

MARY NOTTINGHAM SMITH
A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
FOR PUPILS

by
A. K. Fisher

FOREWARD

During the spring of 1982 as I visited schools in the performance of my duties as assistant superintendent, Mrs. Kitty Killmon, the librarian of Central High School, told me that pupils often asked her who Mary Nottingham Smith was. Mrs. Killmon added that except for a brief mention in one of the books of Henry A. Wise, she had no information to provide students asking about Mary Nottingham Smith.

This biographical sketch is meant to correct that situation. I have tried to write it so that it will have meaning for elementary pupils also.

The sketch would not have been possible without interviews, clippings, and memorabilia provided by Mrs. Barbara Harper Upshur, great niece and foster daughter of Mrs. Smith.

I dedicate this effort to Mrs. Carrie M. Carter, the successor of Mrs. Smith as Jeanes Supervisor.

A. K. Fisher
Parksley, Virginia
October 15, 1982

It is an outstanding honor for a building to be named for an individual. Few of us will ever receive that honor.

Mary Nottingham Smith is the name of a middle school in Accomack County on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. It was named Mary Nottingham Smith because that was the name of the woman who is responsible for the first high school in Accomack that blacks could attend.

Who was Mrs. Smith?

Mary Nottingham was born in Townsend, Virginia, a tiny place in Northampton County, which is also on the Eastern Shore. Mary was born there on August 22; 1882. Therefore, 1982 is the centennial of her birth; that means she was born one hundred years ago.

Her parents were John W. and Fannie Wright Nottingham. Unfortunately, Mary's father died at an early age; so she had to help her mother in raising her four brothers and sisters. In spite of the fact that the family was poor and times were hard, the family members all grew up to be good citizens in the community. Some became carpenters, others learned to be tailors, one farmed, and a sister taught.

Mary decided early that she wanted to be a teacher. That presented a problem because there was no high school in Northampton that she could attend. She went to the Norfolk Mission College. That college did not offer a degree, but it taught the young Miss Nottingham that teaching was what she wanted to do with her life.

Before she was twenty years old, she went to Essex County, which is where the town of Tappahanock is. In a short time she was made principal of a small school there, but after two years she got homesick for the Eastern Shore and returned to Northampton, where again she taught and served as principal.

About that time Miss Nottingham got married. She became the bride of Robert L. Smith, a building contractor and real estate developer. He also was a graduate of Hampton Institute, which is one of the most famous black institutions of higher learning in the United States. The Smiths never had any children but they brought up her niece, who is now Mrs. R.C. Upshur.

During the summer she enrolled in college courses at Hampton Institute. Her professors saw that she was intelligent and energetic; so they recommended her for a job in Louisiana. Mary Smith was asked to come to Concordia Parish and teach school. (In Louisiana counties are called Parishes). She and her husband liked it so well that they stayed five years, and she became a school supervisor.

Although she liked the Deep South, when G.G. Joynes, the Superintendent of Schools in Accomack, asked her to come to that county, she could not refuse. Mr. Joynes was looking for a person to supervise the education of black people. At that time blacks did not go to school with white children, and generally blacks were called Negroes or colored people. That was in 1921.

The new supervisor saw right away that what the youngsters in Accomack needed was a high school. How in the world could she convince the School Board and community to provide a high school for her people? She decided to work through the churches and the black community. All her life Mrs. Smith was a devout Christian. She went to church every Sunday. She knew that if she wanted to raise money for a good cause that a church was the place to start. Because Accomack was a farming area, she asked farmers to donate vegetables to help raise funds for her school. Also she enlisted the cooperation of teachers in the one-and-two room schools.

Strange as it may seem, if you had attended school back in the 1920's it would have been a small frame building heated by a pot-bellied wood or coal stove. Some of the little schools were Jerusalem, Horntown, Oaks, St. Johns, Wattsville, Withams, Mappsville, Whitesville, Onancock, Savageville, Burton, Trower, Belle Haven, Pungoteague, Boston and Mt. Zion. Mrs. Smith visited all these schools to assist the teachers to learn the latest ways of teaching the youngsters. She visited them every week and took supplies the School Board wanted them to have.

