

African American Education in Edenton

In 1830, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a law further prohibiting enslaved men, Women, and children from learning to read and write. This harsh policy is confirmed by abolitionist Harriet Jacobs in her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Edenton's community of free African Americans did not have many official educational resources, often relying on instruction from within their community.

In 1865, near the end of the American Civil War, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) to address the population displacement caused by the conflict, and to provide resources to the newly freed men and women of the South. Records from the Eastern District office indicate the existence of two freedmen's schools in Edenton as early as November 30, 1865. The two schools served hundreds of students.

While Congress did not renew authorization for the Freedmen's Bureau in 1872, North Carolina's Constitution of 1868 provided for the creation of free public schools. Most of the funding, however, came from local sources. Schools in rural communities were often underfunded. The Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) enforced the constitutionality of "separate but equal," further allowing racial segregation and the unequal distribution of resources.

Against this backdrop, Edenton's African American community opened and operated multiple schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to public schools, parochial schools were opened at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church and Providence Baptist Church. Evalina Badham School, a semi-private school, and Edenton Normal and Industrial College, a secondary, vocational, and teacher-training school, were also established in Edenton.

In 1917, Julius Rosenwald, president of the Sears, Roebuck, and Company, and Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute, established the Rosenwald Fund. The fund offered matching grants to rural communities interested in building new schools for African Americans. White Oak and Warren Grove schools, built during the 1920-21 budget year, were two of the state's earliest Rosenwald schools. By 1930, at least five Rosenwald schools had been constructed in Chowan County.

Over time, many of the smaller African American schools were consolidated and absorbed by the Chowan County public school system. Champions of education, such as Edenton High School Principal D. F. Walker, continued to advocate for equal educational opportunities for Black students and equal resources for Black schools. By 1968, Edenton's schools were finally desegregated.

Edenton in the Civil Rights Era and Beyond

After the American Civil War, African Americans made economic, social, and political progress. Many freedmen and freedwomen were skilled in trades, adding their expertise to the economic base. African American entrepreneurship rose steadily in Edenton. That progress was halted at the turn of the century. With the passage of Jim Crow laws, North Carolina ushered in the expansion of racial segregation and the widespread disenfranchisement of African American voters.

Following World War II, many Black servicemen and service-women took a stand against racial violence and discrimination in the United States. Golden Asro Frinks, an Army veteran and Edenton business owner, was one such individual. Inspired by civil rights protestors in Washington, DC, Frinks joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and fought for social change throughout North Carolina and the rural South.

Golden Frinks began his career as a civil rights activist in 1956, with a movement to desegregate public facilities in Edenton. He organized and led groups of young people who picketed racially segregated businesses and engaged in other forms of direct action. These protests became a part of the Edenton Movement. Because Golden Frinks' home was the site of numerous Civil Rights Movement meetings, the starting point for marches, and a temporary residence for activists, the house was referred to as the "Freedom House," and was visited by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on at least one occasion. Frinks inspired political engagement through energetic action and emotional stimulation, thus becoming known as "The Great Agitator."

Golden Frinks' work with the Edenton Movement caught the attention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked Frinks to serve as North Carolina's SCLC field secretary. In this capacity, Frinks co-led the Williamston Freedom Movement and helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Golden Frinks met with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during King's visits to North Carolina. Edenton hosted Dr. King in 1962 and 1966 at the North Carolina National Guard Armory. Both times, he spoke to large crowds, inspiring further civil rights action. Dr. King's assassination, in 1968, had a profound effect on Frinks, who continued the fight for racial equality until his death in 2004.

For more information, please contact:

Historic Edenton State Historic Site

108 North Broad Street

Edenton, NC 27932

252-482-2637

edenton@ncdcr.gov

Open Tuesday-Saturday, 9:00-5:00

Closed Major Holidays

The "Freedom House" of Golden Frinks is currently under construction and will be included in future publications. It is not open to the public at this time.

