State School for Deaf Negroes

[SSD]

A school for the Deaf children of the Negro race was established by Legislative Act No. 159, 1920. The Deaf division did not operate as a separate unit, with separate faculty and buildings, until the school session of, 1938-1939. This deaf institution was known as the Louisiana State School for Deaf [LSSD] Negroes.

This residential school was located about 5 miles north of Baton Rouge on the grounds of Southern University and A&M College, near Scotlandville, Louisiana. It was open to all Negro deaf children of the state between the ages of 6 and 21 whose hearing impairment or deficiencies could not be addressed in the public schools.

The principal of the school was E. L. Gordon. Since the school was housed on the campus of Southern University, President Dr. Joseph S. Clark served as Superintendent. Despite the fact that legislation which established the School for Negro Blind concurrently authorized a state supported institution for Negro deaf children, funds to erect a physical plant for such a school were unavailable. Nevertheless, Dr. Joseph S. Clark worked closely with state Superintendent of Education, Thomas H. Harris, devised means of securing needed funds for construction purposes. By the beginning of the fiscal year for 1937-1938 he was successful, even “without legislative appropriation for capital outlay” in amassing the funds for constructing a physical plant for the Louisiana School for Deaf Children. And so, in the last year of his administration as President of Southern University and Superintendent of Schools for the Negro Blind and Deaf a substantial brick building was built to house State School for Negro Deaf. It consisted of a modern one story brick structure that included two separate wings used for boys’ and girls’ dormitories, two sick rooms, two bathrooms, seven classrooms, two reading rooms and four other rooms, the secretary’s office and principals office. Superintendent J. S. Clark’s selection for first principal of this institution was E. L. Gordon who remained only one year.

The first session of this institution began on October 1, 1938. The initial enrollment at the opening of the school consisted of 44 pupils. There were nine faculty members, none of whom had seen a deaf child before. However, they were willing to accept the challenge. The original roster of faculty members included: Helene Arthur, Owena Joyce Barnes, O. M. Hamilton, I. R. Johnson, J. Marie Spotts, Felton Tate, J. H. Theus, Joseph Eugene Peterson, and Noah Woods. These teachers received extensive training under the supervision of
Mrs. Lillian Jones, a white supervising teacher at the Louisiana State School for Deaf [LSSD] Whites.

During the second year of its operation, Dr. Wallace L. Bradford was appointed principal of Louisiana State School for Deaf [LSSD] Negroes. He served in this capacity continuously until the merger of a unitary system in 1978. During his tenure as principal, Dr. Felton G. Clark was elected president of Southern University. Dr. Clark and Dr. Bradford sought purposeful change. They asked the Department of Education for a name change to better distinguish the two deaf institutions for whites and for Negroes. The names were changed to Louisiana State School for Deaf [LSSD] and State School for Deaf [SSD]. Many thought the acronym stood for Southern School for Deaf.

The school colors were blue and silver and its mascot was the wolf. After fourteen years of operation the high school department was in its infancy. Academic offerings were similar to those of the public school; however, training in the trade and vocational areas were more extensive. Training was offered in the areas of tailoring, home economics, beauty culture, shoe repair, laundering (cleaning and pressing), upholstery, woodwork, automotive, keypunch, etc. Teachers instilled in their students a sense of dignity, impressing upon them that skills attained through training and utilized through training are alternatives to welfare.

Serving the school in its early operation was a beautician, Helene Arthur, a physician, Dr. R. [Raymond] M. Baranco; a resident school nurse, Mary Ellen Brown; a secretary, Nellie Wilder Hamm; a school matron, Earlene L. Bradford; a dietitian and cafeteria staff known then as cooks and helpers.

One of the most formidable confrontations to the University’s existence had been efforts to desegregate education in Louisiana. In 1973 the federal government brought against the “dual system” of higher education. The state NAACP Legal Defense Fund had encouraged and filed suits in 1970, to hasten the end to the “dual system” within the state. The suit urged a cut off of Federal Funds to school systems which remained segregated. The dismantling of components of the University had occurred in the wake of Federal lawsuits. For approximately 40 years the SSD operated as predominately segregated deaf institution. The “desegregation” of the state’s school for the deaf and blind children was accomplished by “merging” the facilities. **SSD was the last black deaf school in the United States to close its doors.** In 1977 the Louisiana Legislature passed an act that provided for the unitary operation of SSD and LSSD. On August 24, 1978, the Board of Secondary and Elementary Education [BESE] voted to locate and operate the unified Louisiana School for the Deaf on the North and South campuses, which previously housed the Louisiana State School for the Deaf. Jesse N. Stone, President of Southern University and A&M College (at this time) and the Board of Supervisors’ efforts to halt the move were
futile. As an additional by-product of this move, the school was able to offer an expanded program utilizing educational and vocational equipment and material previously located at Southern University. This included programs in the area of cosmetology and shoe repair as well as other services.

**Louisiana State School for Deaf Negroes [LSSD]**, [collection]. Archives and Manuscripts Department, John B. Cade Library, Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

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