

## **A PORTRAIT OF THE FREE HILL COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL**

*Cumberland Tales*

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Nestled within the Appalachian foothills approximately five miles northeast of Celina lies the rural African American community of Free Hill. While the origins of Free Hill are obscured by the passage of time, most oral and written accounts agree that the community was founded when Virginia Hill, the daughter of a wealthy North Carolina landowner, freed her slaves in the early 1800s and provided them with several hundred acres of land in Overton (now Clay) County. As one of the oldest communities founded by freed slaves in the United States, Free Hill has been profiled in prominent publications such as the National Geographic magazine.

The population of Free Hill grew steadily from its founding in the early 1800s to about 400 residents by the late 1920s. At its peak, the community enjoyed restaurants and grocery stores in addition to the local church and school. As the economic conditions deteriorated with the onset of the Great Depression and World War II, many residents of Free Hill migrated to urban cities such as Chicago and Detroit for employment. Today, the Free Hill community has approximately 100 full-time residents.

As they have for generations, the local Church of Christ and Community Center (formerly the Free Hill Rosenwald School) continue to serve respectively as the religious and social centers for the residents of Free Hill. Since its founding in 1816, the Free Hill Church of Christ has had considerable influence upon the ethical standards of the residents of the community. Through the efforts of the Free Hill Community Club, the former Free Hill Rosenwald School building has enjoyed a successful second life as the Community Center. The Community Center provides the residents with opportunities for fellowship through the homecoming that is held each year during the second week of July, through the annual Fish Fry and through the yearly Christmas Bazaar.

Education in Free Hill was haphazard at best from Reconstruction until the 1920s. Due to the harsh economic and social conditions of the time, education was a low priority for the residents of Free Hill by necessity. Everyone, including children, had to work in order to ensure personal and community survival.

By the late 1920s, education became increasingly important to parents in African American communities throughout Tennessee. With support growing for education in Free Hill, the Tennessee Department of Education secured funding from the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1930 to erect a permanent school building for the students in the community.

By the time funding had been requested for a new school in Free Hill, the Julius Rosenwald Fund had already made a major impact upon African American education in the South. Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears & Roebuck from 1908 to 1924, wanted to improve African American education in the segregated South through the construction of attractive and functional school buildings. After some initial successes in school building construction with the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama from 1912 to 1916, the Julius Rosenwald Fund (JRF) was established in 1917 so that the innovative school building program could be expanded to African American communities throughout the South. By the time the JRF ended in 1932, it had provided partial funding for the construction of approximately 5,000 schools in 15 southern states, including 354 schools in Tennessee.

In February 1930, the JRF issued \$500 in funding for a new school building in Free Hill. Along with \$500 from the JRF, the Clay County Board of Education contributed \$200. Mary David, a resident of Free Hill, donated the land on which the school building was completed in the fall of 1930 and remains standing today. Due to its historic significance, the school building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. In addition, funding was received for renovations in March 2009 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The T-shaped, three-room school building served students in grades one through eight. It had two classrooms and an industrial room also doubled as a kitchen. Along with the three Rs, students were provided with art/music instruction and vocational training in industrial education, agriculture and home economics.

Most of the teachers at Free Hill came from the Nashville area and had attended Fish University and Tennessee A & I State College (now Tennessee State University). The teachers in Free Hill were highly educated, with many of them having earned advance degrees.

Except for the boom years of the late 1920s when the school population approached 100 students and the early 1960s when the student enrollment dwindled to only 15 to 20 students, the school's average enrollment was approximately 40 to 60 students. Those students who were able to attend high school had to travel 86 arduous miles every day by bus to and from Darwin High School in Cookeville.

The integration movement coupled with decreased enrollment, brought about the closure of the Free Hill School in 1965.

While many Free Hill residents regretted to see the school close for personal and family reasons, the closing of the school was seen by the community as positive step forward for the students in terms of academic, social and athletic opportunities.

The pace of life in Free Hill remains much the same today as it has for generations. Each day, the residents of this close-knit community go about their lives in a peaceful and distinguished manner. It is evident almost immediately upon a visit to Free Hill that the residents were taught such enduring virtues as compassion, hard work, and caring by their parents, teachers, church leaders, and community members.

Additional information about Free Hill can be found online at <http://www.freehillcommunity.org>.

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<http://www.ajlambert.com>