

The History of Cook Park

J.L Cook Memorial Park has served the community for several years. Providing members of McMinn County with a space for play, celebrations, and comfort. From events including reunions, birthday parties, Juneteenth celebrations, Cook Park has remained THE area for many to come and create community. However, before it was Cook Park, on this land used to be an institution where the Black children of McMinn County would come and receive a valuable education. J.L. Cook High School was a historic institution and today I will be discussing its history and legacy.

THE SCHOOLS

The first school ever recorded from this land was established in 1965 and was funded by Freedman's Bureau. The school was taught by Mrs. Mary S. Truesdale. Jacob Lincoln Cook was a preacher in the city of Athens, Tennessee where he established the First Presbyterian Church which is an all Black institution. Within his church, Cook started a small school called the Academy of Athens (Also known as the Athens Mission for the Colored People). The United Presbyterian Church's Freedman Board financially supported the institution by providing \$2000 to \$2500 a year. Cook had the assistance of several community members whose names were Ms. Henerietta Mason, Miss Mary Byars, Miss Fannie Jackson, Mister James Cleage, and Professor Pitts. The school was able to provide a wide range of Black students across the deep south. The school ensured attendance through affordability by charging no more than it takes to support a living. The purpose of the school's curriculum was to prepare students for college and adult life

through comprehensive and practical classes. Later the school was moved to a much larger space and gained a new Principal and larger teaching staff. However, in 1925 the school was burned down in a fire. Fortunately, that did not hinder the students from furthering their education since they continued classes out of Presbyterian Church where a new Principal, Reverend C.H. Wilson. It was not until 1926 that a new school was built. With money from the Rosenwald Fund, McMinn County, and the city of Athens to establish Athens Training School . Later the school was named J.L Cook School after its founder. With the name change came new leaders whose names were W.E. Nash and E. Harper Johnson.

The school served grades 1st through 12th with the elementary being in a separate section than high school. The school offered many resources for the students. It contained a library housing 1104 books. The school had nine grades, an estimated 300+ students, ten classrooms, an auditorium, and a training shop. The school had also provided some students with dorms, and they would stay for the week and go home on the weekend. The school provided courses for students which included chemistry, economics, sociology and more. Cook also had a vast array of organizations such as the youth club, glee club, drama club, citizenship club, music club, and Modern Miss club. With leadership and dedication from the principals, teachers, and staff, Cook was able to leave a lasting mark on the students through a wide range of support. That would soon change with integration.