

In Memory of G.P. Bowser's Movement
Fort Smith, AR
1933-1946



Dean of Black Church of Christ Preachers

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF G. P. BOWSER

George Phillip Bowser was born in Murry County, Tennessee, on February 17, 1874. Inspired by his mother who instilled in him a desire for an education, Bowser finished high school and entered Roger Williams College on a scholarship. This college was operated by the African Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. It was while attending this school that Bowser became a member of the African Methodist Church. Because of Bowser's intellectual ability, a bishop of that denomination saw that he received special training so that he might become a missionary to Africa. This plan, however, did not materialize because Bowser lost his scholarship; apparently, he had failed to take the advice of the bishop who had told him he must concentrate more on his study on the Methodist doctrine than on the Bible. Although the scholarship was lost, Bowser, with the help of his faithful wife, Fannie Billips, completed his education at this college. Bowser then became a member of the Church of Christ, of which his parents were already members, his father having been a pioneer minister of the Church of Christ.

Bowser became one of the outstanding and better prepared ministers of the Church of Christ. He knew from experience how the African Methodist Church was emphasizing education as the means of accomplishing their objective of reaching the masses. He realized that only through education could the challenges facing Christianity be met, and the idea of an educated ministry had not been emphasized too strongly among the Negro members of the Churches of Christ up to this time. Bowser, realizing this fact, established a Christian school in 1902.

Bowser began his school in the meeting house of Jackson Street Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee. Because of the lack of facilities for a school in this church building, this little school moved to Silver Point, Tennessee a few years later, where Bowser, with the aid of a few white co-religionists, purchased ten acres of land on which to erect school buildings. The first building to be erected on this land was a two-story frame building with a chapel and classrooms on the first floor, and living quarters for students, teachers, and the Bowser family on the second floor. This building was later replaced by a brick building which is presently being used as a public school in Silver Point. The next building to be erected was a one-room building which was to be used as a printing shop for the Christian Echo and other tracts and booklets used in the Bible Department of the school. A home for President Bowser was the third building to be erected. This home, however, because of the increased enrollment of out-of-town students, also became a dormitory for girls. The fee for room and board was only six dollars per month.

The curriculum was composed primarily of Bible subjects such as surveys of the Old and New Testaments, although secular subjects were offered.

The name of the school was The Silver Point Christian Institute. Its board of directors was composed of three outstanding pioneer Church of Christ ministers who held educational views similar to Bowser's. These men helped guide this little school in Silver Point until 1919 when another attempt was made to establish the school in Nashville, where it was believed that the school would fare much better numerically and financially. After they had purchased the property of an old school in North Nashville, the issue arose between some of the members of the Church of Christ in that city and Bowser as to the expediency of beginning an all-out effort for a permanent school. While the pros and cons of this issue were being discussed, Bowser moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas in 1933.

After moving to Arkansas, Bowser tried to persuade his co-religionists to sell the property that had been purchased in Nashville, and use that money for the establishment of a school in fort Smith. As a result of this request, it became necessary to call a meeting of all the leading Negro ministers of the Churches of Christ to decide what to do with the Nashville property. Through the efforts of three leading evangelists of the time, meetings were held in 1933 and 1934 in which it was decided, primarily by the members of the Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, not to sell the property in Nashville although Negro Churches of Christ were not ready or financially able to establish and support a school at that time. However, they maintained the property there looking forward to establishing a school in the future.

But Bowser was not one to put off until tomorrow what should be done today. He wanted a school immediately. And although the idea of having a school was temporarily abandoned by the majority of the members of the Church of Christ, Bowser, with the spirit of Joshua and Caleb who said in regard to taking Canaan, "we are able," still had the burning desire to find a Christian school for the members of his race.

With this determination, Bowser, having decided that he would conduct a private school in his home and teach any students who would come to him, especially ministerial students, opened classes in the fall of 1938. His first class in Fort Smith was composed of twenty-three neighborhood children, their ages ranging from five to thirteen years. He was later given the use of the auditorium of the Ninth Street Church of Christ in fort smith in which to conduct his classes. Hearing of the school, several ministerial students began coming to Bowser for instruction. Most of these were married men

from other cities and towns who brought their families with them. Having no money, they were given lodging in the home of Bowser and some other members of the Church of Christ in that city, and they earned their support by helping Bowser in the **Christian Echo** print shop. Tom Henry Busby, an outstanding Negro evangelist of the Church of Christ, was Bowser's strongest supporter at this time.

