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Protest for Douglass School

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Protest for Douglass School

In 1865, two months before the surrender of Robert E. Lee, the United States Congress passed an act that created The Freedmen's Bureau. The Freedmen's Bureau was set to establish programs designed to help the newly freed slaves. The programs aided in land, homes, and education programs opportunities.¹ In the late 1860's Rincon Street Public Colored School was established, and it was located on Rincon Street (today known as St. Mary's Street) in San Antonio Texas.² Between 1870 to 1915, the school underwent many changes, including multiple name changes and stages of expansion. Eventually, the school and its additional buildings were sold in 1913. Protest began to emerge at the idea of selling the school. The school board rejected multiple offers under the cost of building new. The Black community was completely against the sale of the school. They had no concern of money for the school. The Black community protested the sale of Douglass School because it was located centrally in downtown San Antonio and the proposed location for the new school was located on the eastside of San Antonio which made it difficult for many students to attend the only high school for Blacks in San Antonio.

In the late 1860s, George Brackenridge and James Newcomb, members of the San Antonio school board, began the construction of Rincon school. Its original materials came from an old "Confederate Tanner" which was a two-story building made from stones.³ The school expanded into three separate buildings on the property. To the surprise of many Whites, the Black community took full advantage of receiving a free education. This caused the Rincon

¹ "African American Records: Freedmen's Bureau," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration) <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau>.

² Kenneth Mason, *African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937* (Garland Pub, 1998), 129.

³ Kenneth Mason, *African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937* (Garland Pub, 1998), 132.

school to quickly run out of space for more students.⁴ The school's location was quite ideal considering it was the only high school for Blacks in San Antonio. This is very important to remember and understand. Douglass School was the only school to offer a high school education being located in downtown San Antonio made it optimal for all Blacks located throughout San Antonio to receive a high school education. This forced the school to add additional buildings to allow more classes.

The city of San Antonio changed the name of the school to Riverside Negro School in 1884.⁵ Different sources point to different dates as to when the school's name changed from Rincon to Riverside, as well as when Rincon school became an official school of the San Antonio District. The San Antonio Independent School District's pamphlet on its own history page gives dates between 1884 and 1890, and historian Kenneth Mason states it was 1891. The school quickly filled up with students forcing George Brackenridge, a school board leader, authorized the sale of a building believed to belong to the school district in 1891. The authorized selling of the building was to provide funding for Riverside school to expand by adding an additional annex building. The building sold for \$10,000 and helped cover the cost of the new annex. The school operated as Riverside until 1904.⁶

The school changed its name in 1904 to Frederick Douglass Colored High School.⁷

⁴ Kenneth Mason, *African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937* (Garland Pub, 1998), 131.

⁵ "A History of Douglas Academy," <https://schools.saisd.net> (San Antonio ISD, 2008), https://schools.saisd.net/upload/page/9922/docs/A_History_of_Douglass_Academy.pdf, 5.

⁶ "A History of Douglas Academy," <https://schools.saisd.net> (San Antonio ISD, 2008), https://schools.saisd.net/upload/page/9922/docs/A_History_of_Douglass_Academy.pdf, 5.

⁷ "A History of Douglas Academy," <https://schools.saisd.net> (San Antonio ISD, 2008), https://schools.saisd.net/upload/page/9922/docs/A_History_of_Douglass_Academy.pdf, 5.

Frederick Douglass was an abolitionist and social reformer who started life as a slave. What makes this school so unique is that it was the only Black high school. Being centrally located it only made sense that the only high school for all blacks in San Antonio be in downtown. Students walked many miles each day to attend school. The Black community thrived in the opportunity to go to school. Riverside used the money from the sale of the building approved by George Brackenridge to construct an additional building. In 1907, an offer was rejected by the school board in selling the school for \$15,000.⁸ This is very interesting because while the school is expanding on its current property, there is an offer to buy the school.

In Kenneth Mason's book, he states that there were many complaints from White homeowners whose homes resided along the path to the school. Mason writes, "White residents whose homes were along the route of the many scattered branches of the Rincon Colored School had long resented the parade of passing black school children,"⁹ The children passing these homes were being accused of using foul language, fighting with White kids, and being disrespectful to White adults. Mason writes, "The residents simply did not want Blacks walking in front of their homes or in their neighborhoods. Their concerns and complaints went straight to the school board."¹⁰ (Should be noted that during this time, school board members were all white males) These people simply did not want Blacks around their homes. Mason has dated these complaints to 1883. If the school board had been receiving complaints from White community members about Black members something eventually would have to be done to resolve this

⁸ "MAY NOT SELL NEGRO SCHOOL," *The San Antonio Light*, January 2, 1907, 3.

