

Charlotte Hawkins Brown: The Evolution of a North Carolina Legacy

By Lydia Charles Hoffman

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Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.

Lottie Hawkins (1883–1961) spent her early years in the farming community of Henderson, North Carolina. She lived in a comfortable four-column house with her mother, Caroline “Carrie” Frances Hawkins, and her brother, Mingo. Vance County was home for many members of the Hawkins family. They worked as carpenters and masons and in other skilled occupations that allowed them to work outside the sharecropping system, which kept many African Americans impoverished after the Civil War. Their wage income enabled them to purchase small plots of land and build houses for their families. Lottie’s mother worked hard to create a home environment where her daughter and her son would become self-confident and well educated and aspire to live beyond the constraints of discrimination and segregation found at that time in the South. She taught her children how to read and to appreciate oration, art, and music.

Although the Hawkins family fared better than many other African American families in turn-of-the-century North Carolina, Carrie and others in her extended family decided to move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1889. One year later Carrie married Nelson Willis and opened a boardinghouse, where young Lottie, now seven, helped her mother to sew, wash, and iron for the Harvard University students who rented rooms. Dr. Brown later recalled listening to the conversations and debates of these young scholars, which strengthened her resolve to attend college.

Lottie’s home training and intellectual environment provided her with a strong foundation that helped her in her studies at Cambridge’s prestigious English High School. During her senior year, young Hawkins decided to change her name from Lottie to Charlotte Eugenia, a more dignified name, she thought. During her years in Cambridge, Charlotte earned a reputation as a determined, intelligent student and community leader.

She organized the kindergarten at her church, coordinated the Cambridge High School Association's events at the Harvard Square Grand Hall, and received praise from both faculty and fellow students for her high marks, oral presentations, and beautifully crafted watercolors. A chance meeting and Charlotte's accomplishments brought her to the attention of Alice Freeman Palmer, the president of Wellesley College. Palmer sponsored Charlotte's entrance into Salem's State Normal School, where she studied to become a teacher.

Charlotte's family in Henderson provided her with models of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, which she applied to her own life. A few months before Charlotte graduated from the teacher's college, the American Missionary Association (a Christian organization founded to help educate blacks in the South after the Civil War) offered her a teaching position in a rural school outside Greensboro.

Arriving in Sedalia in 1901, Charlotte Hawkins knew that North Carolina's rules for social interaction between whites and blacks would be different from those of New England. But she was confident that her manner and education would help her to deal with the prejudices she would encounter. However, she was not prepared for the condition of the school: a dilapidated building, ill-prepared students, and a community desperate for a leader to teach its children. Over the years, Charlotte served not only as a teacher but also as a community organizer who helped her neighbors to get medical attention, child care, and bank loans to buy property.

One year after her arrival, the American Missionary Association withdrew its funds from the Sedalia school. Determined to keep her educational program afloat, Charlotte returned to New England to raise funds to open the Alice Freeman Palmer Memorial Institute, named after her friend and benefactor. Hawkins returned to North Carolina with \$200 and in the fall of 1902 hired four other women to help her teach classes in academic fundamentals, domestic science, and agriculture.

Palmer was the only school in the area where many African American boys and girls could receive an education. Most walked long distances along unpaved roads to sit on coarsely cut log benches in the converted blacksmith's shed that served as the one-room schoolhouse. During the winter months, Charlotte arranged for some of her male students to live in a shack not far from the school so they could continue their education when cold weather set in. Many of the female students boarded with Miss Hawkins and the other female teachers on the second floor of the schoolhouse. Students who could not afford tuition or room and board could take part in work programs, which not only helped to maintain the school but also enhanced industrial skills. Even as the student body became more prosperous, daily chores remained part of the curriculum. Hawkins insisted



Charlotte Hawkins Brown (center) and the faculty of Palmer Memorial Institute, ca. 1907. Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.

that each student have assigned daily tasks, in order to instill a sense of individual accountability for keeping the community running smoothly.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown (Miss Hawkins married Edward Brown in 1911) enlisted the local community to help her to expand and improve her school. Sedalia's Bethany Congregational Church donated fifteen acres of land to the project. However, Brown knew that a blacksmith's shed and a small parcel of land would not create the living and learning academy she envisioned. Funds for a trained staff and equipment were essential to maintaining an accredited high school. Dr. Brown wanted to offer the best educational opportunities for her students: laboratories, encyclopedias, modern facilities, and reproductions of classical paintings and sculptures to view in the library.



The campus of Palmer Memorial Institute, ca. 1915. The large structure in the center is Memorial Hall. To the left is the Domestic Science Cottage; to the right are Grew Hall (a dormitory) and the Industrial Building. *Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.*

To accomplish her goal, Dr. Brown again turned to her northern friends. In speech after speech at New England summer resorts and Boston churches, she told of her plan to build an academic institution in the South “for the betterment of her race.” Her hard work and determination also brought the attention of North Carolina educational leaders Charles McIver and Frank Porter Graham to Palmer's program and to the need for improved educational opportunities for the state's black students.

From 1902 until her death in 1961, Charlotte Hawkins Brown built Palmer into one of the premier boarding schools for African Americans in the United States. She followed the example of her mother in creating an environment where children and adolescents could live and learn to become self-reliant and well educated. By the time Palmer's doors closed in 1971 (a fire destroyed the main campus building), more than a thousand students had graduated and gone on to colleges and universities across the nation. Many became community leaders themselves, including North Carolina state representative Mickey Michaux of Durham. Dr. Brown's accomplishments earned her praise from notable women and men such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, and W. E. B. DuBois. As the founder of the Palmer Memorial Institute, Dr. Brown left a legacy as an educator of African American children that holds a prominent place in our state's and nation's history.

When she wrote this article, Lydia Charles Hoffman was the site manager of the Charlotte Hawkins Brown State Historic Site in Sedalia. She wrote her master's thesis on Charlotte Hawkins Brown at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.