

Laying the Foundation
for Research on African American Education
in Loudoun County, Virginia:
An Interview with Larry Roeder

Before the Civil War, most of the South had only a basic public school system. After the War, the southern states established a dual educational system based on race. So what were the characteristics of a dual educational system? Researcher Larry Roeder and a host of volunteers have sought answers to that question through the collection, organization, and analysis of thousands of documents—all related to the education of African Americans in Loudoun County, Virginia, c. 1865 to 1941. Following is an interview by Lucy Townsend, editor of the *Country School Journal* and Larry Roeder, the principal investigator of this project. Roeder's comments about the process of gathering papers may be useful to anyone interested in taking on a similar project.

What is the Edwin Washington Project, and how did it come into being?

Prosperity Baptist Church in Loudoun County, Virginia, asked me to document the history of its village as well as its Colored school. That request led to my interacting with the Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) which shared many records with me. After the Prosperity Baptist Church study was completed, I was asked to conduct a similar study of all the Colored schools in Loudoun County during the segregation era. At that time, I was the CEO of a non-profit organization focused on diversity. The group agreed to take on the project.

The purpose of the Edwin Washington Project is to erect a “virtual monument” celebrating the determination of Loudoun’s African American community to gain a proper education for all

their children. This would include preserving the physical records that had survived and bringing their contents to public attention to the extent possible under Virginia State law (The State protects some records due to issues of privacy). I was dedicated to providing an honest and well documented history of Black education in Loudoun during the segregation era.

What resources have you used to find, organize, and analyze the objects you discovered?

The majority of the objects are official files of the Loudoun Public Schools LCPS from (c. 1870 to c. 1968); county records before the public-school system was established; files from 1832 to 1865 on schooling of the indigent; and reconstruction era files of the Quakers on the education of African Americans. These are cataloged according to a system I developed with the faculty and staff of the School of Library Science at the Catholic University of America. Analysis is being done by a group of volunteers according to a set of rules we developed. In addition, we visited libraries and archives in various universities, e.g., Howard University, in Washington, D.C., which has relevant NAACP records; Atlanta University, which has records of teachers paid from philanthropic funds; and objects from government archives. We have also received various objects from other sources such as collections of photographs and old school banners.

What are the main features of the project?

With the assistance of LCPS, I had already done a study of the Conklin Colored and McGraw's Ridge White schools for the Prosperity Baptist Church in Loudoun, using interviews, records held by the church and by LCPS. The LCPS liked my study and suggested it could be a template to examine the entire scope of African American schooling from 1865 to 1968, when integration arrived, as well as covered both reconstruction and the public school period, which began in 1870.

The main features of our project are a descriptive website and Facebook page describing the Project; extensive use of volunteers (including unpaid experts who provided special knowledge); and volunteers from the Loudoun County Public Schools and from the library system. The public schools have a policy of destroying old school documents; but when the LCPS records were found in an abandoned schoolhouse in Leesburg by the Records Office staff, they refused to burn them due to their perceived historical importance.

What kind of support did local and state officials give your project?

Once our team was asked to become involved, we requested support from Delegate John Bell of the 87th District. He arranged for a joint unanimous resolution of the House of Delegates and Senate of Virginia. Delegate Bell has remained a political patron of the project, as has Mayor Kelly Burke of Leesburg and Delegate David Reid of the 32nd District. These politicians have provided our project with much needed publicity.

How did your experiences, skills, and interests contribute to your taking on this project?

I have a Master's in Library Science from the Catholic University of America, and a B.S. with Honors in History from Culver-Stockton College, a distinction only given to students who complete a two-year Master's level research study. At the time the project began, I was on the staff of the School of Library Science at the Catholic University of America and was also the Chair for Research in the Black History Committee of the Friends of the Balch Library. I had also managed a number of projects on cultural diversity. All of these experiences helped me to understand the requirements of preserving records and being aware of their cultural importance.

Taking on a large project usually requires substantial funding. How has the project been funded so far, and how are you planning to raise funds in the future?