Sponsored by the Chowan County Tourism Development Authority

Based on "Community, Family, Church: African American Life in Edenton, 1700's to Present"

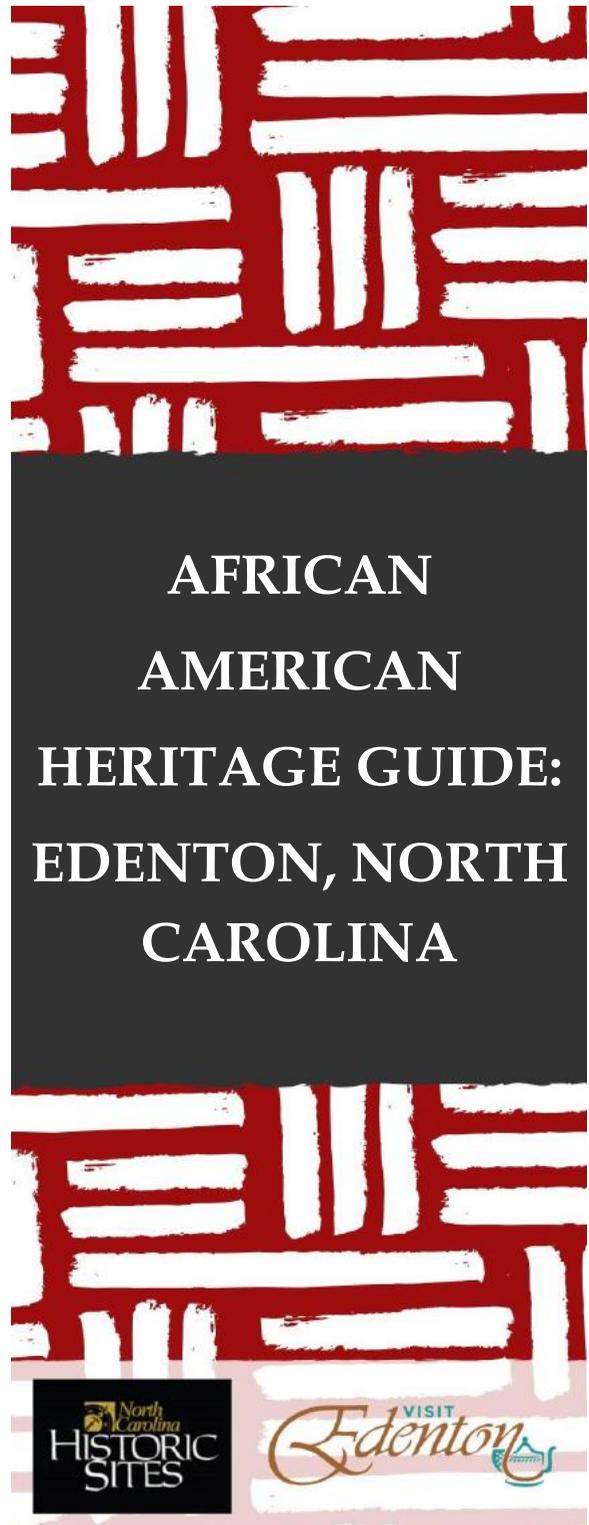
Additional Resources:

Edenton: An Architectural Portrait by Thomas Butchko

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs

Golden Asro Frinks: Telling the Unsung Song by Dr. Goldie Frinks Wells and Crystal Sanders

"Harriet Ann Jacobs: Self-Guided Tour of Her Edenton Years"



1. Kadesh African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church / Former Site of the Edenton Normal and Industrial College

119 East Gale Street

The Kadesh AMEZ Church was constructed in 1897 by one of North Carolina's leading African American builders, Hannibal Badham Sr. The structure is the third building to house the congregation, which traces its roots back to 1866. In the 1870's, the congregation adopted the name "Kadesh" in reference to the oasis where the newly-freed Israelites rested on their journey from Egypt to Canaan.

