

# An African American Landmark in Fayette County Camp Washington-Carver

By Norman Johnson

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Camp Washington-Carver in Fayette County opened in 1942 as a 4-H camp for African Americans — the first of its kind in the nation. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are from the Eastern Coal and Fuel Collection, courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, photographers and dates unknown.

When I moved back to Ansted, Fayette County, in 1979, I realized that it would be hard for me to find suitable employment near my home that would utilize my skills and years of experience as a cultural worker. My most recent job had been as director

of a traveling theater company. However, I had heard that the Department of Culture and History, as it was then known, was taking over the of Washington-Carver 4-H camp in Clifftop, just 15 minutes away. Their aim was to turn it into mountain cultural arts center.

I had never attended the camp as a camper, but I knew that it was the first 4-H camp for African Americans in the country. I had very vivid memories of going to the camp with Ansted residents to play baseball, swim, and have church picnics. Tom Banks, the caretaker at the camp for

many years, was from Ansted and he often visited his relatives and friends in our small town. I remember my Dad taking him back to the camp a few times.

Sometimes Dad would take me and my brothers and sisters along, and as soon as the car stopped at the camp we would jump out and run around on the grounds and bounce up and down on the saw horse, slide down the sliding board, and—most of all—ride on the merry-go-round. This was a favorite activity with almost all of the young people who spent time at Carver.

Other vivid memories are of the smell of chlorine at the bathhouse and the swimming pool, as well as the happy sounds of swimmers splashing and splashing in the water and diving off the diving board.

I cherish my memories of the times that I spent at Camp Washington-Carver and I feel, as do hundreds of this state's African Americans, that the camp is an important historical landmark. It represents a time when the leaders of our state made serious attempts toward addressing the needs and concerns of the African American citizens.

The seeds for an African American 4-H facility were planted in 1928 when West Virginia University hired two African Americans to do extension work for the state's black population. Those two workers were James E. Banks and Lulu B. Moore of Alderson, Monroe County. They were the first to be hired to report on 4-H activities for African Americans in the state, and they worked out of West Virginia State College in Institute, Kanawha County.

At that time, 4-H clubs, which had evolved out of "corn and hog raising projects," were extremely popular in rural America. Club participants were involved with many different programs that emphasized education and personal grooming. Standard projects were nutrition and meal planning, bread making, farming chickens and hogs, flower and

vegetable gardening, canning, quilting, lamp shade decoration, and first aid. [See *Goldenseal*, "Head, Heart, Hands, and Health: The West Virginia 4-H Movement," by Michael Meador; Summer 1984.] One of the main attractions to the 4-H experience, however, was its camping component. Although blacks had helped to start 4-H programs across the state, they did not have facilities to conduct their own camps. In a 1929 report, Banks and Moore stated that 4-H camps were held in 44 of the state's counties for whites but none for blacks. They made a plea for a "Negro 4-H Camp" similar to the white 4-H camp at Jackson's Mill.

Armed with these facts, Dr. John W. Davis, president of WVSC, sought permission from the State Board of Control and joint boards of education—white board of education and Negro board of education - to approach the legislature to appropriate funds to locate and purchase a tract of land for a black 4-H camp. According to Dr. Davis, "The outer walls of support for West

Virginia State College will remain weak so long as 4-H work in the state among Negroes is weak....This reference deals particularly with the allotment of federal funds and the interpretation and application of federal laws which have to do with those funds."

Dr. Davis believed, as did most black leaders at that time, that not only were blacks being denied their fair share of funding under the "separate but equal" racial system, but that federal laws were being openly violated to keep African Americans from their rightful share of federal and state funds according to population size.

