

Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Legendary Educator

Series: Legends



Photo courtesy of North Carolina State Archives.



The campus of Palmer Memorial Institute, ca. 1915. Photo courtesy of North Carolina State Archives.

February is African American History Month, a time to explore the history of African Americans, to learn about their struggles, and to mark their successes. This annual celebration began in February 1926 as Negro History Week. In 1976 it expanded to include the entire month of February and was renamed Black History Month. Today it's also called African American History Month. To participate in the celebration, read about Charlotte Hawkins Brown, a North Carolina legend in African American education.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown was born in Henderson, Vance County, in 1883. Her mother taught her to read and to appreciate art and music. She wanted her children to be well educated and to overcome the limits African Americans faced in the South.

The Hawkins family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1889 and opened a boardinghouse a year later. Seven-year-old Charlotte helped her mother sew, wash, and iron for the Harvard University students who rented rooms. Listening to these young scholars made her want to go to college.

Hawkins was an excellent student in high school and was involved in many activities. She was also a natural leader and organizer. After graduating she went to the Massachusetts State Normal School at Salem, and studied to become a teacher.

In 1901 Charlotte Hawkins started teaching at a rural school in Sedalia, near Greensboro. The run-down school closed after one term, but Hawkins decided to stay in the community and establish her own school. After raising money in New England, she established Palmer Memorial Institute in 1902. She named the school in honor of Alice Freeman Palmer, her mentor and supporter.

Palmer was the only school for African American children in the area. Most walked a long way to reach the one-room schoolhouse. Students who could not pay for their

education worked at the school. But all of the students had daily chores because Hawkins believed that working gave them a sense of responsibility.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown soon became a leader in the African American community both in North Carolina and across the country. She often spoke out against the unfair treatment of African Americans, and she fought for equality. She also supported women's rights, including the right to vote. (Did you know that women in the United States could not vote until 1920?)

Brown built Palmer Memorial Institute into an outstanding private school. Palmer highlighted cultural education and offered classes in drama, music, art, math, literature, and foreign languages. It attracted students from across the United States and from other countries. Brown saw more than one thousand students graduate from Palmer during her fifty years as president. She died in 1961, and the school closed ten years later. Today the Palmer campus is the setting for the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum, a state historic site. Because she was not only a great educator but also an advocate of racial equality and women's rights, Charlotte Hawkins Brown is a North Carolina legend.