three years until 2019, when they got re-elected. For some reason they won't give us an explanation as to why they decided at their board meeting in early 2020 that they were going to back out of the agreement they had made with us."

The attorney for the board of supervisors advised the alumni group to work with the board of education as a possible option for their plan.

"We wrote to the board of education and the superinten-

dent in 2020 asking them to let us come in as a nonprofit, public interest group and present our plan for the use of the buildings and grounds of Moor High.

"We wanted to go back in as an organization by ourselves. We asked the superintendent to give us the opportunity to go before the school board to request that we be given a lease or whatever option we could get to start up our program. But the superintendent never responded to us."

Walter Conley, the retired former superintendent of the of Starkville/Oktibbeha Consolidated School District, says he, too, would like to see his old high school put to good use.

"As a 1964 graduate of B. L. Moor High School," Conley said, "I'd like to see that facility used in some manner that serves the community. The use of the gymnasium, for example, can be used to have recreational programs for the community. And why not use the kitchen facilities to sponsor a banquet or something like that? And there should be some type of educational opportunity not only the children, but also for adults."

"Right now, my position is that we need a lot more details before you can say realistically what services can be provided," Conley said. "In the final analysis, funding is going to be the key that's going to determine what you can and can't do. You can speculate about all the things we want to do, but in actuality it will depend on what funding source we have out there. Right now, we're in the process of doing that."

PROPERTY SOLD?

On October 3, alumni members held a rally in downtown Starkville and got good media coverage, Ellis says.

"We got coverage reporting that the old school was just sitting out there, and we wanted to use it, but couldn't get any answers," she said. "About seven days later, we saw in the minutes of the school board that they had approved the sale of the property. But we didn't find this out until November."

A supervisor from their district had informed members of the alumni association about the plan to sell the property,

she said, based on a report he had from Dr. Eddie Peasant, the Superintendent of Education.

With an unresponsive board and superintendent, Ellis and the Alumni Association took their case to the U.S. Department of Justice. Contact with the Justice Department and a Congressional representative brought on a conference with Peasant and one member of the Board of Education on January 14. Peasant apologized for not having followed through with the alumni members' requests and promised that they would get a fair hearing in the coming weeks, she said.

"But, we found out that the same night we were holding this conference, the board of supervisors had met and approved the sale of the school property for \$130,000. They then told us that we would have to discuss our plan with the Wildlife people [The State Department of Wildlife and Fisheries]."

Ellis says that a private industrial group has been given the green light to use the school property and buildings for commercial purposes.

A meeting set for June 21 will deal with the school board's final arrangement for releasing the title to the old school property.

In recent weeks, Ellis said, the private industrial group has told the alumni association that they would make a part of the former Moor High building available to them.

CONFRONTATION

Peasant was openly criticized at a June 8 board of education meeting by Steven Harris of Jackson, a native of Starkville who is working with the alumni association as both an adviser and advocate. Harris is the founder-chairman of The Second Chance Project for prison inmates and others caught up in the justice system in Mississippi.

Harris gave the board members copies of a petition signed by the Moor High alumni and members of the Starkville community opposing the sale or lease of the school property to a private interest group.

"This petition would not have happened if you had responded to the many requests the people of this community submitted to you," Harris

said while standing directly in front of the superintendent, who sat aghast in his seat behind the table.

JIM CROW HISTORY

Despite the observation of some education researchers that Southern schools got on the desegregation track around 1970, after years of delay following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision, the aura of racial segregation remained in the classrooms and hallways of nearly all the state's schools, even when the fields of sports gave the illusion of a racial admixture.

"While most Southern school districts met federal desegregation standards following 1964, school boards and administrators manipulated federal policy maintaining racially discriminatory policies and segregated learning in desegregated schools," says Luci Valen in her 2014 study, *Before the Corridor of Shame: The African American Fight for Equal Education After Jim Crow*.

Mississippi remains at the top of the list of states with open desegregation orders, numbering 61 at the time of the last comprehensive report of 2017. Included among these orders issued by federal courts to Mississippi school districts as far back as 1961 and 1971 are areas as disparate as nearby Leake, Holmes, Lowndes, and Yazoo County schools, along with school districts in Meridian, Natchez, and Cleveland.

