

Gussie B. Taylor

Educator

From the *Culpeper-Star Exponent*:

“OC pioneer of education, civil rights honored

By Hannah Wever Media General News Service

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“Inside the Orange Train Station Sunday, a picture was worth a thousand memories when the Orange County African-American Historical Society unveiled a portrait of groundbreaking leader and educator Gussie Bayton Taylor.¹

“Members of the African-American historical society, guests, former school officials and friends celebrated Black History Month and presented Thomas Marsh’s portrait of Taylor, a remarkable woman whose lifelong dedication to children and education paved the way for future generations.

“Taylor’s legacy to Orange began decades ago, during the days of Jim Crow and segregation. The county’s African-American children were educated in single-room buildings. At the turn of the last century, a national endowment led to the creation of a ...[rural school fund] and later, the Southern Education Foundation. Through these programs, and others, resources were provided to fund supervisors who assessed and aided the schoolhouses and advocated for educational resources in African-American communities--including those in Orange.

“Taylor came to Orange when she was assigned as a supervisor of black community schools in the 1920s. And here, her contributions to the community are celebrated along with memories of her extraordinary poise, her ability to help neighbors and friends persevere through adversity, and her steadfast character and unfaltering spirit. In Orange, Taylor’s legacy will always be linked to her efforts to bring learning to local children. Her brave leadership paved the way for educational framework and fundamentals for students who would otherwise go without. And her strength and resilience made her a pioneer in the integration of Orange County schools following the 1954 Supreme Court decision that segregation was unlawful in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

“At Sunday’s event, folks remembered Taylor through stories and reminiscences.

“Donald Brooks remembered Taylor as a close friend of his grandmother’s who visited often and imparted a message of kindness and high expectations.

“ ‘She wanted you to speak properly, to do well, and be proud of yourself,’ Brooks said.

¹ Taylor’s portrait was unveiled at the train station but is displayed at the Taylor Education Administrative Complex, 200 Dailey Drive, in the town of Orange, Virginia.

“Retired Orange County educator and assistant superintendent Warren Widmyer worked closely with Taylor during his career and recalled her compassion ‘hidden behind nerves of steel.’ She was respected by all, Widmyer said, and ‘Everyone that knew her loved her.’

“Tearfully at times, others recalled how Taylor stepped in and provided support and assistance to families coping with a death, or facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Others recalled Taylor as a strict, fair disciplinarian whose authority kept youngsters headed toward success, not mediocrity.

“Former educator and school board member Murcelle Coleman remembered a 1965 Orange County Board of Supervisors public hearing in which county officials discussed the then-controversial issue of integrating county schools. Coleman said the commonwealth’s attorney asked Taylor to address the room, advocating the continuation of a segregated school system, and construction of a separate high school for African-American students.

“But, Coleman remembered Taylor’s answer: ‘No indeed, we aren’t going to accept that!’

It was because of Taylor’s steadfast approach to equality for the county’s students, according to Coleman, that schools ultimately desegregated in Orange County. Coleman herself was one of the first African-Americans hired to teach at the newly integrated county schools.

“According to Coleman, some of the individuals—including the commonwealth’s attorney who initially opposed integration back in the 1960s—later became beneficiaries of the African-American community supporting churches and organizations in Taylor’s name.

“ ‘Where would we be if Gussie Taylor hadn’t looked up at him and said ‘No indeed!?’ Coleman asked. ‘We owe her a great deal. There is no doubt about that. She will be remembered not only in the black community but in the Orange County community at large.’

“Taylor’s portrait, which was commissioned by Orange County African-American Historical Society Founding President Rebecca Gilmore Coleman, will hang in the Taylor Education Administration Complex—formerly a school for African-American children during segregation. The building, in its new incarnation, is named in part for Gussie Taylor, and in part for former U.S. President and native son Zachary Taylor.”²

The following is the portrait commissioned by the historical society that was unveiled at a ceremony at the Orange Train Station which is currently displayed in the foyer of the Taylor Education Administration Complex:

² Wever, Hannah. “OC pioneer of education, civil rights honored.” STAREXPONENT.com, The Culpeper *Star-Exponent*, February 26, 2009, www.starexponent.com/cse/news/local/article/oc_pioneer_of_education_civil_rights



Gussie Bayton Taylor

Gussie Bayton Taylor, born in 1907, left a great impact on education in Orange County. She spent 47 years of her life in education, 47 of which was with Orange County Public Schools, teaching both the black and white communities with her knowledge and dignity. Gussie was a supervisor during segregation of black education and worked hard to make the integration of the schools successful. She began her career in Madras County teaching from 1922-25, then moved to Lucas County Schools for a year, and at that point was recruited by Orange County Public Schools in 1925. After retirement in 1958, Gussie was hired as a consultant by the school system as a recruitment specialist for the Lary Childhood Simulation Program. Gussie Bayton Taylor passed away in 1989 at the age of 80, however, she left a permanent impression on Orange County with her strength and power as a determined educator.

--Photo Courtesy of Linda Carlton

The Inscription on the plaque underneath the picture reads:

“Gussie Bayton Taylor, born in 1903, left a great impact on education in Orange County. She spent 45 years of her life in education, 43 of which was with Orange County Public Schools, touching both the black and white communities with her knowledge and dignity. Gussie was a supervisor during segregation of black education and worked hard to make the integration of the schools successful. She began her career in Middlesex County teaching from 1922-23, then moved to Essex County Schools for a year, and at that point was recruited by Orange County Public Schools in 1925. After retirement in 1968, Gussie was hired as a consultant by the school system as a recruitment specialist for the Early Childhood Stimulation Program. Gussie Bayton Taylor passed away in 1989 at the age of 86; however, she left a permanent impression on Orange County with her strength and power as a determined educator.”

Facts on integration: Mrs. Taylor is frequently given credit for the peaceful integration of Orange County Public Schools in her role as Supervisor for the school system. The *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision ruled in favor of integration on May 17, **1954**. However, Prospect Heights school, consolidated from Orange Graded School, Charles Town school in Gordonsville and Tibbstown #7 school in Barboursville, opened as a segregated school in December **1956**. Full integration of Orange schools was not achieved until **1968**.

Further information from Taylor’s “Service of Triumph” held on Saturday, December 2, 1989 at the Angel Visit Baptist Church in Dunnsville, Virginia³:

“Gussie Bayton Taylor was born April 4, 1903, the sixth of twelve children born to the late Richard and Mary Bayton. She joined the Angel Visit Baptist Church at an early age and served faithfully until her health began to decline.

“She was a graduate of Rappahannock Industrial Academy, received her Bachelors and Masters Degrees from Virginia State University and completed advanced courses at the University of Virginia and Temple University in Pennsylvania.

“She began her career as a public school educator at Ozeana Elementary School in Essex, Virginia, continued for a short while in Middlesex County, Virginia and then joined the Orange County Public Schools in Orange, Virginia where she soon became Supervisor of Elementary Education. At the time of her retirement in 1968, she had served the Orange County Community with much distinction for 44 years.

³ Author unknown. Obituary for memorial “Service of Triumph”, December 2, 1989, Angel Visit Baptist Church, Dunnsville, Virginia.

“After a few years following her retirement, she returned to the place of her birth and until her health began to fail, was an active participant in the Angel Visit Baptist Church Hospitality Club, the Retired Teachers Association, The Civic League of Essex County and the NAACP.

“Gussie touched many lives and lived a life of example and precept. In many ways she was of ‘free spirit’ and a symbol of ‘free speech’.

“While a patient at the Riverside Hospital of Tappahannock, Virginia, she departed this earthly life for a better place on Monday, November 27, 1989....”