Seeing the great faith and determination of Bowser to establish a school, John Steve Winston, who was the minister of the Church of Christ at Sherman, Texas, suggested that a meeting be held in Dallas, Texas, for the purpose of acquiring organized financial support for this school. This meeting convened on November 9, 1938, in the auditorium of the Oak Cliff Church of Christ. It was attended by a few Texas ministers and members of the Church of Christ, the majority of whom lived in the city of Dallas. Of the one hundred and fifty dollars raised by collections at this meeting and given to Bowser, fifty dollars was used as the down payment on a two-story frame house in Fort Smith that later became a school building. Being encouraged with this financial aid and other commitments from these ministers and Christians, Bowser suggested to Winston that he should form a national meeting of this kind to be held the following November in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

On November 9, 1939, the first national school meeting of the Church of Christ convened in Fort Smith, Arkansas. This meeting was attended by fifteen preachers from different parts of the United States.

The results of this meeting were encouraging to Bowser, who in spite of his advancing years was still striving to establish a permanent Christian school for Negroes. A board of directors was formed at this meeting to help Bowser in directing the affairs of the school, and the Bowser Christian Institute was adopted as the formal name of the school. Liberal donations were also promised for the future. The student body was increased and another teacher was added to the faculty. Also Bowser's daughter, Thelma Holt, came to help her father with the school.

Following the great meeting of 1939, optimism for the Bowser Christian Institute was at its apex. The institute was now preparing to function as a genuine school. Tuition was free, board and lodging per month were fourteen dollars, and the incidental fee for the school year was one dollar and fifty cents. The curriculum embraced kindergarten, primary, grammar, and high school, with special training for ministers and church workers. All students were taught the Bible daily along with secular courses. A two-story building with a chapel and two recitation rooms on the first floor, and ten rooms on the second floor was obtained as the permanent school building. This was the brightest period of the Bowser Christian Institute at Fort Smith.

But the school never prospered in Fort Smith as the leaders had hoped. The result was that plans were made to move the school to Texas because the Churches of Christ were much stronger in Texas, and the White Churches of Christ in Texas were more missionary minded toward the Negro than they were in Arkansas, and were interested in establishing a school of this kind.

In 1945, Winston reported to the annual lectureship meeting convening in Oklahoma City, that the possibilities of establishing a permanent school in Texas were very good, and it was suggested that he further explore these possibilities. In the meantime, because of the lack of adequate support, and the advanced ages of Bowser and his wife, the property in Fort Smith was sold and the school discontinued. With the money from this sale, the indebtedness of the school was paid, and the balance was given to Bowser for moving expenses to Detroit, Michigan, where he was to live with his daughter while awaiting the completion of the plans for a permanent school in Texas.

While awaiting for this development, Bowser opened a small school in the educational building of the Jos Campau Church of Christ in Detroit, Michigan. This school, known as the Bowser Christian Institute, as its Arkansas predecessor had been, consisted of grammar and high school with teachers who were approved by the state board of education of Michigan.

THE BOWSER CHRISTIAN INSTITUTE

Fort Smith, Ark.

The seventh term of the school will open Sept. 10th. We hope to enroll at least 30 out of town students. I suggest that a number of congregations encourage one from their congregation to attend. If they are not able to pay their way, assist them.

Board and lodging per month will be \$14.00.
Incidental fee for the term \$1.50.
Each student is required to bring 2 sheets, 2 pillow cases, 2 quilts.
Tuition - Free.

* * *

Our course embraces: Kindergarten, primary, grammar, high school, and special ministerial training. Our school is not a reformatory, yet we try to improve all who may attend. A tobacco user is not an ideal student, so lay aside the filthy habit if you desire making good in our school. Boys and girls, men and woman, old and young are admitted.

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The school has no endowment, or any financial backing. Hence is supported by free will offering. All are kindly and urgently asked to donate to this worthy cause. Each Colored congregation is asked to take a collection once a month for this work. Send donations to G.P. Bowser, 2000 N. 14th St., Fort Smith, Ark.

G.P. Bowser's Fort Smith, Arkansas School Movement

By J. S. Winston

In 1933, G.P. Bowser with his wife Fannie, moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas and purchased a home at 2000 14th Street and established a printing shop for publishing his **Christian Echo** religious publication. He and Sis. Bowser worship with the 9th and "S" Street Church of Christ where he taught Bible classes.