When she arrived, she opened the trunk of her car and took out books and supplies. Eagerly the children would gather around to see what Mrs. Smith had brought. While she was talking to the teachers at these small schools, Mrs. Smith would encourage them to "sell bricks." This was a money-raising activity she had thought of to raise funds for the new high school.

There was a lawyer across the Chesapeake Bay in Mathews County who helped Mrs. Smith with her project. His name was T. C. Walker. He would come to the Eastern Shore and give speeches in support of the new high school. He also gave Mrs. Smith legal advice. Much later, Mrs. Smith asked the School Board to name a school for this lawyer, and that is where T.C. Walker School got its name.

In addition to raising money for the building, Mrs. Smith had to arrange transportation for the pupils. Finally after a decade of effort the high school opened in 1932. Unfortunately Mrs. Smith still did not have a new building.

The best she could do was rent the Odd Fellows Hall, which is still standing on Church Road near the county seat of Accomac. The first

principal of the school was Miss Leon Wainwright, who many years later as Mrs. Leon Wainwright Gates would retire in 1970 from the position as principal of Mary N. Smith High School.

There have actually been two schools in Accomack with the name Mary Nottingham Smith. The first was the present T. C. Walker School. The second is the present Mary N. Smith Middle School, two miles north of Accomac. In 1934 the School Board named the first school for Mrs. Smith. The Board did this to show the whole community how much Mrs. Smith had done for public education in Accomack.

In fact, places far from the Eastern Shore asked her help also. Summers she would travel to other states to work with principals and teachers. In 1929 she went to South Carolina, and in 1930 she worked with educators in Florida. Whether she was in Accomack or away, she was known as a Jeanes Supervisor.

(Anna Jeanes was a Quaker who felt more money should be spent to improve education for Negroes. Accomack was one of the first places in Virginia to use the Jeanes funds.)

The 1930's were the years of the Great Depression. People were out of work, and they had little money in the pockets. That is one reason Mrs. Smith had such a hard time getting a high school built. She trained housewives to can and preserve food so the grocery bills would not be so high. Although, next to her church, schools were the most important thing in her life, she still found time to help individual members of the community to make a better life for themselves. She invited professors and specialists to come from Norfolk State College in Petersburg to teach Accomack people ways of improving their way of life.

The 1940's were the war years. World War II lasted until 1945. Mrs. Smith was on the County Red Cross Board, the School Savings Committee, and the Infantile Paralysis Committee. She helped the war effort in Accomack by means of her volunteer work.

As times passed, more and more youngsters came to the high school and graduated. By the late 1940's the School Board knew that a new school had to be built. The high school (now T.C. Walker) was very much overcrowded. The governor at that time was John S. Battle. He also was interested in new school buildings. Accomack received enough money from the "Battle Fund" to construct the new Mary Nottingham Smith High School.

There was a big groundbreaking ceremony. Mrs. Smith was on the platform; in fact she was the mistress of ceremonies. Her good friend and superintendent, Henry A. Wise, was there too.

Regretably, Mary Nottingham Smith never lived to see the new school open. On December 30, 1951, she was getting into her car to go to the School Board Office. She collapsed and never regained consciousness.

Memorial services for Mrs. Smith were held in the auditorium of what is now the T. C. Walker School. Funeral services were held at Ebenezer A.M.E. Church, Capeville, where she had kept her membership. Hugh crowds attended both services. She was eulogized; that is, people made speeches honoring her.

Mr. Wise praised her for her thirty-two years of service in Accomack. He said she had "broad vision" and was known throughout Virginia.

She was buried in the family plot at the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church.

In 1956 the portrait of Mary Nottingham Smith, which now hangs in the front hall of the school, was dedicated. It was not the last time that Accomack would remember Mrs. Smith.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Mary Nottingham Smith Dies at Home Sunday, December 30."
Peninsula Enterprise, Accomac, Virginia. January 3, 1952.

Wise, Henry A., Over on the Eastern Shore, Onancock, Virginia,
The Eastern Shore News, Inc., 1962.

Photographs and family memorabilia in the possession of Mrs.
Barbara Harper Upshur (Mrs. R.C.) of Accomac, Virginia.

APPENDIX

SCHOOL OFFICIALS AT THE TIME THE PORTRAIT OF MRS.
SMITH WAS DEDICATED IN 1956.

ACCOMACK COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD - 1956

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Accomac
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W. A. LEWIS } Accomac
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