When the Superintendent of the Loudoun Public Schools asked me to take on the project, he explained that local government funds were not available, so I would have to invest my own money. Therefore, I have used our group's status as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization to solicit support from local citizens and philanthropists. I also arranged for expensive in-kind contributions such as the Library of Congress's multispectral imagery to reveal hidden texts, valued at 40,000 dollars. The largest donation has been in the form of volunteer hours. For example, a professional cartographer developed our mapping application designed for cellphones and computers. An expert on digital preservation and web design worked at the Smithsonian and other similar institutions is managing our efforts to digitize files, which were physically fragile. She also manages our website and other social media platforms. A certified public accountant handles our financial record keeping. Many other volunteers make transcriptions, and

various history clubs provide other kinds of volunteer help. A professional commercial photographer is digitizing all of our photographs for free, saving us thousands of dollars.

Membership in the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition (LCPCC) has enabled us to talk to like-minded people in history clubs in the county, and they also agreed to provide funds. This is an informal committee of 40 nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations dedicated to the preservation and protection of the historic and environmental resources of Loudoun County.

Members of our project have begun to talk to neighboring counties about developing a regional approach to studying segregated education, part of which would entail developing a physical network for sharing information. We plan on asking for foundation support to pay for some of that activity.

Other groups and individuals have needed the support of local affiliates. What is your experience?

Loudoun Cares has been very helpful. This is an association of nonprofits in Loudoun, supported by the County Board of Supervisors. In 2019, they named the Edwin Washington Project the best volunteer group in the county.

Our association with the Country School Association of America has allowed us to have interactions with national experts on rural schools.

LCPS has been very helpful, proving us a safe environment to study the records and much publicity within the system. The LCPS hosted a conference on our project in 2018, which attracted citizens and political leaders from around the county. An even larger conference is projected for fall 2019 at LCPS high school in the community of Broad Run.

The Black History Committee of the Friends of the Balch Library in Leesburg regularly consults with us on goals, as well as methods of interacting with the African American community.

We also have a positive relationship with the Douglass Alumni Association, which is the official alumni group for Douglass High School, the first official high school building for African

Americans in Loudoun, built in 1941. The DAA is supporting a request by our organization to the Superintendent to move the files to the Douglass building under our supervision.

The Loudoun County Genealogy site on Facebook has become a useful platform for sharing news of our findings on both Black and White schools. They have shared much useful information for us in return. In one instance a volunteer from the group who transcribed a ledger of coffins discovered that they were built for both Black and White citizens from the segregated era.

What obstacles have you faced and how have you overcome them?

Having sufficient volunteers and funding have always been obstacles; but the support of local media, the internet and like-minded organizations has enabled us to offset the problem.

Destruction of the records is a constant risk. We have purchased archival quality containers and scan everything. We are also negotiating with LCPS to move the files to a former library room in the old Douglass High School structure in Leesburg. This will require us to raise about 25,000 dollars for specialized preservation cases. Volunteers have agreed to manage the room after I train them in archival management, and we fully expect to raise enough funds.

What groups of people are most likely to use the knowledge unearthed by this project?

The African American community of Loudoun and their relatives outside the county want to know what happened to their ancestors. Thus, they are very likely to use the knowledge unearthed by this project.

White citizens are also interested and will benefit because both Whites and Blacks attended segregated schools, though our focus is on the education of African Americans.

Any scholar interested in segregated education and civil rights is likely to use the knowledge we unearth.

Local history clubs are very interested, as are groups wanting to preserve their old schoolhouses, the latter because we often find records that explain what the interior of buildings looked like in the past.

What have you learned about country schools because of this project?

Prior to the project, my only experience with country schools was in foreign lands, mostly in Africa and the Middle East. This project has given me a new appreciation for the hard work and sacrifice African American educators, parents, and children had to endure in the days of segregation. I have also learned a great deal about the evolution of types of schoolhouses.

What advice would you give someone interested in taking on a project like this one?

Anyone taking on a project like this needs to understand the amount of work involved and have a practical plan to raise funds, solicit expert advice, engage the media and local politicians, and recruit volunteers.