In 1895 the Kadesh AMEZ Church's congregation organized the Edenton Normal and Industrial College, and housed it in two buildings behind the present Kadesh Church. The College was one of three sectarian schools that served the African American community of Edenton. The College offered both secondary education and vocational training. When the College closed in 1928, the buildings were converted into a public African American school for grades one through seven. The buildings were demolished in the 1940's.

2. Hannibal Badham Jr. House

116 East Gale Street

The Hannibal Badham Jr. House was constructed c. 1900 by Hannibal Badham Sr. for one of his sons. The elaborate house reflects the genius and skill of the Badham family. Hannibal Sr. (1845-1918) and his sons Miles (1877-1925) and Hannibal Jr. (1879-1941) were prominent builders who constructed many of the impressive structures in Edenton.

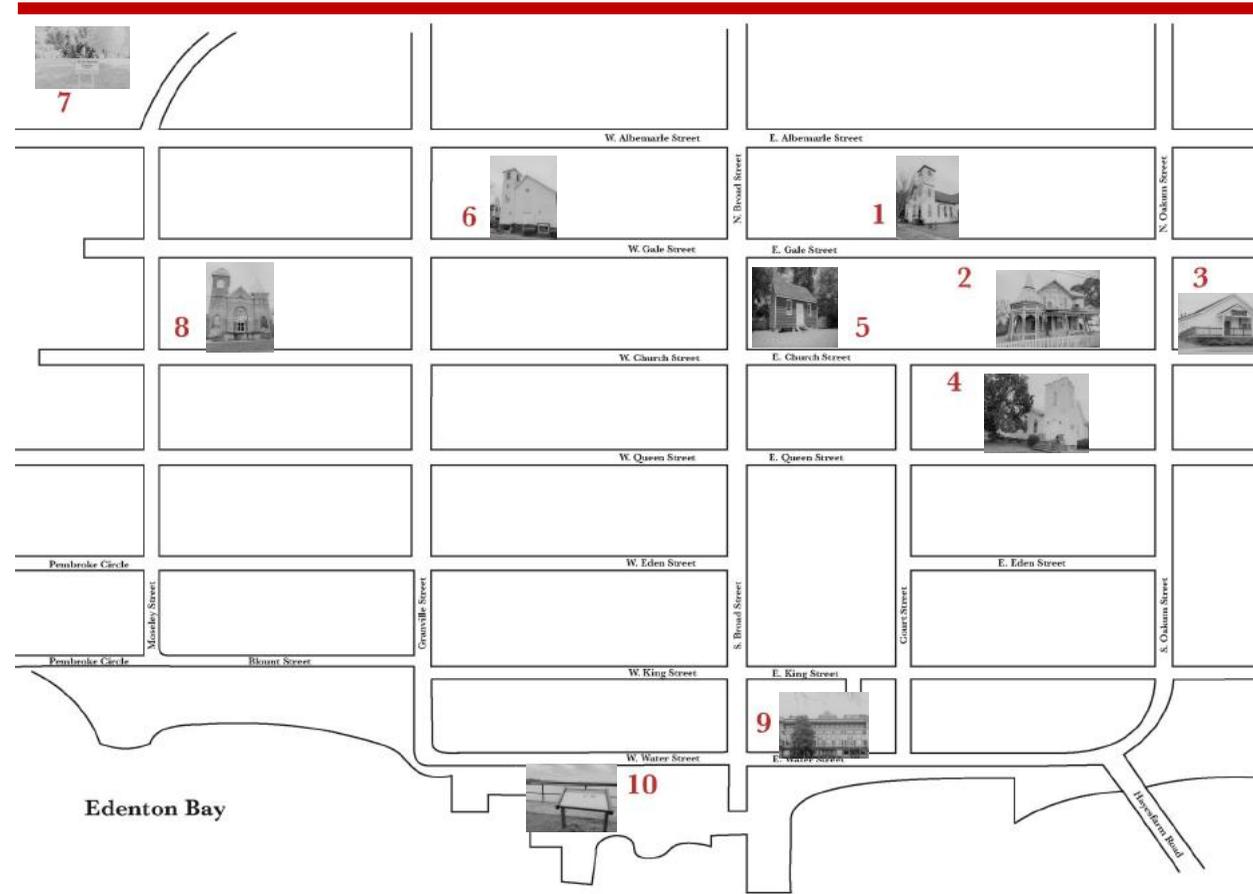
3. John R. Page Masonic Lodge #13

116 North Oakum Street

The original John R. Page Masonic Lodge #13 was built c. 1890 to house the Pride of the South Lodge Number 1691, Grand Order of Odd Fellows. One of six fraternal lodges constructed for African American fraternal organizations between 1885 and 1927, the Lodge was named in honor of John R. Page (1840-1881), one of Edenton's leading African American carpenters after the Civil War. Page also served as Chowan County's representative to the General Assembly in 1870. The construction of the original Lodge is attributed to Hannibal Badham Sr.

The building was also used by the community in other capacities, and served as a United Service Organizations (USO) Club for African American soldiers on two separate occasions. It also housed the Brown-Carver Public Library from 1947-1964. The Masons purchased the structure from the Odd Fellows in 1968. The original John R. Page Masonic Lodge #13 was severely damaged by a storm in 2010. The current Lodge opened in 2012.

Downtown Heritage Sites



4. St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church

128 East Church Street

Established in 1881, the St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church was originally financed by Herbert H. Page. After a cyclone demolished the majority of the building in 1884, the church was rebuilt and incorporated the remains of the original structure. The cornerstone of the new building was laid in 1885, and the finished building was consecrated in 1897.

Adjacent to the structure was the St. John's School, an Episcopalian parochial school that was founded in the 1890's. It operated until 1931, when it was absorbed into the county's school system. The School also housed the Brown-Carver Public Library from 1943-1947.

5. "The Hands That Built a Town: African Americans in Antebellum Edenton" Exhibit