⁹ Kenneth Mason, *African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937* (Garland Pub, 1998), 132.

¹⁰ Kenneth Mason, *African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937* (Garland Pub, 1998), 132.

issue? The new location for the school was on the eastside of San Antonio. An area in which today is noted as being primary Black.

At some point the school was appraised for \$25,000. Which was said to be the cost of constructing a new school on the eastside location. Many of the articles encountered which refused the sale of the school came from the school board. It was the school board who was against the sale because they need more money. The selling of the school failed numerous times between 1907 to 1913. In most of the articles it eluded that the Black community was also against the selling of the school due to monetary value, however in an article which dates to 1907, proves that the Black community was against the sale of the school, but because they didn't want the school moving to the eastside.

The 1907 article shows that there were in fact protest from "colored citizens" against selling Douglass School.¹¹ On this same page there read another article "PRICE OFFERED NOT NEAR ITS WORTH, AND BOARD WILL NOT CONSIDER IT", W.M. Southworth, a member of the school board addressed the concern citizens.¹² He says there is no need for concern or protest, that the cost of materials alone to build a new school were estimated to exceed the \$15,000 offered. The school board wouldn't even consider such a low offer. This article provides evidence that the school board was addressing the concerned Black citizens about selling the school because of money. However, in the same article Southworth says he had looked into the cost and that \$15,000 could cover a majority of the new building, but not all of it and a sale would be highly unlikely. This became a common occurrence in my research, at least three articles address that the school board has turned down another offer of \$15,000.

¹¹ "MAY NOT SELL NEGRO SCHOOL," *The San Antonio Light*, January 2, 1907, 3.

¹² "PRICE OFFERED NOT NEAR ITS WORTH, AND BOARD WILL NOT CONSIDER IT," *The San Antonio Light*, 4.

After turning down another offer the school board implemented a new method of bookkeeping. The schools were required to keep all records and receipts of any and all repairs and maintenance done on the schools.¹³ This was done in an attempted to illustrate that the cost of upkeep and maintain these old schools cost more than building a new school. The latest offer on the school was made by F.C. Hunnam & Co., reality brokers. Again, the offer was for \$15,000 in which case school board members, Mr. Tynan and Mr. Harris asked that the cost to replace the school cost \$25,000 and for it to be placed on file. As this offer was turned down the school received \$5,000 grant in order to build an additional annex building, completing their buildings which made up Douglass School.¹⁴ As construction began on the new annex in 1908, other offers for \$15,000 continued for the school. The school board kept their position known that the school would not sell for less than \$25,000. In both of the articles mentioned again it can be shown that the newspaper is addressing that money is the issue of selling the school. Each article I found regarding the selling of the school all had to do with the school board addressing the cost and telling the Black community not to protest. However, upon extensive research a break though came through. It came in the form of an article dated 1907.

A 1907 article formal protest to the board proves why the Black community was against the sale of the school. The school was located downtown San Antonio off the river. This is considered to be the heart of downtown San Antonio and the proposed site for the new school was east by one mile. Mason mentions that concerns from Black citizens came from worry of their children having to walk more than one and one quarter mile just to get to school.¹⁵ By

¹³ "SCHOOL BOARD IMPLEMENTS NEW RECORD KEEPING," *The San Antonio Light*, 4.

¹⁴ "MAY NOT SELL NEGRO SCHOOL," *The San Antonio Light*, September 3, 1908, 2.

¹⁵ Kenneth Mason, *African Americans and Race Relations in San Antonio, Texas, 1867-1937* (Garland Pub, 1998), 132.

moving the school further east forced some students to walk over two miles one way. In this formal protest though the newspaper J.S. Cameron published an open letter in which he addressed the school board as to why they were protesting. Cameron states,

To: the honorable Board of Education of the Public Schools of San Antonio: Gentlemen:
 We, the colored people of San Antonio, feeling that you would invite an expression of our desires on the question of the sale of the Douglas High School, be to record our united and very serious protest against the sale and removal of our high school, and in doing so we set forth our reasons there for. Our people live in three distinct sections of the city, the south side, the east side and west side of town and the present site of our high school is the most centrally located and by far the most convenient place for such a school. The traditions and legends connected with the gift of this school to move the colored people by a charitable movement and their long years of quiet, courteous and profitable occupancy through very notable in the life of the people, are not urged as our most pertinent reasons for protesting, because it has long since passed under the control of the school board with whom for the good of the school and in whose actions we cheerfully acquiesce in all school questions. I, J.S. Cameron, live at 1003 Comal street, north in the Third ward, my children are attendants at the Douglas High school and to move the school to some remote section of the city will make it well high impossible for my children and my neighbor's children to get the benefits of the high school for the support of which I pay taxes and I voted for the recent bond issue.¹⁶ [sic]

¹⁶ "NEGROS BALK ON SALE," *The San Antonio Light*, June 21, 1907, 8.

