

## History of Dunbar and Central (Revision)

The Mobile County School Board approved the construction of a new Junior and Senior High School for “Colored” students. The school was erected in 1923 at a cost of \$40,000.00. It was a two-story brick building with nine classrooms, a library, kitchen, sewing room and a room for Domestic Science and a rest room for female staff members. This newly constructed school was named for Paul Laurence Dunbar (a poet and writer), a native of Dayton, Ohio.



Professor  
William Amyer Caldwell

**Professor W. A. Caldwell** was assigned as the first principal of this new school, which was located at 1365 Davis Avenue. Prof. W. A. Caldwell became the first black man in Mobile to be named principle of a high school. The school comprised approx. three city blocks. Dunbar campus was beautiful. It was surrounded by beautiful shade trees and flora that gave the surroundings natural beauty. Professor Caldwell’s staff consisted of ten hardworking and dedicated teachers. They were Mrs. H.R. Dixon, Mrs. E. G. Stanton, Mrs. C. F. Wooden, Mrs. M.P. Braziel, Mrs. L. B. Leepers, Mrs. C, F. Shepherd, Mrs. A.M. McKensie, Mrs. O.B. Brown and Miss B.

E. Tobin. Dunbar was not a large school, but it took top honors in all subject areas, because of its excellent and dedicated teachers. In 1933, Professor Caldwell retired and **Mr. C. E. Powell** became the principal. Graduation requirements included courses in English, Social Studies, Mathematics, Science, Health, Physical Education, Foreign Languages and Electives. Dunbar’s Foreign Language Department was unique. It was the only school that included Latin, French and Spanish. Extra-Curriculum activities included athletics (basketball, softball, football), voice, dramatics, band, baton corps and other cultural programs. The school weekly newsletter titled “*Dunbar Weekly News*” was done by Dunbar students. Dunbar remained a high school until the close of the ‘46-‘47 academic year. It reopened in September 1947 academic year, as a junior.



Mr. C. E. Powell  
2nd Principal of Dunbar



During that same time in September of 1947, the Mobile Board of School commissioners conceived the idea of the establishment of a new four-year high school for Black students in the city. **Dr. Benjamin F. Baker**, then Director of “Colored” high schools in Mobile and principal of the Mobile County Training School in Plateau, Alabama was chosen as the principal of this forth coming inner city school named Central High School. Central as the inner city high school for Negroes opened at 500 St. Anthony Street in September of 1947 with Dr. B. F. Baker, as principle.

The Medical College, located at 500 St. Anthony Street, having been deeded to the Mobile Board of School Commissioners in 1944, was chosen as the site for Central High School. This building had many uses. It was formerly the Medical College of the University of Alabama, and when no longer utilized for this purpose, was called “the Old Medical College.” It served as the Dunbar Annex, the Young Men’s Christian Association (for “Colored”), the Mobile Branch of the Alabama State Teachers College in Montgomery and a division of the United Services Organization.



Dr. B. F. Baker and Mr. C. E. Powell from the Dunbar High School, cooperatively formed, a faculty and staff for the new high school. Thus, Central High School was born in 1947 as the inner city high school for Negroes.

Within the first semester of its operation as Central High School; the school was accredited by the Alabama State Education Assoc. and the Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

In the late forties, a parcel of land bound by St. Anthony, Warren, State and Cedars Streets was purchased by the Mobile Board of School Commissioners for the expansion of Central High School. In 1951, the auditorium-gymnasium with a capacity of 1,600 was built at a cost of \$152,000.



Central received many awards and much praise for being a well-run and well equipped school. In 1953, Dr. Baker retired because of ill health. **Mr. Jonathan T. Gaines**, principal of the Mobile County Training School in Plateau was then appointed the new principal of Central High School.

Enrollment was steadily climbing, expansion was again necessary; therefore, the Board of School Commissioners authorized the exchange of sites of Central at 500 St. Anthony Street and Dunbar Middle School at 1365 Davis Avenue (the old Dunbar site) making latter the location of the new Central High School. In the same year, 1953, it was necessary that the new site be enlarged. A twelve-room addition was made to Central High School. The dedicated faculty and staff, varied curricula, national academic organizations, clubs, choirs, well coached athletic teams (the Wildcats) and the Marching One-hundred Band contributed to the success and fine reputation of Central High School.



In the fall of 1954, the Dunbar Jr. High school at 1365 Davis Avenue was destroyed by fire. It was closed for repairs for the remainder of the school year. The 9<sup>th</sup> graders were sent to Booker T. Washington School on Andrews Street; while the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders went to an unoccupied school on North Conception Street (near the downtown post office in Mobile). In the fall of 1955, classes resumed at the newly renovated Central High School. Consequently, the repairs to the building were not complete from the fire so students had to attend school on double session. Seniors and juniors went in the morning and sophomores attended the evening classes which ended at 4:00pm. The Central High School consisted of 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. The 1956 class was the first graduating class from this location while the 1958 class was the first class to complete all 3 years of high school classes at this location. In the 1959-1960 academic school years, a building program was established to provide additional space for a gymnasium-auditorium, library, cafeteria, and concourse.



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The Supreme Court Decision of 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave rise to the desegregation of schools and the elimination of freedom of choice in the Mobile Public School System. A federal judge ordered complete desegregation of schools in Mobile County. As a result, in 1970, Central High School ceased to exist as a high school. The graduating class of 1970 was the last class to receive high school diplomas from the prestigious Central High School of Mobile, Alabama. The building remained open for one year as a junior high school and finally closed in 1971.

In 1991, the Mobile County School Board gave Bishop State Community College the building. Under the ardent leadership of Bishop State's president at that time, Dr. Yvonne Kennedy, renovations began. The school was named the Baker-Gaines Central Campus, named after the late Dr. Benjamin F. Baker and the late Mr. J. T. Gaines, both former principals of the high school.



In the building, there is a Central High School Memorabilia Room which displays artifacts from Dunbar-Central High - 1948-1970. (2)

Source:

1. This article was taken from "Grand Opening Central Campus of Bishop State Community College" booklet. November 13-19, 1995