

Application for Texas State Marker For

Victoria Taylor Walker

State Marker for Victoria Taylor Walker's School

I. CONTEXT

America in the early Twentieth Century was not a country that encouraged diversity among her citizens particularly after the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* which made segregation between blacks and whites not only acceptable but legal. It was in this atmosphere that an African American girl was born in Chambers County, Texas, who defied the odds of her circumstances and went on to become one of the most celebrated teachers in the Cedar Bayou and Goose Creek school systems. Victoria Taylor Walker did not seek attention for herself, but rather wanted to give young black children the opportunity to be successful regardless of their situations in life.

II. OVERVIEW

Born in 1905 to Adlene Winfree Drawborn and William Taylor in the farming community of Cedar Bayou, Tx, Victoria Taylor Walker began her education in the Mount Olive Baptist church at the age of four.¹ According to Chuck Chandler, Vice President of Baytown Historical Preservation Association, this was the only African American school in Chambers County which was located near Highway 146 and Cedar Bayou.² In a later interview with Ms. Walker, she recalled her teacher Ms. Leah Cooper, who roomed with Walker's grandparents, Maurice and Rose Winfree, taught half of the year in Baytown and the other half in Chambers County and seemed to recognize the potential of this young girl who said she wanted to be a teacher.³ The school only supported elementary students up to eighth grade. No high school existed for African Americans in the area at that time except in Houston which was seen as an unsuitable

place to send their granddaughter.⁴ This made getting an education even more difficult for black children. Seemingly her best choice appeared to be the Prairie View Normal and Industrial College in Waller County which meant she had to find financial support in order to attend.⁵ With the help of her grandparents, her church, and working in the school laundry herself, at the age of fourteen, funding became available for Ms. Walker, who received her teaching certificate in two years, and found employment at Bayshore Elementary in the Anahuac school district in Chambers County.⁶ At that time, a college degree was not required to become a teacher.⁷ Reflecting on her career later, Ms. Walker said, “I guess that’s why I’ve always done everything I could to help this community. I was a poor girl and they did everything they could to help me go to school.”⁸

Realizing the need to continue her education, Ms. Walker returned to Prairie View for more classes which allowed her to become the teacher at the Cedar Bayou school in 1933.⁹ Cedar Bayou ISD was established in 1917 as an independent school district with its own board of trustees to make decisions regarding the schools therein.¹⁰ At that time, black children were only given six months of schooling while their white counterparts received nine months, and although the schools were indeed “separate” they were not “equal.” In the Cedar Bayou Colored School, there were no restrooms, no running water, and students had to cross Highway 146 to get to an artesian well for water. Heat came from a wood burning stove which the teacher used to build a fire in each morning with wood contributed from the community.¹¹ One of the first request Ms. Walker made of the school board was to lengthen the school year to nine months and to provide a water well for the school on their side of Highway 146 for the safety of her students.¹² With parental support on her side, both requests were granted. These

were not the only problems facing the existence of the school. In an interview with Ms. Walker, she remembered that floorboards were rotten to the point that “one day a student fell through hurting his leg [which] prompted a great deal of dissatisfaction throughout the community.”¹³ One trustee is quoted as saying that “the only reason the community had wanted her back there to teach was because they knew she would be up at the trustee’s office every day begging in the face...and if she was dissatisfied with the way things were, she could use her own money to get what the community wanted.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, Ms. Walker had been doing exactly that already.

Teachers’ salaries have always been notoriously low but add to that the Great Depression years in the 1930’s, the inequality of black and white workers in general, and being in an agricultural community where education was not necessarily valued, the income for teachers was abysmal. In the Minutes of the Cedar Bayou ISD School Board, August 4, 1938, the yearly salaries of all employees were made public. Male teacher, Mr. LeFevre was listed as making \$990.00; white female teachers \$900.00; African American teacher, Ms. Taylor, \$560.00.¹⁵ (Ms. Taylor became Mrs. Walker later when she married her husband Sam.) By this time, Ms. Walker had graduated from Texas A&M and received her Bachelor of Science degree in 1937. She was a college educated teacher. The following year, the School Board raised wages to \$100.00 a month for white female teachers, \$70.00 for Ms. Walker which was revisited in September and raised to \$75.00 a month.¹⁶ Oddly enough in a printout of teacher salaries in the Cedar Bayou ISD area from 1932 to 1938, Ms. Walker’s name does not appear on any roll; however, in the March board minutes she is listed as a teacher for the upcoming 1939-40 school year as Victoria Taylor, Colored.¹⁷ Later she continued to pursue her education going to

Atlanta University in the summer earning her Master of Arts in 1945, and Texas Southern University (TSU) where she acquired her Master of Education degree in 1952.¹⁸

Although while not receiving equal pay, Ms. Walker used what she did make to broaden the experiences of her students. In an interview with Susan Estes, Ms. Walker stated, "I had a desire to keep up- to be able to offer my colored students as much opportunity as they were getting in the high school across the river."¹⁹ In her attempt to do so, she organized a basketball team, a band, a choir, and a tonette chorus without funding from the school district.²⁰ In this one room schoolhouse, the students were taught math, science, health, reading, writing, English, and history by Ms. Walker, while in the evenings, she opened her doors to the adults in the community who wanted to further their education as well.²¹ Always seeking ways to better instruct her students, Ms. Walker took some students into Houston on Saturdays at her own expense in order to receive instruction from the TSU music department.²² Regarding the above, Ms. Mary Louise Landry-Norman mentioned that Mrs. Walker influenced her life in many ways.