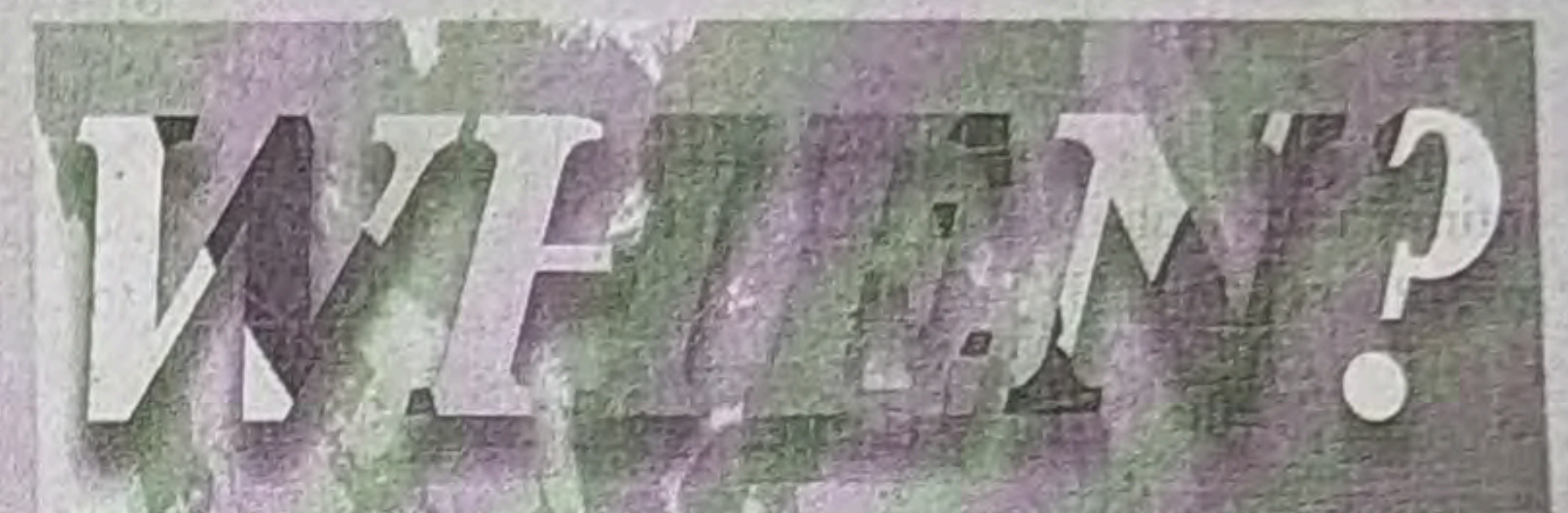
While the initial response in Mississippi to the Supreme Court's mandate was rigid defiance, even going to the extreme of passing legislation to defund all public schools in 1962 while at the same time proposing to use state education funds to subsidize private white academies. Most proposals were scuttled before they were allowed to go into effect, however. The state's way out of the mess that it had created for itself was to shift the bulk of Black pupils to the formerly all-white schools, shut down the Black institutions, and to devise some means of retaining segregation within the walls of what purported to be a desegregated school system.

To help the classic and neo-segregationists with their

daunting task stood the State Sovereignty Commission, the former White Citizens' Council, newly renamed the Council of Conservative Citizens, an organization much favored by former U. S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, and a legion of other local and regional groups dedicated to the racist past.

In order to bring the racist praxis of the "good ol' boys" into the modern era, organiza-

tions like the Cato Institute, the Koch Brothers Foundation, and the American Legislative Exchange Committee (ALEC) were given a fond welcome in Mississippi and remain well-entrenched there today. The latter two organizations have even taken on the task of writing the ultra-conservative and reactionary legislative bills adopted by the current Republican leadership in state government.



By Anne T. Sulton, Ph.D., J.D.
JA Senior International Correspondent

There is a growing consensus that the Arctic sea ice melt problem has grown beyond the point of no return. Scientists across the globe now are asking when, rather than whether, the planet will experience rising seas so high that coastal communities worldwide are uninhabitable.

Some studies predict that many coastal cities and island nations will disappear under the water by the turn of the century. Other studies project that by mid-century millions now living in coastal communities will be forced to move to higher ground.

These scientific reports are frightening reminders that babies born today will experience during their lifetimes a world dramatically different than that experienced by their parents. Their world will include frequent food supply disruptions due to crops damaged by temperature fluctuations, including intense heat waves and extreme winters. Many land animals and water-based species now abundant will be extinct. Air quality too will diminish.

The scientific evidence now is impossible to deny. Arctic sea ice is melting at an unprecedented rate and water is rising.

The USA's National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) reports that "the oldest and thickest Arctic sea ice is disappearing at a faster rate than the younger and thinner ice at the edges of the Arctic Ocean's floating ice cap."

Peter Wadhams explains: "Just a few decades ago, ice 10 to 12 feet thick covered the North Pole, with sub-surface ice ridges in some parts of the Arctic extending down to 150 feet. Now, that ice is long gone, while the total volume of Arctic sea ice in late summer has declined, according to two estimates, by 75 percent in half a century. ... This monumental change is triggering a cascade of effects that will amplify global warming and could destabilize the global climate system."

The USA's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) concurs that sea ice "influences the global climate." Its Arctic Report Card states that "the sustained transformation to a warmer, less frozen, and biologically changed Arctic remains clear."

NOAA also reports: "The average annual land surface air temperature north of 60° N for October 2019-September 2020 was the second highest on record since at least 1900. Record warm temperatures in the Eurasian Arctic were associated with extreme conditions in the ocean and on the land."

When — by what date certain — will we change our behavior to slow the pace at which Arctic sea ice is melting?