

A Place Out of Time

THE BORDENTOWN SCHOOL

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THE STORY OF A UNIQUE BLACK EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION UNFOLDS IN THE NEW DOCUMENTARY “A PLACE OUT OF TIME - THE BORDENTOWN SCHOOL”

Narrated by Ruby Dee, film airs nationally May 24th at 10 P.M. on PBS

March 8, 2010 -- For a 70-year period from 1866-1955, when America cared little about education for African Americans, and discrimination was both law and custom, The Bordentown School in Bordentown, New Jersey, was an educational utopia. An incubator for Black pride and intellect, it taught values, discipline, and life skills to generations of Black children. “A Place Out of Time – The Bordentown School” is a documentary film – narrated by legendary actress Ruby Dee and airing nationally on PBS May 24th at 10 PM – that tells the story of this remarkable institution through its alumni, scholars and historians, and a treasure trove of archival footage and photographs.

Directed by award-winning filmmaker Dave Davidson and co-produced by Amber Edwards, “A Place Out of Time” chronicles the birth, growth, and decline of the last all-Black, publicly funded, co-educational boarding school north of the Mason-Dixon line. The film is also a chronicle of Black education in America across three centuries, a rarely seen inside portrait of a separate Black space, and an historical preface to the growing national discussion about historically Black institutions and their roles in nurturing both identity and personal accomplishment.

In its prime, Bordentown was called “The Tuskegee of the North,” after Booker T. Washington’s famous Alabama educational institute. Students at Bordentown trained in a variety of marketable trades, from agriculture to domestic science, and were schooled in both academic and social skills. With a 400-acre Georgian-style campus, Bordentown could easily be mistaken for an elite private school. Yet it was operated by the State of New Jersey, which closed it in 1955, after the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision.

“It is astounding how, in a few short years, the image of Bordentown changed in the public consciousness,” Davidson says. “In a very turbulent decade, it went from being perceived as an educational utopia to a Jim Crow school.”

“A Place Out of Time” examines the ramifications of the school’s closure (it is used now as a juvenile detention facility, an ironic fact revealed in the final frames of the documentary) and

considers the value of an education that includes manual training and physical labor, practiced on a daily basis in the service of one's community. The story is as timely today as ever, with public education in the U.S.—especially for many African-Americans—under increasing scrutiny and pressure to change. Bordentown was an educational experiment that succeeded in the face of institutionalized racism, limited resources, and political interference. Are there lessons for education today that can be learned from the Bordentown model?

FILM CREDITS

Producer/Director: Dave Davidson; Co-Producer: Amber Edwards

A production of Hudson West Productions, copyright 2009

Format: Standard Definition CC STEREO, widescreen.

Running time: 56 minutes

Funders: The Prudential Foundation, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, The New Jersey Council on the Humanities, and The New Jersey Historical Commission.

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MEDIA NOTES

- DVD review screener is available upon request.
- Director Davidson, Co-Producer Edwards, and several of the persons featured in the film are available for interviews about “A Place Out of Time” and the Bordentown School.
- High-resolution still images from the film, and additional information available online at www.bordentownschool.tv

ADDITIONAL FILM BACKGROUND

“A Place Out of Time” (2009) examines the social, political, and historical forces that forged the school's creation and ascent: the violent backlash against post-Civil War Reconstruction reforms; the Great Migration; the myth and reality of “separate but equal”; the opposing educational philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois; the Harlem Renaissance; and the birth of the Civil Rights movement. It explores the causes of Bordentown's eventual demise, triggered by the same advocates for equality and social justice who had supported it a few years before.

The film combines multiple narrative strands. On one level it maps the history of black education in America and the struggle for equal opportunity in the classroom and beyond. This “big picture” is painted by two of the country's leading scholars -- David Levering Lewis, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of W.E.B. DuBois, and Clement Price, a highly honored professor at Rutgers University and an expert in New Jersey's Black history.

On another level, the film is deeply personal, as the life stories and memories of Bordentown alumni weave throughout the narrative. Viewers meet the alumni individually, and as they prepare together for a bittersweet school reunion on the campus 50 years after the final class graduated. The students at Bordentown came from wildly diverse backgrounds and circumstances, but were all equals in the school's safe space. Standards were high, discipline was strict, and the human bonds were deep and nurturing. As one alumna says “They cuddled us. And they kicked us in the butt when it was necessary.”

Bordentown was a unique institution, but it was also an archetype of many historically Black organizations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its closure in 1955 was, on the surface at least, triggered by *Brown v. Board of Education*; as a public school it could not continue to exist legally as a segregated institution. Attempts by the state to integrate the school—widely considered half-hearted and insincere—failed. And while the decision to shut it down was mourned by Bordentown’s students and faculty it was cheered by the Black press and many Black leaders who had been agitating against the school as a shameful vestige of Jim Crow.

“A Place Out of Time” is historical, not polemical. Yet its story is as timely today as ever. Are there lessons for education today that can be learned from the Bordentown model?

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