

# History of Tuscaloosa High School

*Compiled by Richard Hamner, John Allen, George Taylor, and Shirley Lollar*

Before 1885, education was conducted in private homes and some churches. In 1885 the state legislature decreed that the "Tuscaloosa Graded School System" be established for the purpose of public education.

But from 1885 to 1890, all grades went to school in Stafford School. In 1890, a "High School Department" was established in Stafford School. John Allen remembers attending the old Stafford Elementary School from 1949 to 1955, when it was torn down to make way for the new, multi-story Stafford Hotel, which later became the Ramada Inn.

"In about 1906, during the administration of Governor Braxton Bragg Comer, parents were told for the first time that their children *had* to attend school until they were sixteen."

*Inside Alabama, A Personal History of My State, by Harvey H. Jackson III*

"Tuscaloosa's first high school was constructed in 1910 at 10<sup>th</sup> Street and Queen City Avenue."

*Frank Blair, president, Board of Trade, 1900-1911*

In 1922, the citizens voted a \$350,000 bond issue for a new high school and other education needs.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Street school building became the Junior High School in 1925 when the new building on 21st Avenue was occupied. It was built in 1924 (date carved over the entrance), but not occupied for classes until the fall of 1925.

"Tuscaloosa High School football team won the national championship in 1926 when it skunked Senn High of Chicago 42-0. That was a mythical title, because there were no such rankings. But we claimed it just the same. The THS Black Bears had seven straight perfect seasons, '25-'31, something like 65 games in a row. Coach Paul Burnum might've been elected governor, but I'm glad he didn't run, 'cause I did."

*W.W. Brandon, president of the Chamber of Commerce, 1927-28*

During the Great Depression, city workers and teachers took a 10-percent pay cut, and the city and schools continued in full operation. The county schools, however, closed.

"We voted a bond issue in 1936 for a new city hall that included an auditorium, also a police station/jail. Oliver Lock and Dam was under construction in 1937. Already completed were two new grammar schools and an addition to Tuscaloosa High, where our Black Bears were state champions in football and basketball in 1935."

*Frank Fitts Sr., president, chamber of Commerce, 1937*

“Under Swede Kendall, who coached at Tuscaloosa High for 20 years, the Black Bears were state champions in football in 1949.”

*W. Hilliard Nicol, president, Chamber of Commerce, 1942-43*

A new Tuscaloosa High School was built on 15<sup>th</sup> Street East in 1954 and occupied for classes in 1955. The cost of the building was \$2,002,518 and \$262,475 was spent for equipment, grounds, paving and shrubbery. The building was located on a 33-acre school site and contained 188,000 square feet of floor space. Plans called for the development of a practice football field, track, tennis courts and other recreational areas when the funds were available.

Thirteen hundred and sixty-five students were enrolled in the first year.

The building on 21<sup>st</sup> Street became the Junior High School and ultimately the Board of Education office.

“Tuscaloosa High was state champion in basketball and track in 1955.”

*George Lamaistre, president, Chamber of Commerce, 1954-55*

The THS yearbook for 1961, *The Black Warrior*, notes that it is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tuscaloosa High School, and included photos of the old school and the yearbook's editor.

In 1979 Central High School was formed by the merger of Tuscaloosa High School on 15<sup>th</sup> Street East and Druid High School in West End in response to a federal desegregation order. The school operated on two campuses, a west campus (West Central) made up of the former Druid High property and enrolled grades 9 and 10, and an east campus (East Central on the former Tuscaloosa High grounds enrolled grades 11 and 12. In 1999, the desegregation order was lifted, and two new high schools, Bryant and Northridge, were opened in 2003. In 2004, all Central students were transferred to West Central so that East Central could be demolished for a new Central High facility. The \$31 million school building was completed in 2006 and houses all current Central students.

According to school archivist, Shirley Lollar, the earliest copy of the THS *Black Warrior* yearbook available is the 1915 edition. But Richard Hamner reports that one of his classmates (THS 1962) has a copy of the 1914 edition.

No one knows for certain how Tuscaloosa High School came up with the nickname of Black Bears. But one story of the origin is told more than others. When Tuscaloosa was founded, there were black bears in the area. Another theory floating about is that the black in the name (Black Bears) comes from the Choctaw Indian, Tuskaloosa, meaning Black Warrior, for whom the city was named.