We were disciplined without malice, taught with high expectations, and rewarded with purchases from her meager earnings. In addition, education did not end in the classroom, as every Saturday found Ms. Walker carting some of her students to Houston for violin, piano, and voice lessons, also paid for by her as she knew our parents could ill afford such extravagance.²³

Concern for her students' futures and aware of their limited experiences, Ms. Walker encouraged them to see the world beyond their community by offering them a ten dollar scholarship to attend a boarding school in Kendleton, Texas, which had been established by the

Rosenwald Foundation in the 1920's.²⁴ How many students actually attended the boarding school is unknown, but her regard for their well-being was clear. One of her former students, Jo Ann Seary White spoke of her teacher this way,

Mrs. Walker was a woman of integrity who loved to teach in the classroom and beyond. She taught us to step out of the box, to believe in ourselves, and to set goals far beyond the stars. She taught us that education was the vehicle to success and she encouraged us to be life-long learners, never afraid of trying new and different things....²⁵

Ms. White went on to thank Mrs. Walker for being her teacher, her Girl Scout leader, her music teacher, mentor and friend. Another student added, "Ms. Walker took her students on trips to see the capital and various historical sites to enhance their learning....She taught us nutrition so she cooked our lunches at the school because she wanted her students to experience different aspects of life in general."²⁶

In 1951, a new school was built which had three rooms, including a kitchen, which allowed cooking and sewing to be added to the curriculum.²⁷ It was at this time that the community requested that the new school be named the Victoria Walker Elementary, and it was done.²⁸ Ms. Walker said, "I enjoyed that school so much. When we would have programs, I'd decorate that building from top to bottom with the work the kids had done. Those walls were loaded down."²⁹

In 1954, Cedar Bayou School District consolidated with the Goose Creek School District, and the African American students continued to attend the Victoria Walker Elementary.³⁰ With the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954, the Goose Creek

CISD made the decision to close the school over the objections of the African American community and the parents.³¹ Mrs. Walker, along with her students were moved to George Washington Carver School in Baytown which continued to be a segregated facility until Goose Creek desegregated in 1966.³² Mrs. Walker was then transferred to Stephen F. Austin Elementary, becoming the first black teacher on the campus, and as all teachers and students did, learned ways to accept desegregation.³³ On the first day of class, Ms. Walker stated that she was “shaking so hard [she] couldn’t even fill out [her] class cards.”³⁴ No one knew quite what to expect. However, she did realize that the advantages of desegregation outweighed the disadvantages. The libraries were better equipped, and the students were being exposed to opportunities they might never have experienced if confined to a segregated school.³⁵

In 1971, Mrs. Walker retired from teaching, and on January 18, 2002, she passed away in Baytown at the age of 97.³⁶ As a continuing legacy to Victoria Taylor Walker, in 2007, at a school board meeting of the Goose Creek CISD, a prominent community leader Mr. Ray Wilson spoke in favor of naming the newest elementary after Mrs. Victoria Walker. In a statement to the board on February 20, Mr. Wilson stated,

During the period of legal segregation in this country, black teachers such as Victoria Taylor Walker educated several generations of black students who became productive adults. Her students will testify to her greatness and dedication. Naming the new school in her honor will be an inspiration to not only the young people that attend that school, but to everyone....³⁷

On February 7, 2008, dedication ceremonies were held for the new Victoria Walker Elementary School.³⁸ In a statement to the *Baytown Sun* reporter, Barrett Goldsmith, regarding the upcoming dedication, Board president Bob Hoskins expressed his feelings saying that Mrs. Walker was an “amazing woman” who actually taught his wife at Stephen F. Austin Elementary. He continued, “What she accomplished was outstanding. She was a huge contributor to the community.”³⁹

III. SIGNIFICANCE

In a world where inequalities ran rampant and the Ku Klux Klan members were well known and respected in the Baytown and Cedar Bayou areas, Victoria Taylor Walker chose to stay and pursue her profession of educating black children as best she could in her own quiet, but firm, way. She spent her life working with and for children whether African American or Anglo in the Baytown and Cedar Bayou communities to educate, nurture, and expand their horizons to become the best they could be in any chosen profession in life. She inspired generations of people to believe in themselves while sacrificing her own time and money to help others. Her achievements were acknowledged in being chosen as one of the 50 Black Outstanding Citizens for Baytown’s Fiftieth Anniversary along with many other awards and commendations.⁴⁰ Mr. Wilson added “At a time when blacks were denied basic rights, she worked tirelessly to instill pride in her students and [in] the black community as a whole. She often went to the Board for improvements and educational resources for her school.”⁴¹ Mrs. Walker, in explaining her love for teaching, once said, “No one can love teaching more than I do. They may love it as much, but not more.”⁴²