Cameron address the school board respectfully and his concern is that moving the school forced many of the students to walk even further to go to high school. Cameron states where the Blacks who attend are located, westside, eastside and southside. Douglass's current location is ideal for all Blacks who wish to obtain a high school education. He also tells the board that they "cheerfully" acquiesce in all school questions. Meaning they accept things from the school board without protesting or resisting. It's the school board's responsibility to make the best possible situation for their students to attend, but why move the school when the community is telling you if you move it, some kids can't attend. Cameron without asking a question, questions the board. He does by saying it has always been best interest of the school. Well, the best interest is to keep the school where it is located or at least something centrally located. Cameron's words are chosen carefully and meticulously. Here is a peaceful protest in which Cameron implies much without needing to say a lot.

The proposed location on the eastside of San Antonio was located off Nebraska Street. (today known as Martin Luther King BLVD) To the parents and students attending Douglas school their main concern was moving the school. If this is the only high school for Blacks, and it needs to be moved why not keep it centrally located? This is the argument and protest of the Black community. The difference in location is over a mile, which may not seem like much today. Modern modes of transportation make this type of adjustment easy. However, most of the students attending Douglass were already walking over one mile one way. Cameron is a tax-paying citizen who also votes in school board matters. He feels his concern and his credibility as a concerned citizen is valid. Cameron also provides his location to explain how far his children have to walk. As most concern parents Cameron is concerned for the safety of his children. The

children are the future of the Black community and it is essential for them to try and obtain a higher education.

It is important to note that Cameron never brought up the money that was being offered. His concern was always that of the location of the school. This article also shows that the Black community did in fact pay taxes which were to be invested into the schools. Usually when one thinks of this time period, we forget that taxes have and will always be a part of life. Taxes paid where to help keep the schools maintained and operating safely for its students. By this time in 1907 there were already four existing Black schools, however it was only Douglass which offered high school courses. It was important to all Blacks throughout San Antonio to keep the school centrally located.

The proposal for the school's new location didn't make sense to the Black community. Are we seeing early signs of racial redlining? Cameron says that the Black students are located throughout San Antonio and moving the school does not benefit the students. By moving the only high school to the eastside of San Antonio forced many Blacks who wish for their children to attend high school were left with three options; move closer, make the walk or do not attend high school. As mentioned earlier from Kenneth Mason, Whites have been complaining about the Black students walking through their neighborhoods. Today eastside San Antonio is primarily associated with the Black community. Could moving the only high school for Blacks in San Antonio been a factor in why Blacks are predominantly on the eastside? I argue yes, the evidence is there. Taking the most logical school for Blacks and moving it to the eastside was done with reason and purpose. However, even with valid concerns from the Black community the school sold in 1913.

In 1913, the Scottish Rite Masons of San Antonio purchased the Douglass school property and buildings for the sum of \$25,000. Ironically, this is the same amount which was said to be the value of the school in 1907, yet still sells for the same value six years later. A reappraisal was never called for by the school board and is why the school never increased in value. On August 11, 1913 the Scottish Rite Masons made a deposit for \$1000 and paid the remaining balance of \$24,000 on April 1, 1914.¹⁷ The funds for the school were to pay for the new school being constructed on the eastside of town. Douglass school remained open until the new facility was completed. The new school was completed late December 1914 and was located on Nebraska Street and South Hackberry Street on the eastside of San Antonio.¹⁸ The actual cost to build the new school was \$32,000. The cost came to \$12,000 over the original estimate to build the new school. If an appraisal was redone before the sale of the school, it is highly suggested that the value of the school would have gone up. This could have aide in the additional cost of the school.

