

## Laing School History

Submitted by: Dorothy E. Fludd, BA., MLS., MA.

The school known as Laing had been called by different names throughout its history. It had been called the "Negro school," the School for Colored Children, Laing Industrial School, Laing Industrial and Normal School, and Laing High School from its establishment in 1866, in a shelled out church which had been abandoned after the Civil War. That church, Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church, then severely damaged, has since been restored, improved and still survives at Church and Hibben Streets in the Town of Mount Pleasant, Charleston County, SC.

Cornelia Hancock, a young woman who served as a nurse at Gettysburg was credited with the founding of the school and became its first principal. The school began with the mission to provide an opportunity for recently freed slaves of the Mount Pleasant area to learn to live as free men and women with a desire for better living, high ideals and good citizenship, and to make worthwhile contributions.

Hancock journeyed to this area in the company of Laura Towne, founder of the Penn School at Port Royal, Beaufort County which began several years earlier. Those ladies were on their way to Beaufort County with a brief stopover in Charleston. Whether it was serendipity or God's plan, Hancock's decision to discontinue her trip in Charleston rather than accompany Laura Towne to Port Royal proved most beneficial to the black residents of Mount Pleasant.

The school began in that church with fifty pupils, and lasted only a few months at that site. The school was forced to find other premises. In October, 1866, General Scott, U. S. Provost Marshal was ordered to provide a schoolhouse. The school moved to a brick mansion, which also served as a home for teachers. The Freedmen's Bureau provided this mansion located on Bennett and Venning Streets, which had been built by the White Brothers, owners of the local brickyard.

Two years later in 1868, a two-story school building was built by the Freedmen's Bureau on the corner of King and Common Street (Royall Avenue), on land donated by the Town of Mount Pleasant. The enrollment at the school soon grew to more than 200 persons. Known as the Industrial School, the school grew and offered seven years of schooling along with regular courses in sewing, cooking, cobbling and manual training. An earthquake destroyed the school in 1886, but it was rebuilt. A new Laing Elementary opened at King and Greenwich Streets. Laing High remained on site until 1953, when it was declared unfit, condemned and closed. A new school, Laing High School, was opened in 1953 on U.S. Highway 17 North at 6 1/2 miles from the town of Mount Pleasant. Laing High closed in 1970 with the desegregation of county schools.

It was Hancock's wish that the school be named for Emily Howland whom she felt laid the foundation for the school with her donation of the first one hundred dollars. The school was eventually named for Henry M. Laing, Treasurer of both the Friends Association for the Aid and Elevation of the Freedmen of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Abolition Society which supported and maintained the school with financial appropriations.

Abby D. Munro of Bristol, Rhode Island, joined Hancock at Laing in 1870. Munro became principal in 1876 when Hancock retired due to ill health. Munro held the position of principal for thirty-seven years. During her tenure, Munro expanded her vision, and acquired additional programs and offered much needed services along with its education. In 1882, she opened a children's Home for the Aged. Because of this, Munro and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society were

involved in a dispute for several years. The minutes of the Society, 1894, stated the value of the properties under Munro's control amounted to \$6,000.00. Munro finally relinquished control to the Society and the members voted to name the school Munro School for Destitute Children. The name, however, did not stick and the school continued to be referred to as the Laing School.

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society became Trustee of the school, which it later deeded over to the Consolidated School District #5, Charleston County South Carolina in 1940, with the stipulation that the property was to remain forever for the use of education of Negro children.

Munro edited a publication entitled the Laing School Visitor. The Visitor began in 1894 and was used to inform supporters of the progress of the school. Editorship fell to Henry W. Wilbur at the death of Munro in 1913. The school continued to grow under the Principal leadership of Ms. Antoinette O'Neill, 1913-1919, and Charlotte Ross Powell, 1919-1942. Laing graduated students from eleventh grade during this time period. During the decade of 1930's, an instructor, Ella Pearson, directed a publication entitled Laing Spectator. Ella Pearson became the Reverend Ella Pearson Mitchell, a nationally recognized clergy of the Presbyterian Church.

Laing became one of the first accredited schools educating African Americans in South Carolina during this time. Because of its status, the school was visited by a variety of nationally known personalities such as the Right Reverend Levi Coppin, Bishop the AME Church, Mr. B. F. Williams, Field Agent, James (J. F.) Williams of the Slater Fund, and Mr. D. Henry Wright, Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Mr. Langston Hughes, noted author, visited Laing in the thirties accompanied by Mrs. Ruby P. Cornwell, who taught English at Laing and also served as school librarian. Mrs. Cornwell was also credited with authorship of the lyrics of the Laing Alma Mater. Another faculty member, F. Eugene Deveaux, composed the original music for the Alma Mater.

Through the years, from the establishment in 1866 to 1970, Laing made numerous historical advances. Commencement exercises were held at the nearby Friendship A.M.E. Church until the early fifties. Over the years Laing had a variety of teachers who inspired their students to grow and excel. There were nine principals who served Laing as it operated as an all-black school. Ms. Antoinette O'Neill, vice principal under Munro and acting principal after Munro's death was the first African American as were the following six who served after her.

The nine principals who served Laing from 1866 to 1970 were:

Cornelia Hancock 1866-1876  
Abby D. Munro 1876-1913  
M. Antoinette O'Neill 1913-1919  
Charlotte Ross Powell 1919-1942  
Michael Graves 1942-1945  
John R. Collins 1945-1948  
William H. Swinton 1948-1956  
William E. Rouse 1956-1961  
Fletcher H. Linton 1961-1970

An historical marker has been erected at the site of the original Laing School at the corner of King Street and Royall Avenue (Common Street) by the Laing High School Alumni Association.

School Motto: Try to Excel  
School Colors: Blue and White  
School Mascot: Wolverine