107 East Church Street

Opened in 2019, this exhibit explores the cultural, political, and personal experiences of enslaved and free African Americans in Edenton's Antebellum period. The exhibit is housed in the 1756 Dependency and the Bandon Smokehouse, which are located on the James Iredell House property. The exhibit is open to the public Tuesday-Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.

6. Gale Street Baptist Church

120 West Gale Street

The congregation of the Gale Street Baptist Church was established in 1895. They completed the construction of this Gothic Revival church structure a year later.

7. Providence Burial Ground

West Albemarle Street

The Providence Burial Ground was the final resting place for many of Edenton's free, enslaved, and emancipated African American citizens during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Church records indicate that among those interred are Molly Hornblow, an emancipated businesswoman who was the grandmother of author and abolitionist Harriet Jacobs, Thomas Barnswell, a substantial property owner, and Private Jonathan Overton, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. Modern mapping suggests the existence of between sixty and eighty gravesites.

8. Providence Baptist Church

214 West Church Street

The Providence Baptist Church was organized in 1868, with members largely drawn from the African American members of the Edenton Baptist Church. The existing building was constructed in 1893 and is the third church occupied by the congregation. In the early twentieth century, the congregation also sponsored a parochial school located next to the church.

9. Josephine Napoleon Leary Building

421 South Broad Street

Josephine Napoleon Leary was born into slavery in Williamston, North Carolina in 1856. She and her husband, Sweety, came to Edenton in the 1870's. A barber by trade like her husband, Mrs. Leary purchased three lots in downtown Edenton and established a barber shop. After the "Cheapside" fire of 1893 destroyed most of wooden structures near the waterfront, Mrs. Leary constructed a triple-store building with an elaborate metal façade that she maintained for rental income. Since she owned and rented out other properties in Edenton, she quickly became one of Edenton's most prominent African American businesswomen. Josephine Leary passed away in 1923. Her papers are held by Duke University.

10. Maritime Underground Railroad

Waterfront Park, End of South Broad Street

The Maritime Underground Railroad was a network of African American watermen who worked with individuals of other races and occupations to arrange passage, by vessel, for enslaved African Americans seeking freedom. Harriet Jacobs' description of her escape from Edenton, in 1842, is one of the few written accounts of this network.