

**Preserving the History of Wheelock Colored School
Wheelock, Robertson County, Texas**

Estelle Mitchell Adams

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About the Author Estelle Mitchell Adams

Estelle Mitchell Adams was born in 1928 and raised in the town of Wheelock, Texas, in Robertson County. She is the last surviving grandchild of Georgia slaves Sam Mitchell and Lucy Stubbs Mitchell. Estelle received her education in the Wheelock Colored School, E. A. Kemp High School in Bryan, Texas, a Bachelor's of Science degree in history from Bishop College, a Master's degree from Prairie View University, and post-graduate work from Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. She taught school for thirty-seven years. She taught in Herne, her community Wheelock, and Bryan, Texas, and retired in the Dallas Independent School District. In her words:

“The love of history is in my blood. My mother Amanda Dunn Mitchell loved history. My aunts, the late Bertha Mitchell Sheppard, Celestine Mitchell Witherspoon, and my uncle, the late Arthur Mitchell, loved history as well. I have always been concerned about the welfare of all classes of people.

I do not want the accomplishments of the blacks to be forgotten. I want to keep it on all minds of how our descendants lived and made progress. This writing is just a drop of what has happened in the past. I want to increase people's awareness of what happened to help define the role African Americans played in the development of Texas and the Wheelock community. With little or no education some people in Wheelock were workers on the plantations, while many owned land. There were carpenters, brick masons, hunters, fishers, tanners, and carvers. As tragic as it was, some of the people who were enslaved during the plantation era had no place to go after emancipation. Although they were freed, some chose to remain and work on the plantation for shelter and food. Their efforts helped keep the plantations flourishing and provided the economic backbone for the state of Texas that we know today.

I hope that we as black people all continue to do research and write about our people.”

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From the Texas Brazos Trail Region portion of the website sponsored by the Texas Historical Commission, www.thc.state.tx.us, the following school-related history is provided:

“African Americans living in a 19th and 20th century Texas were denied access to education for decades but opportunities finally began to emerge after emancipation. The Freedman’s Bureau, organized by the federal government, founded several schools in the state that offered classes to African Americans but Texas’s segregated public education system continued to underfund African American scholastic activities, limiting student access to books, libraries, educational resources and buildings. In 1917, the Rosenwald Fund, established by Sears, Roebuck and Company CEO Julius Rosenwald, provided matching finances to communities who built public schools for African American students. Rosenwald schools began forming in Texas in 1920 and by 1932, the year the fund ended, Rosenwald’s program had helped fund more than 5,000 schools across the South, including 527 of them in Texas. The construction of the largest Rosenwald School built in Texas, the Calvert School, was located in the Brazos Valley community of Calvert and completed in 1929. The town restored the school building as the W. D. Spigner Elementary School and it continued to operate until 2010. Today the Calvert Colored W. D. Spigner Alumni Association Inc. operates the building as a neighborhood multipurpose center.”

Wikipedia’s information about the Rosenwald Schools includes:

“A Rosenwald School was the name informally applied to over five thousand schools shops and teachers’ homes in the United States which were built primarily for the education of African-Americans in the early 20th century. To promote collaboration between white and black citizens, Rosenwald required communities to commit public funds to the schools, as well as to contribute actual cash donations. Millions of dollars were raised by African-American rural communities across the South to fund better education for their children.”

Although the true start date for the Wheelock Colored School is not known and any additional history of this school and community has not been found, here is my recollection of it from 1927 (when my oldest sister attended) to 1957 when integration occurred. It is not known at this writing if the Wheelock Colored School was built under Rosenwald’s program, but we do know that it was a symbol of hope and pride, and parents volunteered. Although cash was scarce for the black community, they did whatever they could to help maintain the school. The people in the communities had strong will power. They had faith and all pulled together for the common good of not only themselves, but their communities as well.

Colored schools were originally one-teacher schools and all trustees were white. By the 1930s, school buses were provided for white children but in Wheelock there were no buses for the black children to ride to school. After the white schools had received new supplies, their previous blackboards, desks, and books were given to the black schools. The textbooks were “out of adoption” (had been replaced in white schools by newer versions), and there were never enough books for every child to study from. There was no electricity and no inside water, but a well provided clean drinking water. Every child brought lunch from home in a sack or a tin pail bucket. Outside toilets

and Sears Roebuck catalogues were given to the school. The catalogues were used as toilet tissue.

Originally a one-room, one-teacher school, by the 1930s two teachers were assigned, with one named as the Principal. With two teachers, the school building was partitioned off into two rooms instead of one, and there were plenty of windows for children to have plenty of light. Often, when programs were given, the movable partitions would be removed to create a stage. The schools were also used for community gatherings.