1934 Christian School

Bro. Bowser began his Christian School. 9th and "S" Street Church of Christ brethren granted him the privilege to use their church building for his school. Classes were offered, 3rd through 9th grades.

- Tuition - 50 cents for children per week
- Adult - three nights per week 1 dollar (if they had money to pay or not)
- Ministerial students - 11 dollars per month with requirement to help work in print shop
- Women students helped Sis. Bowser with cooking and housework.

1935 School Movement

R. N. Hogan with G. E. Steward, J. S. Winston and Levi Kennedy, launched a school movement to establish a brotherhood Christian School in Fort Smith. The movement was not successful. Bro. Bowser continued his little school in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

1938 School Movement

J. S. Winston with the endorsement of Bro. Bowser and encouragement of R. N. Hogan, G. E. Steward and Levi Kennedy held a school movement meeting in Dallas, Texas. The meeting was well received and encouraged by brethren of Texas.

1939 Fort Smith, Arkansas Special Call Brotherhood Meeting

The result of the Dallas, Texas school meeting Bro. Bowser had J. S. Winston to announce a brotherhood call meeting to be held November 5-8 in Fort Smith, AR.

The meeting was well attended by brethren from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Tennessee.

Board of Trustees was selected and appointed with chairman, secretary and business manager. The name Bowser Christian Institute was adopted and G. P. Bowser appointed president.

Classes for 3rd thru 9th grades offered were: reading, writing, English, Latin, mathematics, history and Bible. Ministers were taught English, Latin, Greek and Bible education. Teachers were: Maude Penny, English and math; Thelma Holt, reading, writing and history. G. P. Bowser, advanced English, Latin, Greek, history and Bible.

1942 Purchased Building

Bro. Bowser purchased a three-story frame house (11 rooms) with a vacant corner lot for a school building. 1st floor was for chapel and classrooms, 2nd and 3rd floor for men housing, kitchen, dining room, women students housed in home of Bro. & Sis. Bowser and Bro. and Sis. Helm.

1945-46 School Closed

Because of few churches in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Fort Smith a small city offered very little employment for students; a decision was made to move the school to Texas; Dallas or Fort Worth area. Fort Smith school

building property would be sold, indebtedness liquidated and adequate funds from balance sale to be given to Bro. Bowser for moving to Detroit, Michigan where he would live until school was ready to open in Texas.

May, 1946, Fort Smith Bowser Christian Institute closed. (Additional names of students: U. Shields with wife and daughter, Russell Moore & wife, Furry & Wife and daughter, Marhsahellen Talley, Ft. Worth, Texas.)

1947 Bowser's School in Detroit, Michigan

Elders of Jose' Compu Church of Christ granted Bro. Bowser permission to conduct his school in their education building. Bro. Bowser continued Detroit School until the school was ready to open in Texas.

1947-48 Southern Bible Institute

The Board of Trustees consisted of white and Negro brethren who organized and opened school in Fort Worth, Texas. The name was changed to Southern Bible Institute. The school was established Lake Como Church of Christ building.

In the fall of 1948 the school opened. J. S. Winston served as President, G.C. Washington as Dean, G.P. Bowser as head of Bible Department, Imogene McIntire, teacher and office clerk.

1948-49 School Moved to Terrell, Texas

Southern Bible Institute continued in Fort Worth until Military School property was purchased in Terrell, Texas. The ministerial students who attended were Jacob McClinton, Fred Geeter, H. E. Mitchell, A.C. Christman, L.C. Harris and Alvertice Bowdre.

Southwestern Christian College

When the school property was purchased in Terrell, Texas the school name was changed to Southwestern Christian College.

It was the consensus of the black members of the board of trustees to make requests as to what brother would be appointed president of Southwestern Christian College. The school would need their experience in establishing a Christian school as well as their financial support.

1949-50 Southwestern Began (An Associate College)

The presidents (white brethren): E.W. McMillian, A. Barber, A.V. Isbell.

1967 First Black President

Jack Evans was appointed the first black president of Southwestern Christian College. In 1977 it became an accredited Junior College. In 1980 it became a Senior College for Bible Religious Education, Computer Science. Assets include land purchases of 22 acres consisting of women's dormitory, men's dormitory, physical education gymnasium, dining hall, auditorium, learning center, liberal arts building and remodeled student center. These assets of the college are estimated at a net worth of 7 million dollars.