In a December 1936 letter to members of the State Board of Control, Dr. Davis explained the need for a 4-H camp with a swimming pool. "At present time," he stated, "there is but one organized and directed swimming pool in the state of West Virginia into which Negroes may go freely without molestation or arrest. This swimming pool is located in the Negro High School building at Clarksburg." The fact that the state's



This merry-go-round was a popular attraction for kids at the camp, and a joyful memory of the author

African American citizens were forced to swim in snake-infested creeks and dangerous rivers while white Americans were given swimming lessons in pools patrolled by lifeguards, had long been a sore issue in the black community.

After almost a decade of struggle, African American leaders in West Virginia had something to be proud of when a bill was introduced to the regular session of the 43rd Legislature of West Virginia by Fleming Adolphus Jones, a black member of the House of Delegates from McDowell County. It read, "For the purpose of teaching Negro boys and girls the 4-H standards of living, and to inspire them to lift themselves toward these standards, and to discover and train Negro boys and girls for leadership, and for the purpose of teaching standards of excellence in agriculture, soil conservation, vocational agriculture, and home economics, a 4-H camp, institute, and state exhibit for Negroes is hereby established."

The bill passed: 70 yeas, 11 nays, and 13 absent or not voting. It was signed into law on March 9, 1937, by Governor Homer Adams Holt. Along with the passing of House Bill No. 48 authorizing the establishment of the camp, the legislature also approved the request by WVSC to conduct extension work. WVSC had for many years pointed out that by being a land grant college they were entitled to that status by the U.S. Department of Agricultural.

Using the \$25,000 that the state had appropriated for this project as seed money, Dr. Davis and his allies approached the federal government to secure New Deal funds for the camp. Their efforts paid off in early July 1939 when the federal government announced that a \$114,000 WPA grant had been approved to aid in the construction of the 4-H camp. Word spread that West Virginia State College had amassed roughly \$150,000 to purchase land for an African American 4-H camp, and Dr. Davis

began to receive letters and phone calls from land owners around the state offering to sell their land to the state for the camp. Dr. Davis personally contacted all of the landowners and made trips to several counties to look at tracts of land.

When Dr. Davis first visited the Clifftop property, he fell in love with the beautiful scenery and serenity of the land. He spent many hours walking from one end of it to the other. In a long letter to president Walter R. Thurmond of the Board of Control, Davis described the Clifftop tract and invited the president to accompany him to evaluate his number one choice for construction of the 4-H complex.

After months of negotiations, a deed to approximately 583 acres was transferred from Mr. and Mrs. Charles and Kathryn Middleburg to the state of West Virginia with the agreement that the land would be used to build a lodge for the Negro 4-H camp. Designers and engineers created blueprints for the envisioned



During the days of segregation, the need for a safe, clean and well-supervised swimming pool for West Virginia's African American citizens was a potent argument for building the camp. This pool at camp Washing-Carver got plenty of use. Photograph 1948.



C. T. Hairston was the first camp director. Photograph from the *Biennial Report of the Bureau of Negro Welfare and Statistics, 1954-50*. The report notes that during the 1949-50 camping season, 67 different groups made use of the facility.

facilities, and work began on the construction of the camp.

Building the camp involved several different work groups and immediately became a well-known project in the local labor market. The Civilian Conservation Corps built the road to the spot where the main complex was to be erected. After the CCC built the road and cleared roughly 65 acres of the land for the camp complex, WPA workers came in and dug the foundation and began to build the structures. Whites and blacks worked together on the project.

Small businesses—such as the team of expert stonecutters that was hired to quarry and lay rock for the chimneys and foundations of the buildings—and individuals—like the local man who was contracted to use his horses and mules to pull the large chestnut trees that lay scattered about on the land—reaped generous benefits from the WVSC endeavor. Staff and students at West Virginia State College participated in different phases of the construction.

