

School Segregation and Emma McGowan

Carlisle had the first charter public school system in Pennsylvania starting in 1836. These were not schools that were equitable for all of Carlisle's community members. While segregated schools for students of color did exist, students did not receive a Carlisle High School diploma until 1882. In 1897, several African American parents fought for equitable rights. One proactive parent, Mary E. Brown, took the School District of Carlisle to court for not allowing her son Edward to attend the white high school. The school district argued that Edward Brown never applied properly to attend the school, that they only received petitions for "equal facilities" or schools. The local court ruled in favor of the school district claiming it was not based on discrimination but rather that no transfer request had been made.

According to Cumberland County Historical Society records, the "Colored High School" was officially discontinued in July 1919. Former students describe a lottery system to attend the high school that limited the number of students of color that could attend. The elementary schools remained segregated until the 1948-1949 school year.

Emma Louise Thompson McGowan, 1876-1966

Emma Thompson was born to Laura White Thompson and Caleb Thompson just over a decade after the end of the Civil War near Winchester Virginia. In the early 1880s, the family relocated to Carlisle. The oldest of sixteen children, she was nine years old when she began working part time to help support her family. She graduated from Carlisle's black segregated high school in 1894 and began teaching in the segregated schools in 1896 until 1901. In 1902, she married the minister at Third Presbyterian Church, Rev. Osborne Howard McGowan. Born in the West Indies, Rev. McGowan was 15 years her senior. The family left Carlisle moving to Buffalo, NY then Montreal, Canada before arriving in Detroit. During their years together, Rev. McGowan had grown increasingly angry and eventually violent. After the birth of their last child, the abuse reached new heights, as he was furious that the child was female. As a strong independent woman, Emma McGowan refused to be abused by her husband and filed for divorce, an act which was not looked highly upon during this time period. She was awarded a divorce in 1917.

Ms. McGowan was the mother to six children but two passed away. After her divorce, she returned to Carlisle with her four children. She resumed teaching in the segregated schools and had an enormous influence on the students she taught. It is important to note that while living as a single mother and teaching full time, she would take the train on Saturdays to attend classes at what is now Shippensburg University in order to acquire a required certification for teaching. Ms. McGowan retired from teaching in 1943. She never taught in a fully desegregated school system but was active in the push for desegregation. She had a profound impact on the community and her students. In 2002, Carlisle High School's West Building was named in honor of this strong woman.