On January 4th, 1915 Fredrick Douglass High School opened its doors to its faculty and students. The school kept its name and was a two-story building made of ten rooms. The new Douglass school was and exact copy of the Highland Park school and was equipped with advance lighting, heating, and ventilation throughout the school. It was a great improvement from the old school. This is considered the reason for the additional cost for the school. The new improved facility provided manual training and domestic science classes. The goal was to teach skills or craft in which the students could use to find work once done with school. It was important for all members to contribute to society. Students who did not further pursue their

¹⁷ "RECEIPTS FOR DOUGLASS SCHOOL FUND.," *The San Antonio Light*, June 27, 1914, 6.

¹⁸ "Negro High School Ready," *The San Antonio Light*, December 28, 1914, 5.

education were equipped with a skill to provide for themselves and their families. After the school was completed the original Douglass school was given to the Scottish Rite Masons.

Unfortunately, due to current events with COVID-19 pandemic, my research has been halted. The Scottish Rite Masons are still located in San Antonio and have a library with their archives, however due to the quarantine city issued the library must remain closed until otherwise determined. The question as to why the Scottish Masons purchased property will remain a mystery until access to archives can be made available. The Masons are located approximately two blocks from where the old school stood. The Mason to my knowledge did not build or use the property which makes the purchasing of the property making it even more interesting. Why by the property if they didn't intend to use it? Or is there simply a reasonable explanation.

It is important to understand the historical significants of Douglass School. This school was the only high school for Blacks in San Antonio which reside in the most opportune location for all Black students. However, the school board sold the school and the school was forced to move to the eastside. Black students throughout San Antonio were forced to make the adjustments in order to go to high school. The school board had received complaints from 1883 until the school was finally sold in 1914. There are a lot of discrepancies which appeared while researching Douglass school. The only Black high school was adding to the school yet offers were being made to purchase it. The property is finally sold; however, the purchasers built their headquarters two blocks away. The Black community of San Antonio wanted and deserved a better facility for there students. However, the school board saw its only option to do so was to move the school. The school board never mentioned other locations for a new school besides the one on the eastside. There was never mention of possible moving the high school to a similar

central location. What is known is that the school was moved to the eastside and a large majority of the Black community followed the school.

Free public education is a privilege in which modern society often overlooks. The newly freed slaves jumped at the opportunity to better their situations. Douglass school quickly ran out of space forcing more schools throughout San Antonio to open. However, Douglass school was the only school to offer high school. Moving the high school from its prime location did not make sense to the Black community. They were forced to adjust to the movement of the school in 1914 and offers early insight of how city officials of San Antonio began the push to shift Black San Antonians to the eastside. Douglass school remains open under the name Douglass Academy. The school is no longer a high school, yet the original structure from 1914 remains with a few renovations.

As early as 1907, offers to purchase Douglass school for \$15,000. This was all happening while the school was in the process of adding two additional annex buildings. Multiple newspaper articles suggested that protest against the sale of the school was because the value of the school wasn't being offered. However, a formal protest from J.S Cameron proves differently. The school board was against the sale because of money; however, the Black community protested the sale of the school because it moved the school to a new location on the eastside which made attendance for some students difficult. The Black community fought and protest the sale of their school the legal and right way. Their valid reason for not moving the school was ignored and the school was still sold. It is important to know the history and legacy which falls on Douglass School. The Black community came together and showed that protest can be done correctly and without chaos. Protest for Douglass School was to not move its central location and continue to allow equal access to high school education for all Blacks in San Antonio.

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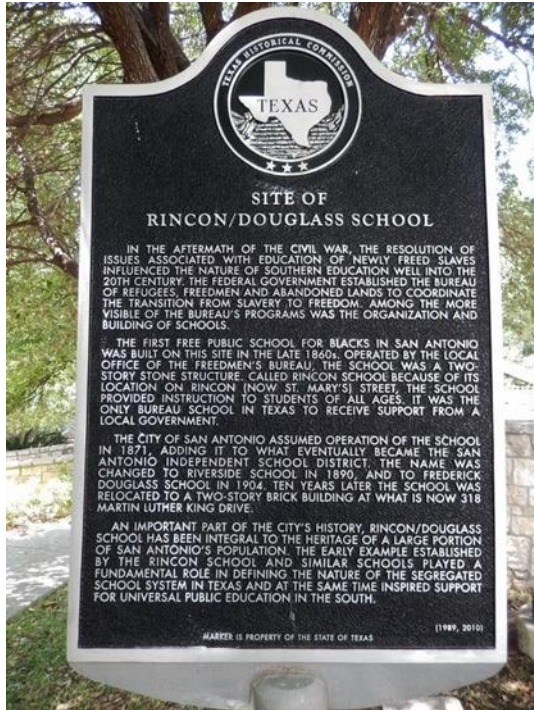
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