One non-local group was prison laborers from Moundsville prison

who provided the finishing touches, especially on windows, doors, and hardware. Woodrow Haney, the guard assigned to the prisoners, said in an interview that while he was working as a guard at Moundsville, U.S. Senator M. M. Neely approached him about being in charge of a convict work crew at Clifftop. He said to Haney, “We are gonna send a bunch of men out to Clifftop in Fayette County to finish a 4-H camp out there, the largest one in the world. I think you’d make a good man out there.” Haney accepted the assignment and the next day boarded a bus with 27 inmates and drove to Clifftop.

In 1940, the first building was completed. It was the two-room guest cottage, constructed of native American chestnut. Also in 1940, the water tank and pond were finished. In 1942, the Great Chestnut Lodge, also called the Great Hall, was opened for use. Also in 1942, two frame dormitories were constructed and the swimming pool and bathhouse were finished. The grounds were spacious with a picnic pavilion, tennis courts, and ball playing fields.

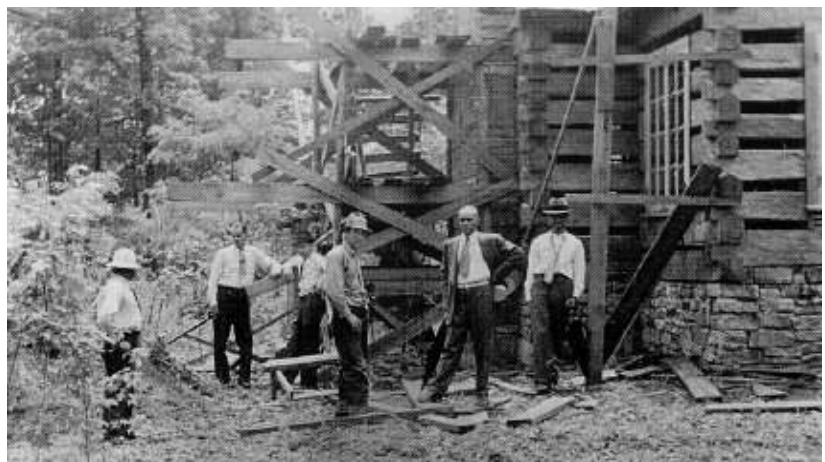
The dedication of the camp on July 26, 1942, was the most significant event to take place in the state’s black history during the 1940’s. Not

only was this a great achievement for the state but also for the nation since this was the first state Negro 4-H camp to be built in America. One important group to attend the dedication was the staff of the newly formed extension workers at WVSC. Dr. John W. Davis asked all extension workers to attend for it would be this group who would provide a bridge for communities throughout the state to the activities at the camp.

West Virginia State College began using the facility before the construction was finished. “They had a bunch (campers) come in up there—the colored, you know—they came in before we left there,” said former CCC worker Calvin McMillion. “They were just as nice as could be, some nice colored girls.”

At that time, C.T. Hairston was director and Mrs. A.P. Hairston was camp secretary. They lived in the apartment over the front entrance to the Great Hall. The first floor of this large log building housed the assembly hall, the dining hall, and the kitchen. The back half of the second floor was divided into two dormitory-style rooms. A smaller log cabin some distance away was designated as the health center.

The late Emma Robinson who took



In 1940, this cabin became the first building completed at the camp. Dr. John W. Davis is seen wearing a suit and tie. Photograph courtesy of West Virginia State College Archives.

groups to the camp from the New River Coal Company of Mount Hope said, "Well, when we would go up, we would go for a period—like one week and two weeks, think those were the limited periods. And then we had to have girl camp and boys camp, because we didn't have space to arrange so we could have them together." Later a dormitory for boys was constructed some distance from the Great Hall

In its peak years during the 1950's, the Negro 4-H Camp would accommodate roughly 1,600 campers annually from around the state.

The routine of the daily schedule is described by John Seay, a former counselor and teacher from Beckley who worked on the staff at the camp for nearly 20 years. "First we would have breakfast," he explains. "After breakfast, we would clean up the cabins. At one particular camp I was nature study teacher, science and nature study." The camp's staff also included a music and drama teacher, an arts and crafts teacher, and instructors in swimming and health and first aid.