Schools were open for seven and eight months because cotton still had to be picked during the off-months. The eight-month school term began in the third week in September. Later in the 1930s, nine months was granted for schools to be open. The black teachers' pay was \$50.00 a month, less than that of the white teachers.

In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools. Black schools began to disappear and were left empty as their former pupils transferred to white schools. Many black schools closed in the 1950s and 1960s, while some rural schools were consolidated. People left the plantations and moved to towns for better job opportunities.

Wheelock teachers for the one-room school in the 1920s were Mr. Frazier, Mr. Lofton, H. L. Farris, and E. D. Huff, all of whom lived in the Hearne vicinity. For the two-room school in the 1930s, Stella Epperson from Hearne, Texas, and Leola Edwards from Franklin, Texas, were appointed. About 1931 or 1932, Leola left and Jewell Epperson, Stella Epperson's daughter, was hired. Jewell was a good musician who taught first through third grade while her mother Stella taught fourth through seventh grade.

Teachers lived in the homes of families. Around 1934, a two-room house was built at the back of the school for teachers to live in. Whatever patching needed to be done to the school and/or house, Reverend McCullough, a self-made carpenter, did the work.

Emma Ballard from Franklin, Texas, taught for three years. When D. H. Jefferson and his wife, J. A. Jefferson, were selected as teachers around 1937, they had four children and the house was too small for them to live in, so they roomed with Reverend McCullough and his wife Sadie, whose home was behind the school.

Around 1945, Lula Robinson from Hearne, Texas, and Hattie Galloway were hired as teachers, with Hattie named Principal. The school was always over-crowded. The enrollment increased and in 1951 Estelle Mitchell Adams was hired to teach the fifth and sixth grades. Estelle taught one year before moving to Bryan, Texas, and Vinetta Blocker Mack was hired. The whites had given Wheelock School a piano, which was played by Estelle when she was teaching there, and by Vinetta Blocker Mack when she was teaching there.

Integration came in 1957 with the court case of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. Wheelock Colored School children were bused to the integrated Franklin School. Hattie Galloway Latson drove the bus and taught in Franklin until she was hired to teach in Bryan, Texas. The Wheelock Colored School building was eventually torn down.

The Wheelock Colored School was located on old Franklin Road (now FM46), next door to the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. Around the school was black, sticky soil, and when it rained it was very boggy and difficult for the children to enter our school. We had to walk close up against the fence where grass was growing to avoid getting sticky mud on our shoes. Sometimes we had to use little sticks to rake most of the mud off before entering the school. Part of the mud was probably because across the street was the Wheelock cotton gin which was operated by the late Trotter Locke. The big

tank next to the cotton gin provided water to run the gin as well as being also used by the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church for baptisms. My father Elijah Mitchell had the only truck that could move cotton bales from the gin in Wheelock to Bryan and he spent many weekends working for Mr. Locke, hauling the bales for further processing in Bryan. Mr. Locke enjoyed the school children, who enthusiastically responded with clapping when he blew the cotton gin whistle every day at twelve o'clock to let the community (and the children) know that it was dinnertime.

Most of the children had the same thing in their lunch pails: 2-3 biscuit sandwiches, with pear or peach preserves or jelly and peanut butter, sometimes a slice of fried ham and or a baked sweet potato, and sometimes a sack of peanuts (which were devoured before school even started).

Our parents taught their children to always want to be somebody. You can excel, do more, do better, and you can be the best. We started school at the young age of six and seven years old. Our participation in school began as early as second grade. Our teachers involved us in contests such as creative writing and story-telling. Other events included art, music, spelling, reading, writing, and oral reading. At the junior high level, students continued to participate in these events but many became involved in one act plays, modern oratory, mathematics, and science. The second and third grades had operettas. Fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades had plays too. The eighth grade had debate teams, and oratorical contests.

A scholastic league was established in Texas in 1911 by E. D. Shurter, and was approved by the Texas State Teachers Association. The league was organized and schools all over Texas participated. The league divided the schools into classes based on enrollment to level the competition; 1A through 5A, with 5A being the largest enrollment. By 1932, virtually every school in Texas was a member of what was called the Interscholastic League Academic Contest. (The late Barbara Jordan, United States congresswoman, participated in the Interscholastic League as a student.) The district contest met in March, while the state's met in early May. All events were held on Saturdays. Of course we were nervous because we were being judged. The students juggled their practice and homework with rehearsals. The high school students participated in drama, physics, math, current events, debate, poetry, running, jumping, pole vaulting, and throwing the discus.

