

Nomination for CISD School Name

**Mittie J. Campbell**

**“Reaching the Unreached”**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the CISD School Naming Committee,

We respectfully but proudly nominate one of Conroe’s earliest Black education pioneers, **Mittie J. Campbell**, for the long-overdue recognition of having one of Conroe’s fine new schools named in her honor – *again*.

Her exemplary life was one consistent pattern of leading and teaching the youth and adults of Conroe and East Texas. Her grit and determination helped them survive and flourish in their difficult circumstances and the challenges facing African Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including racism, a World War, and the Great Depression. Please allow us to review a few important highlights of her life that should have significant bearing on your consideration.

At twenty-two years old and about six months pregnant, Mittie married Jessie J. Turner, a preacher. Early in 1898 and just two months after giving birth to her first child, she was teaching fellow teachers in a convocation of the Texas Colored Teacher’s Institute; her topic was “Texas History – The Present Rule.”<sup>1</sup> Once again in 1912, just three weeks after the death of her husband, the thirty-seven-year-old widow and mother of two girls stood before her colleagues in the same state-wide teachers’ association, this time teaching from the topic, “Morals in School. How Best Taught.”<sup>2</sup> Less than a year later she was again asked to educate her peers, this time in the Montgomery County Colored Teachers’ Institute; her topic continued to show the breadth of

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<sup>1</sup> Article, “Colored Teachers Institute,” *The Conroe Courier*, 18 March 1898, Vol.4, No.22, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Article, “MONTGOMERY COUNTY COLORED TEACHERS INSTITUTE TO MEET,” *Conroe Courier*, 6 December 1912, Vol.21, No.1, p.1.

her knowledge and capabilities by teaching them, “Methods in Teaching Intermediate Grades – Decimals.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1916, a year after her second marriage to Ebby Campbell, the manager of a wood yard, Mittie J. Campbell became the First Assistant in Conroe’s Black public school. The workload for Mittie and the other teachers must have been enormous: there were more Black students (459) than White (442), but there were 15 faculty overseeing the White students while there were only 5 faculty, including Mittie, for the Black students.<sup>4</sup> The ever-increasing number of Black students had overwhelmed the “old negro school building,” necessitating moving the classroom furniture to the Conroe Industrial Institute for African American students. Mittie had her hands full there, functioning as the school’s only teacher of Grades 6, 7, and 8, all in Room 4. In that year there were 52 6<sup>th</sup> graders, 39 7<sup>th</sup> graders, and 52 8<sup>th</sup> graders – 143 students in the 12–14-year-old age group, but Mittie Campbell stalwartly filled the unenviable role, and her skills and excellent performance were being noted.<sup>5</sup>

The rented space at the Industrial Institute was always understood to be temporary at best, and Conroe’s Black population began making plans to raise funds for land and a new public school for their children. The Whites of the city were divided in their feelings about sharing the town with Blacks; public lynchings of Blacks had not stopped in the previous century: one had already occurred right in courthouse square in 1908. In contrast, the town newspaper shared a much more positive attitude in 1917 about their Black neighbors:

Our Negroes deserve better than they have, and better is coming for them. A large well conducted, up-to date Negro school is one of the most needed institutions of our little city at present.<sup>6</sup>

Then something quite significant impacted Mittie Campbell’s career: the United States entered World War I in April 1917. Just two months later, Professor Ewart G. Abner, the principal of the Black school, joined the Army.<sup>7</sup> The school board chose Mittie J. Campbell as his

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<sup>3</sup> Article, “MONTGOMERY COUNTY COLORED TEACHERS INSTITUTE TO MEET,” *Conroe Courier*, 6 December 1912, Vol.21, No.1, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Article, “Conroe Public Schools, 1916-1917,” *Conroe Courier*, 10 August 1916, Vol.24, No.35, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Article, “Conroe Public Schools, 1916-1917,” *Conroe Courier*, 10 August 1916, Vol.24, No.35, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Article, “Conroe Public Schools, 1916-1917,” *Conroe Courier*, 1 February 1917, Vol.25, No.8, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Article, no title, *Conroe Courier*, 14 June 1917, Vol.25, No.27, p.1.

replacement for the principal's chair. Ten months later, in April 1918, the newspaper gave high praise to the Black school's new principal:

The school is coming to the close of a most successful term under the administration of Mrs. Mittie Campbell as principal. Speculation was rife when a woman was put in charge of the school, but *she has made good* and with the assistance of her faithful teachers the school is closing out in a few weeks *its best session*.<sup>8</sup>

A few months later, in August, the newspaper revealed that Mittie was still teaching despite her principal duties, this time high school subjects to the older students.<sup>9</sup> Despite her demanding work schedule, she also spoke at what were described as patriotic meetings in nearby Montgomery and Fostoria on "The Need to Conserve Sugar" to support the soldiers and the war effort, and in the same month she served as the chairman of the Colored Teacher's Institute in which she had been a featured guest lecturer several times in previous years.<sup>10</sup>

With land now purchased in the Dugan section of Conroe for the new schoolhouse, the Black community began building the two-story structure and continued to raise funds, but White bigotry made its presence known once again. Twenty-eight Whites protested the location of the Black school in south Conroe by signing and presenting a petition that was angrily against "having a colored school located in our community. The school board bravely took the side of the African American community and the work continued. At the end of 1918, that school building was given the name, Mittie J. Campbell School for Negroes, in honor of the woman who had worked tirelessly to educate Conroe's youth, fellow teachers, and the community at large.<sup>11</sup> The *History of Conroe Independent School District* stated that the school was named for "the first principal and the one who contributed most in organizing the school."<sup>12</sup> Obviously a well-deserved honor.

Mittie J. Campbell was not the type of person to rest on her laurels – the school bearing her name still needed to be finished and paid for, so Mittie took a lead in the fund-raising activities. In January 1919, the newspaper noted that the work was going slowly on the new

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<sup>8</sup> Article, no title, *Conroe Courier*, 25 April 1918, Vol.26, No.18, p.8 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> Article, "School Subjects," *Conroe Courier*, 29 August 1918, Vol.26, No.36, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Articles, *Conroe Courier*, "(COLORED) PATRIOTIC MEETINGS FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY", 5 September 1918, Vol.26, No.37, p.3 (sugar); and no title, Vol.26, No.39, p.3 (chairman).

<sup>11</sup> CISD, *History of Conroe Independent School District*, unpublished paper, 1981, pp.4-5.

<sup>12</sup> CISD, *History of Conroe Independent School District*, unpublished paper, 1981, p.11.

Black school building with donations coming almost entirely by the Blacks themselves. However, “under the leadership of the efficient principal of the school, Mrs. Mittie J. Campbell, the school raised \$41.02 (\$694 in 2022 USD) to aid in the work last week.”<sup>13</sup> Later in the same year, her continued efforts to do fundraising had yielded another \$60 (\$1,014 in 2022 USD).<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of Mittie Campbell’s administrative and teaching duties and fundraising efforts, Professor Ewart G. Abner, the former principal of Conroe’s Black school, and now Lieutenant Abner, returned from the Argonne Woods in France, slightly wounded. The newspaper mentioned he had been “away from our school on leave of absence and hopes to be back on the job next September.”<sup>15</sup> A favorite son in education and Conroe’s Black community, he was, indeed, restored to his position as principal, and Mittie carried on as a teacher during the 1920-1921 school year and as a fundraiser for the school.<sup>16</sup> Her oldest daughter, Jessie C. Turner, had also become a school teacher in Conroe’s Black schools at this time, no doubt influenced by the wonderful example of her mother.<sup>17</sup>

In 1927 the Conroe School Board decided that CISD schools needed to be renamed “in honor of some Texas hero and the Negro schools in honor of some prominent Negro.” Thus, White schools were renamed the Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin, and the Mittie J. Campbell School became the Booker T. Washington.<sup>18</sup> Mittie J. Campbell was no longer the principal and the school no longer bore her name, but her dedication and drive to teach carried on through the last years of her life, as she and the whole nation drove headlong into the Great Depression.

True to her eclectic teaching skills that had offered courses in civics, morals, decimals, sugar conservation, and subjects for lower grades and high schoolers, she fought the Depression by teaching food production and domestic science to 800 African Americans scattered on farms and various communities throughout Freestone County 100 miles north of Conroe. She had become the Home Demonstration Agent for the county, teaching gardening, cooking, canning,

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<sup>13</sup> Article, no title, *Conroe Courier*, 24 January 1919, Vol.27, No.5, p.4. Currency conversion calculated through the CPI Inflation Calculator at <https://www.in2013dollars.com/1871-dollars-in-2018>.