"After science," John Seay continues, "we would have recreation. After recreation we would go back in and I would take another group in science and nature study. By this time we would have an evening play. I was one of the teachers in sports. After sports it was time to clean up for supper. After supper it was free time. After free time we would have what they called vespers service. Sometimes I was in charge of that. After vespers service we would have campfire. After campfire we had snacks and then we retired and went to bed."

Besides the 4-H camps, a range of other activities took place at the camp including Boys and Girls State, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, mining encampments, home economics encampments, church camps, private camps, and other community camps. The buildings also served as a space for large meetings and gatherings for

many groups and organizations from around the state. WVSC conducted staff and faculty training seminars and special classes on the site. They also held pre-season band and football conditioning sessions, military training for pilots, and ROTC maneuvers. Lectures and demonstrations by the telephone company, hospitals, mining companies, and other state and federal organizations would accompany those programs.

In essence, the 4-H facility served as a junior college for the state's African American population. And because of prevailing Jim Crow laws, the swimming pool, baseball field, Chestnut Lodge, and the camp

grounds were well-used for church picnics, reunions, and other civic activities. An older former camper was quoted as saying, "For black people, the magnificent main lodge was like the Statue of Liberty for it represented the entrance to a free land. You could eat in the dining room, swim in the swimming pool. Jim Crow laws stopped at the gates, ...and that made it almost a holy place."

From 1942 to 1963, the Negro 4-H Camp was the primary non-school African American center for agriculture, mining, arts, and home economics education in our state. With the passing of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme



Camps sponsored by the fuel industry brought countless youngsters to Camp Washington-Carver

Court decision which outlawed segregation, all of the state's 4-H programs were transferred to Jackson's Mill by 1964. In 1957, West Virginia State College lost its land grant status and, with it, its ability to conduct extension services. The hardest blow to WVSC's ability to administrate the facility came in 1972 when it was denied legislative appropriations for the camp.

Serious efforts by WVSC were made in 1973-74 to revive the camp by attracting programs that crossed color lines. Doris Peaks, who worked in the kitchen during those years, says, "We had some groups that would come in and stay one or two or three weeks. We had groups, like the Methodists, that would come in different age groups like the senior and then the junior Methodist. We had the Beckley Child Care Center. We had groups from Chicago and the ROTC from WVSC. There was also a group of Head Start teacher trainees from Marshall University."

The most colorful event was the 2nd Annual John Henry Memorial Festival, featuring a Blues and Gospel Jubilee starring Tai Mahal, Uncle Homer Walker, Della Taylor, Eugene Redmond, Bob Thompson, Miss Naomi Jordan and the Family Affair, Lou Myers, and others. There were Sunday school encampments, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other integrated groups, but the efforts failed because those organizations did not have significant capital to support the complex's operating budget. In 1979, the camp was transferred to the Department of Culture and History to become a new rural cultural arts center. By this time it was known officially as Camp Washington-Carver in honor of historic black leaders Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver.

In 1980, Camp Washington Carver was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The occasion was celebrated with a rededication ceremony by the Department of

Culture and History, with Governor Jav Rockefeller giving the keynote address [See *Goldenseal*, "Camp Washington-Carver Opens," October December 1980].

Shortly after that event, I made an appointment and met with Commissioner of the Department of Culture and History Norman Fagan, and Director of Arts and Humanities Jim Andrews to make them aware of my qualifications and desire to work at Camp Washington-Carver. Norman and Jim explained to me that they were in the rehabilitation phase of the camp's renewal, but urged me to keep in touch because they intended to carry out the mandate of the transfer agreement that they had made with West Virginia State College. The mandate stipulated that a strong African American component be a part of the camp's agenda. Norman also assured me that theatre would be a part of the programming. I left that meeting feeling very enthused and determined to try to obtain a position at the camp.

