

Local Schools



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PBJHS Students Tour Garfield Street Landmarks

MARCH 18TH 2019 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Poplar Bluff Junior High seventh graders toured Wheatley School, Rattler's Grocery and Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church—all of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places—to learn about the cultural significance of the landmarks within the community.

The English class recently read “The Watsons go to Birmingham” about the civil rights movement, and then on Tuesday, Feb. 26, had the privilege of hearing from local black leaders about their first-hand experiences growing up through integration, in recognition of Black History Month.

“School was everything; it was the hub of the community,” recalled Carolyn Cooper, who retired from teaching at Junior High after 34 years. She noted that going from home life out into society “was like living in two different worlds.”

Cooper was a graduate of the Wheatley Class of 1957, the last year before integration took effect within the Poplar Bluff school system beginning with upperclassmen at the secondary grade level. This was three years following Brown vs. the Board of Education, the milestone United States Supreme Court decision that established equal education in public schools.

She was accompanied by another lifelong educator, Genell Cole, who attended school for one year at Wheatley in the seventh grade before transferring to Junior High. “They prepared us intellectually... but not emotionally,” Cole said. “Suddenly, I was the only

little black child in class, like Ruby Bridges.”

During a tour of the old classrooms upstairs—now a museum—Colvin McDonald shared about the legacy of the Wheatley Tigers, the school basketball team he was a member of prior to attending PBHS as a senior during the year of integration.

McDonald informed students that the varsity Tigers won the first state championship for Poplar Bluff in 1937 through the Missouri State Negro Interscholastic Athletic Association. Before blacks and whites competed in sports together, he said, they would occasionally scrimmage against the Mules outside of the public eye. “We beat those guys most of the time,” McDonald claimed.

Serving as chaperone for the day, Tammie Newman, a Junior High communication arts teacher, shared how she attended fifth and sixth grade at Wheatley when the building was a neighborhood school within the R-I district in the mid-1970s, showing the students her former classrooms.

Afterward the students went across the street to Rattler’s Grocery, a corner store that recently celebrated its 60th anniversary, and Newman remembered how her classmates used to look forward to going there after school for penny candies. The second-generation owner, Rex Rattler Sr., reminisced how he grew up helping his parents operate the store, and also attended school and church, all within a block radius on Garfield Street.

From there the students visited Pleasant Hill, next door to Wheatley, and learned about the over 100-year-old congregation from church secretary DaRonda Robinson. She took the seventh graders to the kitchen, explaining how Wheatley did not have its own cafeteria, so the students would often eat there over the lunch hour.

Katherine Harris of the Wheatley Historical Preservation Association was credited for organizing the event. She received assistance from a group of volunteers of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, whom she made a connection with during the recent Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at Wheatley.

“We are proud of the growing partnership we have with the Wheatley Historical Preservation Association, and feel that this unique relationship presents an opportunity for our students in Poplar Bluff that are not available in other communities,” stated Dr. Scott Dill, R-I superintendent. “By virtue of this historical landmark, our students have been afforded the chance to be a part of the living history of this community and to hear first-hand accounts about this amazing facility.”

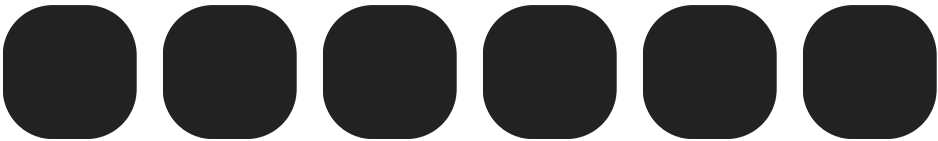
Pictured: Students learn about the Tuskegee Airmen, black military pilots during WWII, from Vietnam veteran Alan Johnson.

Photo and article submitted by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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