

Community Building – Rico Elementary School

A Fulton County Public School for the Rico Community

When the cornerstone of the Rico Elementary School was laid on April 15, 1933, the community must have felt in high cotton, having received such a modern building as part of Fulton County's school system. The brick building would include a central hallway and five rooms, indoor restrooms, and coal heating; and it would accommodate students in grades 1-7.

Down the road and across the street from Rico Methodist Church, students previously attended the Old Rico School. Built between 1880-1889 when the community was a part of Campbell County, the four-room wooden building had no indoor plumbing. At recess a student would go to the church and bring back a bucket of water for the children, and everyone drank from the same dipper.



Miss Hutcheson's class. Rico Elementary School 1934.
Contributed by Sandra Huffmaster.

As rustic as the Old Rico School was, it was still more modern than the first school in the community. Piney Woods School was a two-room framed building with a rock chimney at each end. Located where Providence Baptist Church now stands, it was likely built before 1852 in a rustic style that resembled nearby homes, as was the custom of the period. In a story told by Helen Collins Selman in her 1970s article, *We Wanted to be Called Green Eyes*, "When the school caught fire, the teacher sent George Greene to Geat Herndon's store to borrow a bucket. Mr. Herndon had a customer so George waited until Mr. Herndon asked what he wanted. The school house burned down."

School days, school days, dear old Golden Rule days

We asked residents to share their memories of attending the Rico Elementary School. They said it was a unique experience due to its small student to teacher ratio, dedicated teachers, and strong parent and community involvement.

Tom Peek, who attended from 1936-1942, said school was pretty basic back then. "We learned reading and writing and arithmetic; we didn't have fancy computers. Some of our classrooms had three grades in one room. The teacher would start a lesson and give an assignment to one grade and then move on to the next. Most of the boys wore dungarees, so they'd be ready and dressed for farm chores before or after school. We also did chores at school: we brought in the coal and stoked the heaters, and we drew water from the well for our indoor drinking water. When I graduated, there were only four kids in my 7th grade class: Me, Jim Langley, Donald Reeves and Geneva Gammonds."

Patsy Teal, who attended in 1943, said she only went to the 1st grade at Rico before the school closed. She then transferred to Charles Riley School in Palmetto and remained there until she was ready for high school. Her account of the school closing mirrors the history written by Pat Hall, who was the school's principal in 1961. Pat wrote, "The school was closed during World War II because of gas rationing. When it re-opened, about 1948, the seventh graders remained at Charles Riley. The county planned to send the fifth and sixth graders to Charles Riley along with the seventh graders. There was a community uproar and a meeting with the county administrators reestablished Rico as a 1-7 grade school."



Tom Peek, who works at the Palmetto Hardware Store, still looks dapper in his dungarees.

Kenny Smith, who attended 1948-1954, said there were big coal heaters in every room. He remembers the time one of those heaters caught on fire. “The closest fire department was over 20 miles away in College Park. They had a heck of time getting here because they were in an open fire truck on a cold day, and back then the roads in our community weren’t paved.” As for his education, Kenny said Evelyn Jones was a great teacher. She taught grades 4 and 5 (all the teachers were combination-grade teachers) and the one year when there was only one student in the 6th grade, she taught him too.

Ken Langley, who attended 1957-1963, remembers the school had three classrooms, a closet/occasional classroom, a library and a cafeteria; with an addition added in 1961.

Although Ken transferred to another school for one year in 1961, Pat Hall’s history describes the school’s addition. “During the construction of the addition, the 6th and 7th grades were taught in the back of the Rico Methodist Church in the kitchen. There was running water at the sink, two out houses – “ladies” and “gents”, and a pet church mouse who appeared daily. The teacher drove the school bus, “Jezebel” between the church and school when the weather was cold or rainy.”

Ken also recalled one of his favorite teachers, Virginia Philips. “She was a real disciplinarian, but one of the best teachers I ever had. When she was teaching us cursive handwriting, there were two ways to make the letter “r” and if you didn’t do it her way, (up, out, and back down), she marked it wrong. Another teacher would grab you by the ear and pull you out of the chair if you misbehaved.”

Sandra Huffmaster, who was a teacher at the Rico Elementary School from 1979-1980 shares her memories.

“Forty years ago, in August 1979, I began my new position as a 5th/6th grade combination class teacher at the Rico Elementary School. Back then we had four combination classrooms with around 20 students in each class, and the school had a reputation for being one of the best in our area. While it was a rural school in character, it was more like a private school run by a community, with teachers, staff, and parents (both past and present) all actively engaged in providing the best education for their students. I remember that year, I had my entire class over to my house for a cook out. That would never be done in a school today.

“Over the years, I had the privilege of teaching nearly every child in the community, and those kids became an extended family to all of us who worked at the school. For me they were literally like a family as after the school closed, I moved with them from the Rico School to Charles Riley School, to Bear Creek School over the following years until retirement.



Ken Langley, Row 1, left 2; and **Judy (Bridges) Henderson**, Row 2, Left 2 in their 1959-1960 class picture at Rico Elementary School.



Sandra Huffmaster's 5th and 6th graders at work.
Photo from The Sun newspaper (01/10/1980)

"The school building too was an important part of our community. If only those walls could talk, they could share the history of a time when the school day included more than teaching and learning the three Rs – it included teaching children to be social, artistic, inquisitive, and eager learners. And the day included values important to the community, such as praying before lunchtime meals, beginning the day with the "Pledge of Allegiance," and singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

"When Fulton County announced its plans to close the school in June 1980, the community, PTA, parents, and staff were devastated. They fought very hard at Board Meetings to save their school—but with only 80 students, 4 teachers, a principal, a secretary, 2 lunchroom workers, and 2 custodians Fulton County determined it was not cost effective, including the age of the building. I doubt there will ever be another school like Rico Elementary School."

Fulton County School Board approved the building of the Rico Elementary School in 1932. Construction was completed in 1933. The school closed in June 1980.

6. We recommend the erection of a new building at Rico, Central and Sandtown to take the place of the present dilapidated building.

Upon report of the southside committee that it had visited the Rico school and found same to be completed, it was agreed to accept the building and make final payment.

RICO SCHOOL	
General Contract	
Dry Toilet Equipment	\$6,485.93
Finish and pivot hardware	259.07
Architectural services	142.59
Digging well	414.54
Additional strip of land	60.00
	25.00
Total	\$7,397.13



September Meeting

The Rico P.T.A. held its first meeting for the scholastic year 1942-43 on Wednesday afternoon September 8, 1943 at the school building.

The meeting was called to order by the President, Mrs. L.P. Comby, and opened by singing "America". The association then joined in praying together the Lord's Prayer.

