



Memories of Lincoln School, a book review

by Kurt Prenzler, CPA, Madison County
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As a history buff and avid reader, I enjoy learning about the past of Madison County.

A year ago, after reading "Crusade Against Slavery: Edward Coles, Pioneer of Freedom," I wrote a short review. Coles was the second governor of Illinois (1822-1826) and he lived in Edwardsville.

Coles freed his slaves, bought them farms in Pin Oak Township and led the fight that kept Illinois from becoming a slave state.

Many may not realize the link between Coles and Lincoln School, which is located on North Main Street in Edwardsville.

Today, anyone driving past the old school is likely to notice the abundance of activity taking place. The historic building is now being converted into a cultural center.

A former student, Mannie Jackson, purchased the building to preserve its history. Jackson is a highly successful businessman, and a former owner of the Harlem Globetrotters. He has generously contributed to projects in the Edwardsville community.

I just finished reading "Lincoln School Memories: A History of Blacks in Edwardsville, Illinois," written by Nola Jones Williams. Williams is the granddaughter of "C.C." Jones, the principal at Lincoln School from 1902 to 1951.

Williams dedicated the book to Alma Aitch Jackson, who taught first and second grades at the school from 1924 to 1951. It contains photos, memories, poems and a history of the black community in Edwardsville.

In 1877, a segregated, tax-supported school for black children opened in the building that formerly housed the Madison County Courthouse. This area became known as Freedom Square and was the spot where Coles officially “freed” his slaves.

In 1912, the old building was torn down and a larger school was built to include a high school department. In 1951, Lincoln School closed for renovation following the integration of the Edwardsville School District. The school reopened in 1952 as an integrated elementary school.

Alma Aitch Jackson and other teachers at the school were not provided jobs, and were forced to find other employment. The school, along with the Wesley Chapel A.M.E. and Mt. Joy Baptist churches, formed the heart of the black community.

The district closed the school in 1972 and since then it’s been used for various purposes, including a shopping mall and a fraternity house. In 2007, the Bank of Edwardsville acquired the property and sold it to Mr. Jackson, who later endowed it to Lewis and Clark Community College.

Thanks to Mr. Jackson, once again the building will serve as an institution for learning. It is scheduled to reopen this year as the Mannie Jackson Center for Humanities.

I recommend Williams’ book to anyone interested in learning about Edwardsville’s black history. A copy is available at the Edwardsville Public Library.