<sup>14</sup> Feature column, “SCHOOL NOTES,” *Conroe Courier*, 12 December 1919, Vol.27, No.51, p.4. Currency conversion calculated through the CPI Inflation Calculator at <https://www.in2013dollars.com/1871-dollars-in-2018>.

<sup>15</sup> Feature column, “SCHOOL NOTES,” *Conroe Courier*, 28 March 1919, Vol.27, No.14, p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Article, “Conroe Curlings,” *The Houston Informer*, 1 November 1919, Vol.1, No.24, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Article, “Teachers Elected,” *Conroe Courier*, 16 July 1920, Vol.28, No.30, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> CISD, *History of Conroe Independent School District*, unpublished paper, 1981, p.6.

sewing, and home beautification, “and every phase of home life”; frequent reports were made of classes she taught in canning corn, meat, vegetable soup and more.<sup>19</sup>

The way Mittie described her work among these people during the Great Depression reflects her love for mankind and education; it is her own words that best justify our recommendation of her. In December 1930 she poignantly described her work as “reaching the unreached”:

Although the canning of vegetables is still in its infancy among Negroes, wide-awake interest has been manifested in many [who] have availed themselves of the opportunity presented them; the present financial depression is aiding the home demonstration agent in *reaching the unreached*, for now they realize the importance of producing and conserving their produce from an economic point of view.<sup>20</sup>

Early in 1931 she reported again to the county, this time reflected on the year of service she had put in on their behalf, educating them in critical skills to withstand the Depression. In so doing, her words reflect the legacy of her entire life as an educator and wonderful person:

For twelve months it was my pleasure to work in the schools and local communities with the girls and women converting into useful articles for interior home decoration rugs, mats, vases, towels, etc., using material that has been thrown away prior to the introduction to the home demonstration activities.

Since the home supplies all other organizations, the progress for weal or woe depends upon the atmosphere that surrounded the home in *producing worthy citizens in filling positions of honor and trust ...*

*The local leaders will be able to carry on the work learned during my stay. ...*

It was impossible to learn all in one year, but *your foundation has been well laid, continue to build. ...*

*I shall ever cherish your memory and urge that you continue the work well begun among you.*

Mittie J. Campbell.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Article, “Bowen Reviews Negro Demonstration Work in County,” *The Teague Chronicle*, 30 May 1930, Vol.24, No.44, p.2.

<sup>20</sup> Article by Mittie J. Campbell, “NEGRO DEMONSTRATIONS WORK MOVES WITH THOROUGHNESS,” *The Teague Chronicle*, 12 December 1930, Vol.25, No.20, p.5 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Article by Mittie J. Campbell, “NEGRO DEMONSTRATION AGENT REPORTS ON YEAR’S WORK HERE,” *The Teague Chronicle*, 20 February 1931, Vol.25, No.30, p.5 (emphasis added).

On 3 November 1933, Mittie J. Campbell's valuable, special life was tragically ended at 58 years old in a collision with another car; her chest was crushed, and "traumatic pneumonia" quickly set in, ending her life two days later, on the 5th.<sup>22</sup> Her gravestone has been reclaimed from the decades of woods and undergrowth that had consumed the entire Conroe Community Cemetery.

It is fine to name schools after famous people who seem to have moved mountains, but equally important to the history of Conroe and the nation are the names of those, like Conroe educator Mittie J. Campbell, whose every effort to "reach the unreached" and produce "worthy citizens" has shaken up and helped form the community in which we live today.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration of Mittie J. Campbell.

Respectfully,

John Meredith  
President  
Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project (CCCRP)

Annette Kerr  
Historian & Author, *African American Cemeteries in Montgomery County, Texas*  
Montgomery County Historical Commission; CCCRP

Andrew V. Rapoza  
Historian & Author, *Promising Cures*  
CCCRP

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<sup>22</sup> "Texas Deaths, 1890-1976", database with images, *FamilySearch*:  
<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:K3CW-NR6>