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Henry Highland Garnet: Namesake of Garnet High School

- *By Ernest Everett Blevins*
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In 1882, C.W. Boyd moved from Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, to Charleston. Boyd would establish a Charleston-area institution named after a famous African-American pioneer.

C.W. Boyd had been educated at Georgetown High School in Ohio, the University of Cincinnati, University of Chicago and West Virginia State University in Institute. In Charleston in 1900, he established the Garnet School. That school, established to educate children of African-American descent, started small, but grew into a high school and is now a career center in Charleston.

Boyd was the first of the principals during the existence of Garnet School. He served at Garnet school until 1908, then became supervisor of Negro Schools in Charleston. He later served as a principal at Boyd Junior High, which was named for him. By 1927, the growth at Garnet High required a new building.

The Garnet High School that many Charlestonians are familiar with was built in 1928-1929 at Lewis and Shrewsbury Streets — one of the buildings that is a local landmark in The Block section of town. Warne, Tucker, Silling and Hutchison of Charleston designed the three-story brick over steel frame school.

The new school included an auditorium, cafeteria, a domestic science room, gymnasium, library, mechanical drawing, printing, science labs and sewing rooms. The school was one of three schools — along with Washington High in London and the West Virginia State College Teachers Training High — for black students in the Kanawha Valley in the 1920s. John C. Norman, the seventh registered and first black registered architect in West Virginia, designed the 1952 addition to Garnet.

Garnet High was significant to the black community in Charleston. Alumni include Reverend Leon Sullivan; cardiovascular surgeon Dr. John C. Norman, Jr.; Tony Brown (of PBS' Tony Brown's Journal); and Ivin Lee, the first woman to head a police department in West Virginia.

Garnet High closed with school desegregation after the Brown v. Board of Education case. The last commencement was held on May 25, 1956.

Garnet then became John Adams Junior High, serving until 1969 when the present John Adams Middle School was built in South Hills. The Garnet name was restored as the Garnet Adult Education Center and now the Garnet Career Center.

Boyd named his school for Henry Highland Garnet. Garnet was born about December 1815 in Kent County, Maryland. In 1824, Garnet and his family escaped slavery to New York City. Garnet attended the African Free School. He worked on ships and completed his education at Oneida Institute in Whitesboro, New York. In 1842, he served as the first pastor for Liberty Street Negro Presbyterian Church in Troy, New York.

In the 1840s, Garnet became an abolitionist. In 1843, he made his "Call to Rebellion" at the National Negro Convention, which encouraged slaves to obtain their freedom by rising against their owners. Contemporary abolitionists Frank Lloyd Garrison and Fredrick Douglass opposed this route to abolition. Garnet's "Call to Rebellion" was likely inspiration for future abolitionist activism, including John Brown's raid in Harper's Ferry in 1859.

In 1850, Garnet toured England and Scotland, speaking against slavery. England ended slavery in 1834. In 1852, Garnet traveled to Jamaica as a missionary.

Garnet supported the Liberian Movement until the outbreak of the War Between the States. Liberia was established in the mid-1820s by the American Colonization Society to resettle freed slaves. Between 1822 and 1861 about 15,000 former slaves from the United States colonized Liberia on the African continent. In 1847, Liberia gained independence. The U.S. formally recognized diplomatic relations in 1862. The capital is Monrovia, named for President James Monroe who secured money for the settlement.

Garnet recruited for the Union army in January 1863 when the military began accepting black soldiers. After the 1863 New York Riots, Garnet moved to Washington, D.C., to preach at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. On President Abraham Lincoln's birthday in 1865, Garnet became the first black man to give a sermon before the U.S. House of Representatives.

During Reconstruction, Garnet sought to continue the fight against slavery in other places such as Cuba and Brazil. In 1872, he helped organize the Cuban Anti-Slavery Committee with branches in several states. The committee sought to enlist the United States to support the Cubans in their fight for independence from Spain.

Garnet fulfilled his desire to visit Africa when President James A. Garfield appointed him as the U.S. Minister and Counsel General (now called an ambassador) in Liberia in 1881. He died in Monrovia, Liberia, on February 13, 1882, a few months after his arrival — and the year Boyd arrived in Charleston.

In 1926, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Huntington native and past president of West Virginia State College (1920-1922), established the second week of February as Negro History Week. The week coincided with the birthdays of Lincoln (Feb. 12) and Fredrick Douglass (Feb. 14). It seems appropriate to add in Garnet, who died in the same week.

From Carter Woodson's establishment of Negro History Week 93 years ago, the U.S. and Canada now celebrate Black History Month every February.

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