

NCCU: The First Day, The First Class, October 1910 (Centennial)

North Carolina Central University is currently celebrating its Centennial, 100 years of sacrifice, struggle, and achievement. The school was named the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua (NRTS&C) in 1910. The name changed to NCCU in 1969. The school “opened” with the beginning of classes in October 1910. A contrast of the schools both then and now is a testament to the success, leadership, and humanitarianism of the legacy of founder James Edward Shepard.

The night before the school “opened” in Durham, there were numerous prayer vigils throughout the Piedmont. St. Joseph A.M.E. Church had the largest prayer service. The church was filled to capacity. Shepard, local ministers, and officials of the International Sunday School Association offered words of encouragement and prayer. Was Shepard worried about the possible failure of the school? Yes!

The school was originally located in Hillsborough, in Orange County, North Carolina. At that time, Shepard’s idea for a magnet school within a small academical village failed. He then accepted the decision of the Durham Merchants Association and the International Sunday School to locate the school in Durham.

The day before classes began, the long, single-lane dirt road to the campus was filled with horse-powered rubber-wheeled carriages and ox-carts. The students arrived from urban communities in Durham, Orange, and Wake counties and from small rural towns and villages within the Piedmont. All of the students were rooted in an agricultural, industrial, and domestic work culture. Many of them were well-acquainted with each other. They had met at Raleigh’s famed Emancipation Proclamation parades, Shaw University activities, church conventions, Sunday School meetings, and the “Great” North Carolina State Fair. The fair was one of the most popular social events in the Upper South. Students from throughout the region competed for prizes in agriculture, food preparation (canning), livestock breeding, dress making, crocheting, oratory, and scientific inventions. The annual Shaw vs. St. Augustine football game highlighted the Colored Day. Despite an absence of mass communication, the legendary “grapevine telegraph” kept people informed.

The students were welcomed to the campus by Shepard and the faculty and staff of the NRTS&C. With few exceptions, campus residency was required. The students unpacked their bags in a dorm that was equipped with steam heat, electric lights, and indoor plumbing. The above features were an anomaly within many Durhamnites’ homes. Each student was required to own a Bible. Unlike the students of 2010, the students of a hundred years ago had worked in the sun and regarded education as a privilege. Also, unlike 2010, failure was less of an option because there were no alternatives. Collectively, these students were imbued with a high sense of honor and integrity. They accepted Shepard’s

admonition that “image is everything” and that social behavior was a major ingredient of success. Thus, the first day coincided with an NRTS&C strategy to communicate to each student how to speak, act, and dress.

On opening day, an atmosphere of excitement and expectancy filled the air. The students exhibited a strong sense of urgency. They recognized that something great was about to happen, and more important, they knew that they were on a fixed road to destiny.

Whereas the 2010 class mirrors the hip hop culture, the 1910 freshmen loved ragtime music. Undoubtedly several students were enthused about an emerging musical phenomenon named jazz that their parents detested. Ministers denounced jazz as a sin and the work of the devil. The dainty ladies of the NRTS&C rejected jazz because it was “honky tonk” (night club) and involved a loud saxophone instead of a quiet piano.

Unlike 2010, the students quickly learned that their lives were going to be regimented and their off-campus visitation and activities severely restricted. There was no official dating policy, and any student could be suspended by Shepard at any time for honor violations. Unlike 2010, the student holidays consisted of one day for Thanksgiving and two days for Christmas. Classroom seating was gender oriented. The dining hall was managed by Shepard’s wife, Annie Day.

The NRTS&C had a two-year industrial and vocational curriculum. The school had an elementary and a high school category. The board required all faculty to have a four-year college degree. At the time, no black public school within the state offered a four-year college degree. Thus, the faculty originated from schools in Pennsylvania, New York, and other areas; the schools represented among the faculty included Howard, Columbia, and Cornell.

NCCU has a rich and glorious history. Read more about the Centennial at www.hlsuggs.com.

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