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*Anacostia Community Museum Archives*

## **Birney School Life Newsletter, November 1950**

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[[image - drawing of the front of Birney School]]

## The History of Birney School

In our city are many schools, some mellow with age, some standing proudly in their recent release from hammer and chisel. If these buildings could speak, what a history they could relate. From their lips, the growth of communities, interesting events of every decade could be told. None of these could rival in interest the history of the James G. Birney School.

The education of Negro children in Hillisdale, as Anacostia was then called, had a very humble beginning many years before the erection of the first Birney School. The first classes were taught by a white woman, Mrs. Frances Hall, in a one-story frame house on Mount Zion Hill, on what is now Elvans Road, S.E. Later, a two story frame building called the Hillisdale School, was erected on the east side of Nichols Avenue just above Sheridan Road.

It was in 1889 that a rapidly increasing population necessitated the building of a new four-room structure on Nichols Avenue between Talber St. and Howard Rd. this was the original Birney School. It was called the Birney School annex and was combined with the Hillisdale School until 1901. Foremost among the citizens petitioning for the school were Mr. John H. Dale, Sr., Mr. W. E. Wills, Mr. Basil Frazier, Mr. James F. Smoot, Mr. Christopher Phillips, Miss Emma V. Smith, and Miss Fannie Johnson.

The people of Hillisdale were proud to have their new school named for James Gillespie Birney because he had labored so diligently in the movement to free the American Negro slaves. In 1834 he liberated his own slaves who had come into his possession at his marriage. His life was threatened many times because he persisted in his fight for the emancipation of the slaves. In 1836, his printing shop in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he published his anti-slavery paper, The Philanthropist, was demolished by an angry mob. His press was broken up and thrown into the Ohio River. He was the most distinguished of those Americans who fought to abolish slavery by political means.

In 1901, the old Birney Annex was moved to the back of the schoolyard, and an eight-room brick building, called the Birney School, was constructed on the site. An increasing enrollment again necessitated expansion, so in 1914 an addition, containing six rooms and an assembly hall, was constructed. The old Birney Annex was razed in the same year. As time went on, even this plant proved inadequate. One portable was used from 1923-1925, two from 1926-27, and one from 1927-29. When the portables were abandoned, half-classes were organized in the main building.

From about 1925 to 1931, four teachers at the Cook Home worked under the supervision of the principal of Birney School, Mr. J. E. Syphax. Miss Suzanne Cook provided a home for about seventy boys, all wards of the Board of Public Welfare, just as other foster mothers take these "board children" into their private homes. The boys had been placed there by the Juvenile Court for minor offenses, mostly truancy. When Miss Cook, because of ill health, gave up the children, they were placed in private homes in various parts of the city. The teachers were then transferred to other schools in the District.



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In 1917, the second rooming house center in District.

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In 1917, the second community center in Divi-  
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