I remembered I loved to be on the debate team. The late Joe Walker was my debate partner. We always won locally and went to state contest where we won second place. We were in the seventh grade when we attended Wheelock School. I won second place in piano solo at the state as well. Going to the district contest in Calvert, Texas and the state contest at Prairie View College was exciting. We would set the alarm clock at 4 a.m. on many a Saturday morning. My father would pick up all the children in his truck and take us to Calvert for the district meeting. For the state meeting we would ride with our teachers Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Jefferson from Calvert, Texas. We were determined to put our brainpower against other students across the state. We enjoyed learning on our own. We studied because we wanted to learn. Our goal was to make it to the state finals and place at the top. We always came back with second place. The debate team and piano solo always placed. At this writing I have not mentioned other persons because I have no known facts about their participation in these events.

My parents, the late Elijah and Amanda Mitchell, had a vision for their children and the children in the community. They both were reared in Wheelock. They owned a big truck and on bad days Elijah would pick up all the children and transport them to school and do the same in the afternoon. The truck had a tarp on it to protect the children from the bad weather. He also made two long benches for seats. The children were thrilled to get the ride. The Pearl and Henry Chambers children had the

farthest to walk from George Dunn's farm. Elijah asked for permission from the parents and trustees to carry the children to school in his truck.

In his mind, he had developed a school bus for black children to ride in. He had a sign made that said "School Bus", which he painted yellow and that was the beginning of the first black school bus in Robertson County.

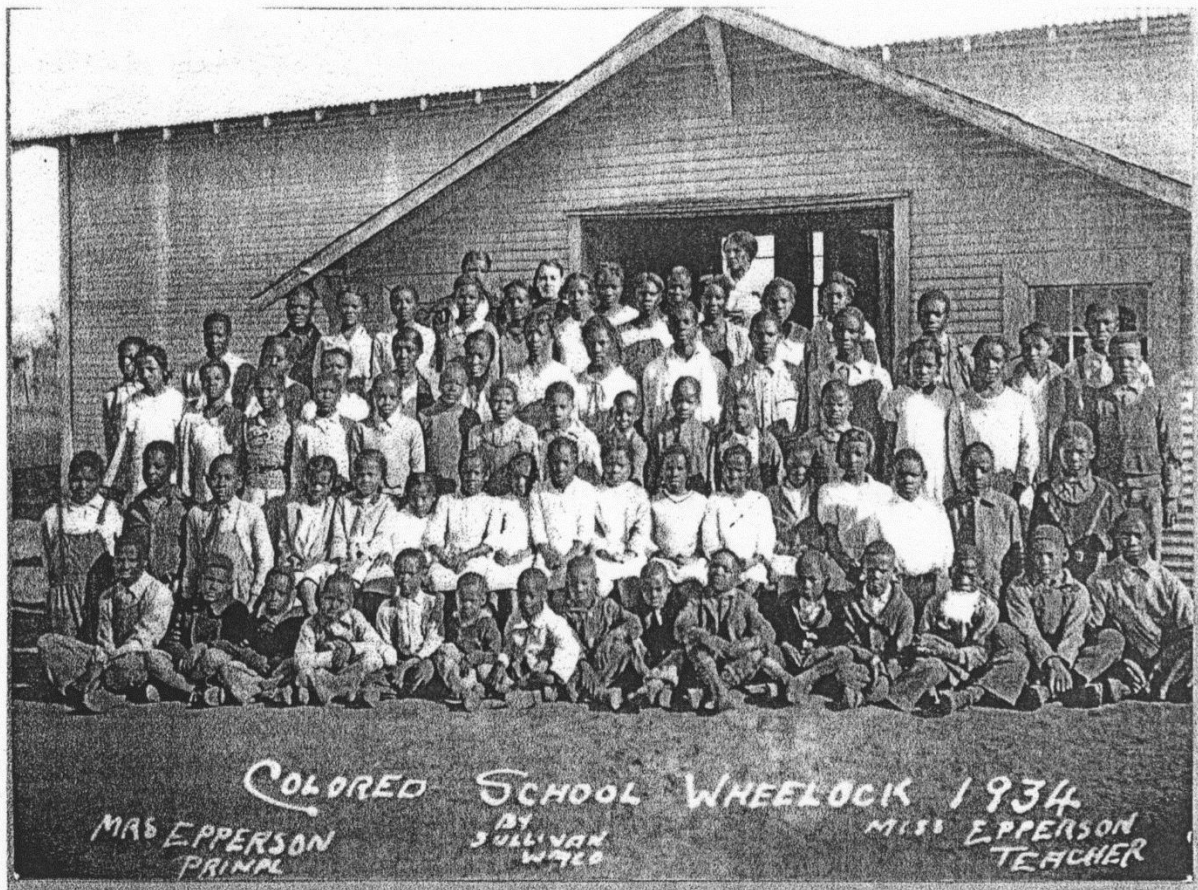
Some black parents would give him a few dollars to help with the purchase of gas. After the white trustees in Wheelock saw the great progress, they gave the blacks one of their old not-running buses. Several self-made black mechanics came to the home of Elijah and repaired the bus for the children to ride. Many times flats stopped the bus. The children would get out and walk on to school, or walk home. Lad Nickelson who was the Superintendent in Franklin thought well of the service that Elijah was giving and wrote a letter to The Texas Association for Teachers in Austin, Texas, and asked them to give him a salary for driving the bus. The request was granted.

