

African American Education in Delaware: A History through Photographs, 1856-1930

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**Rabbit's Ferry New Colored School in foreground and Old School in background
located in Sussex County.**

Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library



Rabbit's Ferry Old Colored School, Sussex County

Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library

The reports submitted to the Service Citizens by the education consultants inspired Pierre S. duPont to establish the Delaware Auxiliary Association. The chief responsibility of the Auxiliary Association was to fulfill the recommendations of the two completed reports and to study the educational situation in Delaware as an arm of the Service Citizens. It was also relegated the responsibility to disseminate the information from the reports to public organizations like the Negro Civic League; it had thirty-two branches and a membership of 150. To assist in teachers' education, duPont convinced Richard W. Cooper from the Columbia Teachers College to join the Auxiliary Association as a consultant. Additionally, the Auxiliary Association was to fund the Delaware College (University of Delaware) Summer School for teachers and the Summer School for Colored Teachers at the State College.¹⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the top priority for the Auxiliary Association was to supervise the new construction of schools for both Euro-Americans and African Americans beginning with the latter. In addition, the primary problem still remained; it was the lack of funds. Unlike duPont, the various reports did not move local residents to increase financial support for their schools as reported by the Auxiliary Association in 1920. It reported that:

The problem in Delaware is obviously financial...It is un-American and unmoral that children who live in a community where the parents have financial resources outside of land values should have a superior education [than] the children who live in the purely rural districts. The tendency everywhere [except Delaware] is toward greater State appropriation in order to save the local districts from a burdensome tax levy.¹⁶⁰

With no additional funds forthcoming from local entities or from the state, duPont devised an alternative approach to funding the new construction of schools. He established a trust fund for the Auxiliary Association. It began with \$2 million, which soon rose to \$2.5 million. The additional \$500,000 went to Wilmington for African American schools in the city. Out of this fund, duPont set aside \$900,000 for new African American schools replacing almost the entire African American school plan. The rest went toward the construction of Euro-American schools.¹⁶¹

The Auxiliary Association went into immediate action by contracting with James O. Betelle from the architectural firm of Guilbert and Betelle in Newark, New Jersey, to design the new school buildings based on the recommendations of the existing survey teams. Betelle had developed a national reputation as an expert in school design. In 1920 he authored articles on

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 3; "Ideals and Achievements in Delaware," Report Made to the Annual Meeting of the Service Citizens of Delaware (May 6, 1921), 17; Purnell Collection-Service Citizens, RG 9200, Delaware State Archives, Dover, Delaware.

¹⁶⁰ "The Educational Situation in Delaware," 6.

¹⁶¹ Carswell, "First in Community Work"; John Munroe, *History of Delaware* (Newark, Delaware: The University of Delaware Press, 1984), 200; An Agreement between P.S. duPont and Wilmington to Donate \$500,000 to the construction of African American schools, 1919, P.S. duPont Papers.

school building designs, which appeared in *American Architect* and *The American School Board Journal*. The articles appearing in the *American Architect* covered his school designs for Delaware. At the time he contracted with the Auxiliary Association, Betelle was an architectural consultant for the New Jersey and California State School Boards. He was also a professor of school architecture at Columbia University.¹⁶² The Auxiliary Association made Betelle's services "at the disposal of any county or special district board, although no board is excluded from selecting and engaging its own architect."¹⁶³



School officials celebrating the completion of New Castle Colored School in New Castle County. Left to right: James O. Betelle, architect; Reverend J.H. Earp or G.G. Hanson (identity unclear); F. de H. Janvier; H.E. Snavelly; Judge R.S. Rodney; A.J. Taylor, president of Delaware School Foundation; J.T. Eliason, Jr.; and H.W. Holloway, Secretary of School Building Commission and Superintendent of Public Instruction in Delaware.

Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library

In addition to drawing plans for the buildings, Betelle reviewed topographical surveys of building sites for approval. These were the result of the Dillard, Jackson, and Bachman study titled "Negro School Site Report."¹⁶⁴ The intent of the report was "to secure a site as near as possible to the center of the colored school population." They recommended that the new schools should be built near the present buildings. In special cases, new sites should be selected, "owing to the movement in Negro population" or to the unhealthy environmental conditions at

¹⁶² James O. Betelle, "New School Buildings, State of Delaware, Part I," *American Architect* 117 (June 16, 1920), 751-788; Betelle, "New School Buildings, State of Delaware, Part II," *American Architect* 117 (June 23, 1920), 785-788; Betelle, "Architectural Styles as Applied to School Buildings," *The American School Board Journal* 58 (April 1919), 25-28, 75-76; "The Educational Situation in Delaware," 4.

¹⁶³ "The Educational Situation in Delaware," 4.

¹⁶⁴ "Negro School Site Report," P.S. duPont Papers.

existing school sites. To assist each school district, the State Board of Education compiled a volume of plans titled "Standards and Plans for School Buildings in Delaware."¹⁶⁵ According to the Auxiliary Association:

The work was undertaken by educational authorities of national standing and the plans and specifications for school buildings were based upon the best results of school architecture achieved in different parts of the United States."¹⁶⁶

The Auxiliary Association wanted to start immediately on construction so as to "know from experience the best type of building, the cost of construction and the relative merits of material used."¹⁶⁷ They based the construction on a book of plans, titled *Standards and Plans of School Buildings and Grounds for the Public Schools of Delaware* produced by Betelle, Englehardt, and Strayer. This was for the school districts to follow or to use as guides. They based their plans on contemporary ideas concerning healthy and sanitary environments both inside and outside, recreational opportunities, and ideal learning conditions inside the building. For example, they followed many of the recommendations made by B.F. Willis, an architect who designed school buildings. P.S. duPont attended a 1916 conference on the preservation of rural life held in Philadelphia. At the conference, Willis presented a paper titled "The Ideal Rural School Building." In the paper, Willis outlined an ideal architectural design for rural schools. The final designs for the Delaware rural schools included similar recommendations as outlined in the paper presented by Willis.

Strayer submitted draft copies of the book of plans to Odell and duPont for their review in late 1919. In the draft, there were recommendations on site location, drainage, size, form, and use. Similar to Willis' "Ideal Rural School Building," the plan called for a central location within the center of population and near a roadway. The setting should be "a pleasing, natural landscape." It should also contain a garden, playing fields, and a playground in addition to a building that fit into the natural setting. Willis suggested that students grow potatoes in the garden to use as fuel for the internal combustion engines that supplied the electricity for the building. Similar recommendations appeared in the Betelle, Englehardt, and Strayer draft.¹⁶⁸

This was followed by building recommendations on the orientation of the buildings and the placement of windows, which Strayer deemed as very important. The draft called for a north-south orientation of buildings to allow natural light from the west, east, southeast, or southwest through elongated windows. "Classrooms," Betelle, Englehardt, and Strayer concluded, "should

¹⁶⁵ "The Educational Situation in Delaware," 5; Memorandum Regarding Colored School Buildings from James H. Dillard, Jackson Davis, and Frank P. Bachman to P.S. duPont.

¹⁶⁶ "The Educational Situation in Delaware," 4

¹⁶⁷ "The Educational Situation in Delaware," 5.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Willis, "The Ideal Rural School Building."; Following completion of the Milford Colored School, a report showed that the custodian instructed students on how to garden. It reported that students had been very successful in their gardening efforts.

not have full North or South light exposure.” Willis spoke of this in his 1916 speech. He argued that these windows should open as to afford:

...the children a breath of “uncooked air”, which is about the only blessing that God has given us, that may still be enjoyed without paying man for it as it flows down from His vaulted dome—with the opening of the windows. The pupils will then take two or three turns around the class room to the music of the Victrola,—giving their gray matter an agreeable rest, returning to their books with freshened interest. The teacher will then recall the works of Jean Paul Richter: “on the day of Judgment, God will perhaps forgive you for starving your children when bread was so dear, but if he should charge you with stinting them in His free air, what answer will you make?”¹⁶⁹

The fenestration or design of windows in the building was a ribbon of six contiguous and center-hinged windows allowing them to be opened by pushing them outward.



Ebenezer Colored School, New Castle County

Notice the elongated windows, which allowed natural light to shine over the left shoulders of the students.

*Board of Education Collection
Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives*

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.