Sanger-Brown left mark on black history

EDITOR'S NOTE:
This is one of an occasional series of stories The Daily Iberian is running throughout the month of February in recognition of Black History Month.

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BALDWIN - The building now known as United Methodist Committee on Relief Sager-Brown first opened its doors in 1867.

"Then, probably no one could have imagined African-American orphans after the Civil War would play such an important role in Black History - of the war would play such an important role in Black History -

The women recruited the the Freedman's Aid Society, a branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and took in 75 African-American children. After deeming New Orleans an inappropriate place for an orphanage, the women bought the Byrne Plantation next to the sugar plantation of John Baldwin, originally of Berea, Ohio.

With children in tow, the women relocated. Baldwin soon hired someone to lead the entire crew by calling on Dr. William D. Godman, also of Ohio.

The Godman family members were just as much outcasts as the children they came to help - white, northern, Methodist missionaries came to help black children in the land of angry southerners and French Catholics. Godman soon returned to Ohio, leaving his wife and daughter behind.

"They were missionaries and trained to do the work of the Lord. If someone was hurting, they tried to help any way they could," Redding said. "I think that is why they came here, and I commend them for doing that and serving where they could."

Though the Sanger-Brown history does not reveal the first name of Goodman's wife, her compassion may have been the building block for the African-American school.

History tells that a laundry woman approached Mrs. Godman and asked her to "teach me just one verse of the Bible." Though it was against the law to teach an African-American how to read, Mrs. Godman agreed.

Before long Mrs. Godman was teaching friends and family of the laundry woman, and the basis of the school was born. Godman came back to Baldwin and stayed for the next 20 years, building an orphanage, a school and a church along the way.

Godman enlisted the financial aid of William Gilbert who donated $40,000. The elementary school took his name, the Gilbert Academy and Industrial School, until that title was transferred back to New Orleans in order to start a preparatory school there. The Baldwin school was then used for students through the eighth grade and became known as the Godman Industrial School.

When the depression hit the South in the early 1930s, the Godman students came to the school's financial aid. The Godman family formed a choir of students and toured the north-east as the "Jubilee Singers." Addie Sadler and C.W. Brown, both from New York, watched the "Jubilee Singers" and were convinced to buy the school.

The school then was titled the Sager-Brown Home and Godman School.

Perhaps the ideal example of what the Sager-Brown Home and Godman School inspired in African-American children can be found in alumna Evelyn Lewis, 73, who attended the school from 1957 to 1964.

"The school was very important back during those days," said Lewis. "Most of the teachers were white, but from the North. Plus we got religion, which we didn't get in the public schools. People brought their kids to school there. Students came from all over." After graduating from Sager-Brown, Lewis attended and graduated from college and went on to teach for 30 years in Franklin.

"For me, I had no prejudice in my heart, because the teachers didn't have any in their hearts. Discrimination meant nothing to me," Lewis said. "That's how I learned to share and give to those less fortunate than me."

Sager-Brown is no longer used as a school. Integration broke down the need for a segregated school in 1978. But the building, in a way did return to its roots.

In 1992 the United Methodist Church used the abandoned building as a shelter after the destruction of Hurricane Andrew. Sager-Brown continues to give shelter for those without a home.

"I think Sager-Brown is significant in that it was an outstanding school, first for young African-American boys, and then later for both boys and girls at a time when it was difficult to get quality education," Redding said. "Sager-Brown was a caring center essentially for children who had no where else to go. We think of it as kind of a miracle place."


Evelyn Lewis, a former student of the Sager-Brown school, looks over pictures of herself and fellow classmates from years ago. Lewis has passed on the tradition of education she learned at the school — she was a teacher in Franklin for 30 years.