

Historic Marker Dedication Ceremony Honors Kelly Miller, Fairfield Institute

By Sharon G. Avery

At 3 p.m. Sunday, a historical marker honoring Kelly Miller and commemorating the Fairfield Institute will be dedicated by the Fairfield County Historical Society. The dedication ceremony will be held at the site of the marker on Congress Street, between Moultrie and Palmer streets.

The Fairfield Institute

The Fairfield Institute, also referred to as the Presbyterian Mission School, was established by the Northern Presbyterian Church during Reconstruction for the education of blacks. Prior to the Civil War, the activities of free blacks and slaves were strictly regulated by state law, and it was illegal to teach blacks to either read or write. After the war, there was a great need for educational institutions for blacks, and into this void in southern education stepped a number of churches and missionary societies.

On February 1, 1869, the Presbyterian Commission on Home Missions, incorporated in New York, purchased land in Winnsboro for a black school. This land, fronting on both Congress and Vanderhorst streets, was purchased for \$2,200. Also in 1869, the Rev. Willard Richardson, a native of Pennsylvania, arrived in Winnsboro to take charge of the proposed school. Richardson was 53 years old when he arrived in Winnsboro and remained here as minister, principal and

teacher for nearly two decades. He and his wife, Harriet, and daughter Clara, lived in the Clarke House on Congress Street, which was included in the 1869 purchase. This house was recently demolished.

The school soon had a growing number of students. The *Charleston Republican* reported in the spring of 1870 that a large school for black children had been established in Winnsboro "under the superintendence of Mr. Richardson, a gentleman from the North, and great praise is due him for the pains he takes with the children." The story also refers to attempts of black county residents to establish free schools for their children throughout Fairfield County.

The school building was probably built immediately, however, no mention of its construction is made in the local newspaper, the *Fairfield Herald*. During the 1870s, activities at the Mission School were sporadically noted in the newspaper. Stories usually concerned programs and recitations held at the nearby Presbyterian Church (Calvary Presbyterian Church), near the corner of Moultrie and Vanderhorst streets, and also founded in 1869. One newspaper account says Richardson employed the "Kindergarten System", which stressed teaching children ideas, and to think before taking up books. Five- and six-year olds could locate and identify all of the countries and capitals of the Eastern and Western hemispheres.

The earliest reference to the school building itself is made in *South*

Carolina: Resources and Populations, published by the State Board of Agriculture in 1883. The subchapter on Fairfield County refers to the Fairfield Mission School as a wooden structure built at a cost of \$2,000. The location of the school on Vanderhorst Street and its frame structure is verified both by later remembrances of the school and late 19th Century insurance maps of Winnsboro.

Over the years, several out-buildings for student boarders were added to the school and parsonage.

In 1879, the Peabody Fund of Staunton, Virginia awarded grants of \$450 each to Mount Zion Institute and to the Fairfield Institute. To qualify for Peabody funds, each recipient had to be a free common school, have an enrollment of at least 100 students, operating funds at least twice the amount of the very Peabody grant, and a minimum of one teacher for each fifty students, training.

In 1880, there were approximately 200 students at Fairfield Institute. Sources indicate that of the students, 100 were studying to become teachers and 20 were preparing to enter the ministry. This source also noted that Rev. Richardson "has for a number of years labored most acceptably as principal" with the assistance of three women teachers (one of whom was his daughter, Clara).

For many years Richardson was active in both the Fairfield County Teachers' Association and the annual local Teachers' Institute, held in May 1887, Richardson resigned as head of the Fairfield Institute.

Closing exercises for the school were conducted at (Calvary) Presbyterian Church. The *News and Herald* reported the "entertainment was a very interesting one, and the thorough showed thorough training." Later in the summer

Richardson left Winnsboro to retire in Delaware.

Fairfield Institute continued to operate for a year after Rev. Richardson's departure, but no further accounts of the school appear in the local newspaper. A final mention of the school appeared in the *Columbia Register* of April 28, 1888, in a front page story on Fairfield County, which stated "...there is in Winnsboro, a Presbyterian Mission School, with some 200 pupils..."

The Institute closed permanently at the end of the school term, merging with the Brainard Institute in Chester.

Kelly Miller

Kelly Miller was born in Fairfield County July 23, 1863. His parents, Kelly Miller Sr. and Elizabeth Miller were both natives of Fairfield County. Kelly Miller, Sr., born about 1827, was one of a very small number of free blacks living in the county prior to the Civil War. His parents, Isaac and Milly Miller, were both free blacks. In addition to Kelly Miller, Sr., their children were Isaac, Rebecca, Elizabeth (or Eliza), Thomas and Mary. Records indicate that Harriet Bird was another daughter. There may have been additional children. The Millers were closely related by marriage to the Oglesby and Bird families - other free black families in the county.

Kelly Miller Sr. was listed as a mechanic in the 1860 census and as a farm laborer in later censuses. His brother, Isaac Miller, represented

Fairfield County in the South Carolina House of Representatives from 1872 to 1874.

Kelly Miller, Jr.'s mother, Elizabeth Miller, was a slave. At the time of his birth, his mother belonged to the Rabh family, who lived west of Winnsboro near Mill Creek. It was not unusual for free blacks to marry slaves or slaves from neighboring plantations to marry. This situation often required couples to live apart much of the time. Children of free black/slave couples took the status of the mother; this made Kelly Miller, Jr., a slave at birth.

Kelly Sr. and Elizabeth Miller had thirteen children, according to a sketch which appeared in a 1946 *News and Herald*. Census records of 1870 and 1880 identify eight of the children: Eliza, Matilda, Henry, Adam, Isaac, Kelly, Thomas, and Robert. The sketch identified another son, John Miller.

As a youngster, Kelly Miller, Jr. first attended neighborhood black schools, coming to Winnsboro in the 1870s to attend the Fairfield Institute. A mathematical genius Kelly Miller excelled at the Institute. In 1880, he was awarded a scholarship to continue his education at the Preparatory School of Howard University. Rev. Willard Richardson, principal of Fairfield Institute paid his fare to Washington, D.C.

In two years he finished the three year preparatory course of Latin, Greek and mathematics and entered Howard University, graduating in

The Fairfield County Historical Society cordially invites you to the unveiling of a historical marker honoring Kelly Miller and the Fairfield Institute on Sunday, February 2, 1986

3 p.m.

South Congress Street
Winnsboro, South Carolina

(Continued on Page 3-B)