

A Place Out of Time

THE BORDENTOWN SCHOOL

A Documentary Film

FACT SHEET ABOUT BORDENTOWN

GENERAL HISTORY

From 1886 to 1955, The Bordentown School was only state-run, all-Black, co-educational boarding school north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Students lived and worked on campus in a learning community with faculty and staff.

FOUNDER

The school's founder Reverend Walter Rice was born a slave in South Carolina. Late in the Civil War he became what was known as a contraband – one of a group of unofficial workers and fighters that followed Union Army outfits, such as the Massachusetts 54th (the group depicted in the film "Glory"). Rice befriended a young officer who brought him to New England after the war.

PHILOSOPHY

The school successfully blended the opposing philosophies of two major figures in Black education, Booker T. Washington (who championed training in the manual trades) and W.E.B Dubois (whose philosophy emphasized classical education for the "talented tenth").

NICKNAMES

Bordentown was known by two nicknames:

- "Old Ironsides" – The land donated to build the school's 100-acre campus came from the Estate of Admiral Charles Stewart, commander of the USS Constitution (Old Ironsides) during the War of 1812; and
- "The Tuskegee of the North" -- Because it featured Booker T. Washington's "trades forward" approach to education, Bordentown gained this nickname after Washington's legendary Alabama institution.

FAMOUS VISITORS

Bordentown became a destination for key Black leaders and progressive white citizens to observe the school in action. Some of the more famous visitors include:

- Eleanor Roosevelt
- Paul Robeson
- Jesse Owens
- Albert Einstein
- Mary McCloud Bethune
- Booker T. Washington
- Albert Barnes (Barnes, the eccentric art collector and educator, was a great fan of

African Art and culture. He brought artist friends like Henri Matisse to the campus to hear the choir in an attempt to expose them to what Barnes deemed “authentic” culture.)

GRADUATES

Notable Bordentown alumni include:

- George Haley - Ambassador to Gambia (and brother of “Roots” author, Alex Haley)
- Rhoda Scott - celebrated jazz organist (now living in France)
- Maida Springer - labor organizer, pan-Africanist and social justice worker
- George Grant – dentist, Harvard professor, and inventor of the golf tee

FACULTY AND STAFF

Notable Bordentown employees include:

- S.A. Haley - father of author Alex Haley and Ambassador George Haley
- William Hastie – the first Black U.S. Appeals Court Judge
- Lester Granger - former leader of The Urban League
- Frederick Work – co-author of "Folk Songs of the American Negro" with his brother John, who directed the Fisk Jubilee Singers and made the first field recording of blues singers, including Muddy Waters.

AGRICULTURAL EXCELLENCE

The school grew most of its own food and livestock. Its produce routinely swept the awards at state agricultural competitions.

SPORTS

The first national championships of the all-Black American Tennis Association (ATA) were played on the Bordentown grounds in 1924. Althea Gibson won the tournament there in 1955 before winning Wimbledon.

The school’s Ironsides football team was not allowed to play against other local high schools because the team included semi-pro “ringers” who had already graduated from high school but had returned for job training. Instead they toured, playing colleges and military bases along the Eastern Seaboard.

CLOSING

The school was a victim of the Supreme Court’s 1955 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision ruling that segregated education was unconstitutional. After half-hearted attempts to enroll white students at Bordentown, the State of New Jersey claimed the institution could not be integrated and it was closed. The campus now serves as a youth incarceration facility.

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