Wood to provide heat for the school was cut from the land of my father Elijah Mitchell. Jim Gary, Arthur Mitchell, and Elijah Mitchell spent days cutting down trees and hauling them to school for the winter months. The saw used for cutting was long and had two handles for two persons to saw the logs. The large boys were sent to the woodpile by the teacher to cut wood for the big iron heater. The teachers made the fire to warm the building for the children when they arrived. The children kept the campus cleaned, pulling weeds and chopping down grass with a hoe when needed.

The teachers always had a big program at Christmas time and at the closing of school. At school closing for the year, an operetta and two or three act plays were staged and the eighth grade had a closing program. Every student had to participate somehow in the closing program. All the teachers and most of the parents could sew costumes. I remember one year being a butterfly in the closing program operetta. My costume was made of crepe paper – pink with ruffles at the neck and wings formed from clothes hangers and crepe paper, and a sash to hold everything together. I felt so pretty.

At Christmas, the boys went into the woods and cut down a big cedar tree for the school. The teachers and the boys were involved with creating a wooden stand to hold the tree which was then nailed firmly into the schoolroom floor. The children all made decorations to hang on the tree. I remember making lots of colored paper chains and Christmas bells out of red and green construction paper, hung by strings on the tree branches. I also remember seeing tiny candles that were attached to the tree branches but never lighted. The red berries from nearby yaupon holly bushes were brought inside and tucked into the tree branches. The program was Christmas poems, singing carols, and the three-act play. All children were on the program, wearing new shoes and white socks and dress-up clothes. The teachers gave presents to the students, usually a pencil and a candy cane. The parents contributed to the main attraction, Santa Claus and his sack of fruit, candy and nuts for all the children. My father Elijah Mitchell and his brother Arthur (Doc) Mitchell took turns being Santa Claus. It was fun for all.

Wheelock Colored School 1934



The students of Wheelock School from left to right starting from the bottom row:

First Row: Malicah Dunn, Wilson Smith, Archie Lee Walker, ___, Napolitan Payne, J. D. Dunn, Archie Childress, Edward Taylor, Johnnie Dunn, M. D. Sheppard, Emmit Johnson, ___ Dunn, Marion Mitchell, Elijah Mitchell Jr., Dewitt Curry

Second Row: Ernest Walker, Roscoe Hickmon, James Petty Bradford, Clarissa Dunn, Ella Griffin, Estelle Mitchell, Zelma Payne, Orena Gooden, Bertha Walker, Lola Smith, Helen Garner, Josie Milligan, ___, Elmer Chambers, Jeremiah Smith

Third Row: Velma Chambers, Polly Campbell, Johnnie Mae Smith, ___, Joe Walker, ___, ___, R. L. Cavitt, Grady Chambers, ___, Buddy Walker

Fourth Row: ___, ___, Dennis Gooden, Marjorie Walker, Bennie Williams, Rosie Mae Chambers, Hazel Gooden, Elmira Chambers, ___, Ned Walker, Ernest Walker, ___, Taylor, ___, Lucile Curry, Mary Walker, Curtis Taylor, ___

Fifth Row: R. L. Gooden, Carrie Jane Brown, Willie Ruth Hickman, ___ Smith, Ethel Robinson, Wilma Walker, ___, Vera Mitchell, Flossie Dunn, Lola Smith

Last Row: Ida Mae Lyons, Jewell Epperson: first-fourth grade teacher, ___, ___, ___, Stella Epperson: fifth-seventh grade teacher and Principal

* ___ : names that can't be remembered