In her own words, “...What teachers look out for now is not color, but the welfare of the children in that classroom. [And] that’s how it should be.”⁴³

As members of the Chambers County Historical Commission, we would like to place a State Marker in the location of the first Victoria Walker Elementary located just north of the Cedar Bayou tributary itself to honor her dedication to the African American students who attended her school in the Twentieth Century. (see map)

IV. DOCUMENTATIONS

“Board Names New School Victoria Walker Elementary.” *INSTEP: A Publication of Goose Creek CISD*, 19 March 2007, p. 1.

“Board Vote Closes Walker Elementary.” *Baytown Sun*, 30 June 1964. P.1.

Carver, Sherri. “Victoria Walker: Retired Teacher Recalls Career.” *Baytown Sun*, 19 February 1984, p. 31.

Cedar Bayou ISD, Minutes of School Board Meetings: 4 August 1938; 20 March 1939; 30 March 1939; 21 September 1939; 18 April 1940; 19 March 1942; 7 May 1951; 28 May 1951; 16 August 1951; 10 September 1951; 9 October 1951; 28 January 1952; 16 April 1952.

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Local and Special Laws of Texas. "Cedar Bayou Independent School District." No. 48. University of Houston Law Library. 17 May 1917. Sterling Municipal Library Vertical Files.

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"Walker Obituary." *Baytown Sun* Online. January 2002. Accessed 17 February 2020.

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1. Susan Estes, *Victoria Taylor Walker, Black Educator* (Baytown, TX: Lee College, 1992), 157.

Margaret Henson. *The History of Baytown* (Baytown, TX: Bay Area Heritage Society, 1986), 140. (Also)

2. Chuck Chandler, "African American Schools Before Carver," *Baytown Sun*, 12 February 2020, Section B, 1.

3. Sherri Carver, "Victoria Walker: Retired Teacher Recalls Career," *Baytown Sun*, 19 February 1984, 31.

Estes, Susan, *Walker-Educator*, 158. (Also)

4. *Sun*, 12 February 1984.

5. Ibid.

Estes, 159. (Also)

6. Ibid.

7. *Sun*, 12 February 1984.

8. Ibid.

9. "Local and Special Laws of Texas," University of Houston Law Library, 17 May 1917, Sterling Municipal Library, Vertical Files, 333-4.

10. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.

11. Estes, 161.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 161-2.
14. Cedar Bayou ISD Board Records, 4 August 1938.
15. Ibid., 30 March 1939 & 21 September 1939.
16. Ibid., 20 March 1939.
17. Estes Interview 162.
18. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Estes, 162.
22. Warren Singleton, "Welcome to Victoria Walker Park," *Baytown Sun*, 4 June 2017, Section 1B, 1.
23. Estes, 162.
24. Singleton, Sec. B, 1.
25. Ibid.
26. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.

27. Terri Cook, "Goose Creek to Host Dedication Ceremony for Victoria Walker Elementary School," Memo in GCCISD Administration Building, Goose Creek CISD release to *Baytown Sun*, 30 January 2008.

28. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.

29. Ibid.

30. "Board Vote Closes Walker Elementary," *Baytown Sun* 30 June 1964, Sterling Municipal Library Vertical Files. A1.

31. Cook, 2.
Estes, 163. (Also)

32. Cook, 2.

33. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.

34. Ibid.

35. Singleton, *Sun* 4 June 2017.

36. *INSTEP*: A Publication of Goose Creek CISD, "Board Names New School Victoria Walker Elementary," 19 March 2007 Vol. 8, Issue 6, 1.

37. Singleton, 4 June 2017.

38. Barrett Goldsmith, "A Legacy in Baytown Education *Sun*, 6 February 2008, Sterling Municipal Library Vertical Files, 3.

30. "Board Vote Closes Walker Elementary," *Baytown Sun* 30 June 1964,
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31. Cook, 2.
Estes, 163. (Also)

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33. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.

34. Ibid.

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39. Obituary, Victoria T. Walker, *Baytown Sun Online*, 22 January 2002,
Accessed 17 February 2020.

40. *INSTEP*, 1.

41. *Sun*, 19 February 1984.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

Also Included:

Photos of George Washington Carver High School; Carver Elementary School; and Walker Elementary School. Sterling Municipal Library Vertical Files, Baytown, Texas.

Map of Victoria Walker Park in Chamber County. Sterling Municipal Library Vertical Files, Baytown Texas, 9 January 2007.

Property Legal Description of Victoria Walker Park in Chambers County. Sterling Municipal Library Files, Baytown, Texas.