

Resilience and Education: The Stories of Union Academy, Mebane, and Lincoln High

Union Academy, A. L. Mebane High School, and Lincoln High School stand as pillars of Black education in Alachua County, Florida. These institutions emerged during an era of systemic segregation, offering African American students opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive despite the harsh realities of racial discrimination.

Founded in 1867 with support from the Freedmen's Bureau, Union Academy became the first public school for African Americans in Gainesville. The school was established in a modest building constructed by Black carpenters, demonstrating the commitment of the local Black community to education. At Union Academy, Harriet E. Barnes was among the early educators who laid the foundation for academic excellence. Barnes, a New England teacher, faced an uphill battle by providing education to formerly enslaved children in Alachua County and training Black teachers. Despite facing constant underfunding and racial discrimination, the school thrived due to the dedication of its staff and community, serving as a cradle of academic excellence and community pride.

In 1923, Lincoln High School was established under the leadership of A. Quinn Jones. Jones, a Gainesville native and Florida A&M University graduate, emphasized academic rigor and character development. Under his guidance, Lincoln High became one of the few accredited Black high schools in Florida. Lincoln offered a diverse curriculum that included Latin, music, and industrial arts, providing students with a well-rounded education. A. L. Mebane High School opened in 1956 in the town of Alachua, extending educational opportunities to Black students in rural areas. Named after Principal Albert Leonidas Mebane, the school became a hub for academic and extracurricular activities. The faculty at Mebane often went above and beyond to mentor students, serving as role models and community leaders. The school hosted annual sports events and talent shows, creating a vibrant school culture despite the limitations of segregation.

The federal mandate for desegregation in 1970 brought profound changes. Lincoln High School was closed, and its students were sent to newly integrated schools across Gainesville. Mebane High was converted to a middle school, ending its role as a high school. The closures were met with sadness and frustration by many in the Black community. Lincoln students held a protest march, mourning the loss of a school that had been more than just a place of learning, it had been a center of unity for the minority community. The legacies of these schools live on through the efforts of alumni associations, reunions, and community projects. Today, the names Union Academy, A. L. Mebane, and Lincoln High resonate as symbols of resilience and a commitment to Black education in Alachua County.

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