

HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM IN KEY WEST

BY

MRS. ETHEA STRICKER

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The first school recorded in our early history was kept by a pastor of St. Paul's Episcopal Church during 1834 to 1835.

In 1843, provisions were made for paying from Monroe County taxes for the education of children whose parents were unable to pay for their schooling. For each pupil, \$1.00 a month was paid to the teacher who provided her own schoolhouse.

This was the beginning of our public school system, but the one-room private schools continued long after public schools were built.

In 1905, I started my education in one of these private schools, but my parents paid the large sum of \$1.00 a week.

This school was held in one of the beautiful twin homes across the street from where the Public Library is now located.

Miss Lydia Moss was the teacher. She was a fine big spinster that I will never forget. She gave me a good foundation in the primer and first grade. I started school in August and was eight years old in October.

In September 1870, a public school named the Sears School was started by the Masons in the Masonic Building which was located where the present post office now stands. The school had an enrollment of 203 pupils and four teachers.

In 1874, the county constructed its first public school. It was also named Sears School and was located in Free School Alley on Simonton Street between Fleming and Southard Streets.

The enrollment that year increased to 300 pupils and one more teacher was added.

The building was a large two-story frame structure with three classrooms upstairs and six downstairs.

On April 4, 1908, the first high school graduation in this county was held at that school. J. Lancelot Lester who became our State Attorney and the father of Circuit Court Judge Ignatius Lester and Dr. Lance Lester was the only graduate.

During this time the Convent of Mary Immaculate and the Ruth Hargrove Seminary were built. The latter was a Methodist School. I started second grade at the convent and attended until I finished the eighth grade. I skipped the seventh grade because the class was crowded and a few of us unfortunate ones were sent on to eighth grade.

In the early days, there were 13 grades. The primer was a full term.

I would like to see us go back to that system as a foundation in education. It is like a solid foundation for a building. It is more lasting.

The second public school to open here was the Russell Hall School built in 1887.

In 1900 the building was moved from Grinnell Street to the site now occupied by Truman Elementary School.

In 1909, Harris Elementary School was built at a cost of \$42,000.00.

After a few year the high school division of Sears School was moved to four upstairs rooms at Harris School.

The Principal, Professor Geiger, was a stern, harsh disciplinarian who started at Sears School and was transferred to Harris.

He did not believe in sparing the rod. Neighbors could hear the belt lashes he gave the boys who disobeyed a rule.

He married Miss Lee, one of the nicest teachers who taught under him.

Isabel Biaza was the first graduate of this school.

I attended Harris School during my freshman and sophomore years.

On June 4, 1914 the Division Street School was dedicated. It was built on the site of the Russell Hall. The name was changed to Truman School in 1949 in honor of President Harry Truman.

In 1915, the high school was moved to the second story of this building.

I was in the first graduating class of this school in 1916. There were 10 graduates, the largest class to graduate in Key West.

The high school was given the name of Monroe County High School.

I could not compete for a scholarship given by Mr. George Allen, President of the First National Bank, because I had skipped the junior class.

My father died while I was a sophomore. My brother was in dental school in Atlanta, and I wanted to drop out of school to work and help him finish. Two of my teachers encouraged me to take two subjects during the summer as I had taken an extra class during my freshman and sophomore years. I did and when school opened, I took the exam and went on to my senior year.

In those days, each graduate had to give an oration at the graduation exercises. My oration was "Is Poverty a Curse?". I was trying to prove to myself that it was not.

The next school to be built was the Key West Junior Senior High School on White Street. It later became the Memorial Elementary and the Glynn Archer Junior High School.

The May Sands School was built by the Federal Government for their use and later was taken over by the Key West High School as an annex.

It was used as a book depository and for home economics classes. It is now used as an Exceptional Child Education Center and is the hub of a new and wide program for Exceptional Children.

There are 67 teachers in this program across the county with 33 teachers and three psychologists centered in the May Sands School. This program does diagnostic and rehabilitation work. A modern addition to this facility was completed this year.

The first public kindergarten was held in a building in the Army barracks. It was later moved to the big armory building on White Street.

The Reynolds School was built in 1927 for the kindergarten. It was later used for primary classes as well but has since gone back to housing strictly kindergarten classes. Miss Susie Gardner was the head of the first kindergarten.

The Horace O'Bryant Junior High School was built on land that had to be filled in 1964. It was named for Mr. O'Bryant who was a Principal here for many years before becoming Superintendent.

In August 1956, the present Key West High School was completed at a cost of \$2,250,774. The site was also a swamp that had to be filled in.

After graduation I went to a summer normal school taught by a Methodist minister here. I took the state examination for a teacher and was assigned to No Name Key because there was not an opening in Key West.

The Keys had to have 12 pupils to get a school so an eleventh grade girl, who was my age, had to make up the twelfth pupil.

I was paid the hugh sum of \$40 per month. I had to go to Big Pine Key by train and be transported by skiff to No Name Key. So out of my \$40, I had to pay train fare, room and board.

My pupils ranged from kindergarten to eleventh grade, so I was glad for the help of the eleventh grader. Pat Parks has written of my experiences in her column in the Key West Citizen.

My boyfriend, George Jay Stricker, came up to visit me on Sundays. There was a Russian hermit living on the opposite side of the Key. He went to Key West to do his banking and as my boyfriend worked at the First National Bank, he go to know the hermit. My friend asked the hermit if he could bring me for a visit. Mr. Matcovitch, who was a myth to the people of the Keys, said he could. On the following Sunday we took my entire class for a visit.

The house was built on stilts and the walls were covered with guns of every kind. Mr. Mac was very nice, but the house and his appearance were errie. He was married and had a wife and family in Key West, but preferred the life of a hermit. He still has decendants living in Key West.

The school term on the Keys was only three months long. When I returned to Key West, I got a position at Truman School where I taught third grade for two years before getting married.

After my husband's death in 1925, I again took the state exam and went back to teaching. I reared my three children on \$75 a month and was once paid in script.

I continued studying and received the life primary certificate.

I thought I was all set then with a life certificate but soon were were given a certain length of time in which to get an L.G. degree. This was a two-year degree in education. So through correspondence, extension classes (in these an instructor came down and taught on Friday evening and Saturday morning and assigned work to last all week) and by going to summer school, we earned the required L. G. degree in 1941.

These were strenuous times and we thought now we would have some free time, but soon a bachelor's degree was required so back to the grindstone.

I attended the University of Miami one summer and the University of Denver in 1950. I earned by B. S. in Education in 1953 from Florida State Woman's College, now Florida State University, at the age of 55.

Salaries had inched up in the meantime, but I retired in 1958 after 33 years of teaching. I enjoyed my work and after three years of rest and relaxation, went back as a substitute. I substituted for seven years but decided to quit when I became 70.

Education has come a long way in Key West and has spread out so that the entire county has a fine school system. Intergration has taken place with very little conflict and busing is in the process of adjustment.

Plans are underway for two new elementary schools this year and we have an excellent junior college.

Our Superintendent, Armando Henriquez, whom I taught in first grade, and his staff and the School Board are alert to the needs of the county and dedicated to the education of our youth and adults.

Some of the teachers whose names are closely linked with the early educational system are Miss Mary Dunn, Miss Louise Grant, Miss Lillian Wilson Cowart, Miss May Sands and Miss Sadie Moss.