In the spring of 1984, I received a letter from Norman Fagan asking me to contact Bob Shreve at CWC if I was still interested in working there. Bob informed me that there was a seasonal position available in the programming department at the camp and that I could have the job if I wanted it. I accepted the job on the spot.

As program assistant, my duties included collaborating with Bob and Norman in setting up a model program for annual summer seasons. After a series of meetings, we designed events that related to Fayette County, the state of West Virginia, and African American heritage. The main events were Homestyle Dinner Theater, Doo-Wop Saturday Night, "Carver Goes Country," Appalachian Open Championships bluegrass music competition, Fayette County Old-Time Days, and Black Heritage Week Celebration. I served as the



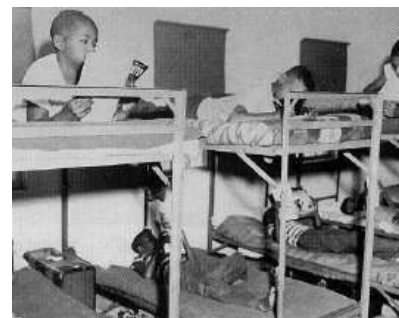
Nature Study



Arts and Crafts



Mealtime



Rest period

coordinator of the Black Heritage Week Celebration.

In 1986, I proposed that instead of just presenting a week of performing arts for the Black Heritage Week Celebration, we offer a youth arts camp. I felt that a camp would be instrumental in keeping alive the

roots of the 4-H concept that resulted in the creation of the historic site. For our first encampment, we prepared for 80 participants but were happily surprised when 120 teenagers showed up and registered for the arts workshops. The young people were divided into groups of 25 and each group was rotated to workshop sessions in literature, theatre, music, dance, and photography. The success of the first encampment instantly established this as an annual event.

When not performing the duties of a program assistant, I was researching the history of the camp. I investigated files, manuscripts, records, and books located in the Cultural Center, and accompanied Fred Armstrong, acting director of the State Archives (now director of the Archives and History Section of the Division of Culture and History), in conducting oral interviews with people connected to the camp's past. Fred and I also met regularly with Sharon Mullins, director of exhibitions for the State Museum (now the director of the State Museum). The three of us designed an exhibit that showcased the history of CWC.

After exhausting the resources at the Cultural Center, a deal was worked out that allowed me to investigate the archives at West Virginia State College. At the end of my research, I had accumulated enough documents to fill four small boxes with materials relating to the history of the camp. In addition, I had added to the collection of photographs and artifacts that already existed in the State Archives and conducted several additional interviews.

On June 9, 1989, the "History of Camp Washington-Carver" exhibit opened to the public in the Great Chestnut Lodge. I worked for two more years at the Department of Culture and History before taking another job, but I continued to serve part-time as director of the one week African American Arts and Heritage Camp until 1994.

The mention of the name "Camp Washington-Carver" or "Clifftop" still elicits strong memories within the state's African American communities, especially among our senior citizens. While many of those citizens are disappointed that there are no African Americans currently working there, they applaud the initial restorative efforts that have taken place at the facility since it was placed under the auspices of what is now the Division of Culture and History.

On Sunday, September 26, 1999, my wife Brucella and I, along with my mother-in-law Sarah Wiggins, attended the Native American P o w w o w a t C a m p Washington-Carver. I know that Lulu Moore, James Brooks, and John W. Davis would be glad to know that here on the grounds that they had helped to create, children and adults of all races are talking, laughing, learning, singing, dancing, eating, and having a good time.

Camp Washington-Carver has gone through several administrative as well as physical changes during its history and will no doubt continue to change in the future. But regardless of what it becomes, its roots will always represent a landmark for African American unity and achievement.

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NORMAN JORDAN operates the African American Heritage Family Tree Museum in Ansted, and serves on several museum and history boards throughout the state. He holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from West Virginia University and a master of arts degree from Ohio State University. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.

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