

Thorsby Schools

By Derric Scott

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The Scandinavians that formed the town of Thorsby (1896) felt strongly that a good education was important. The early schools in Thorsby were held in high esteem for their quality.

There are a number of photos and articles that still exist of the Thorsby school buildings. The school names, timeframes, and locations are fairly confusing. Hopefully this will help answer those questions.

Thorsby Public School / Thorsby Elementary School
Thorsby Normal School
Thorsby Institute
Thorsby High School
Thorsby School
Strasburg School

Strasburg School

Early newspapers had a few mentions of the Strasburg School. In May of 1894 property was deeded to the Trustees of the Strasburg School by Mary R. and B. T. Rasberry¹. Today the Scandinavian Cemetery occupies a portion of the northern edge of this property. The deed requires the land to be used exclusively for school and church purposes. One of the last articles simply said that “the school formerly known as the Strasburg School will hereafter be held in the big school house in Thorsby.”²

Thorsby Public School / Thorsby Elementary School (first)



Mrs. Marietta (Grover) Bice, long-time Thorsby historian and Union-Banner newspaper contributor, wrote³ that two schools were formed in the early days of Thorsby, the Thorsby Public School and the

¹ Chilton County Deeds, Book 47, Pages 130-131.

² Chilton County Call 6/11/1897

³ Thorsby – Writings and Memoirs, Mrs. Marietta (Grover) Bice, excerpts from newspapers various dates.

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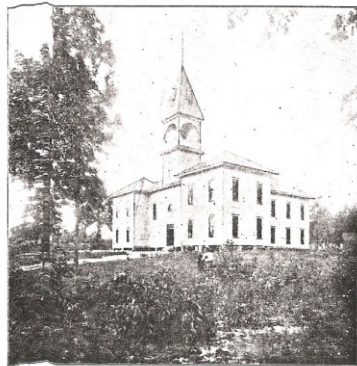
Thorsby Normal School. She also wrote that the first elementary school (the Public School) was on the site of the current Thorsby School, then moved “to a two story building across town” (almost certainly the building in the above photo) and the old site became the location of the Thorsby Normal School.

So, it seems, the first school was the Thorsby Public School, which was an elementary school. It was originally located on the site that is currently the Thorsby School, but soon moved across town to the two story building shown in the photos.

The Chilton County Call newspaper, published in Thorsby in 1897 had references to the two-story “Public School⁴,” perhaps this building.

Mrs. Bice continued and said that this building was later bought by Mr. and Mrs. Green Burnett of Collins Chapel. They removed the upper floors and converted it into a house. Her article (unknown date ca. 1970s) said that Mrs. Delene (V. E.) Wyatt (daughter of the Greens) lived in it on Michigan Ave.

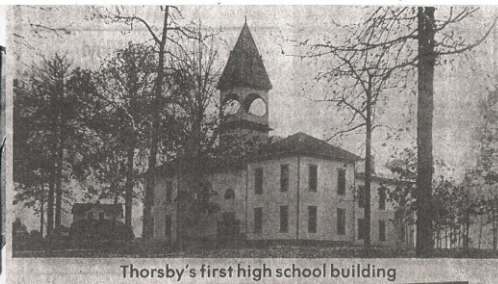
Thorsby Normal School (aka Thorsby Normal and Collegiate Institute)



“THORSBY NORMAL SCHOOL.”



DORMITORY AND WATER TOWER



Thorsby's first high school building

Thorsby Normal School and dormitory (1901-1904).

Thorsby Normal School’s opening ceremonies were on Monday, September 16, 1901. It enrolled 136 students, 48 of which were from out of town. A “Normal School” was the name given schools that were primarily to educate teachers. In this case, it seemed to be a general high school as well. Thorsby Normal School was located on the same spot as the current Thorsby School. The building contained 11 rooms including a library, office, music room, auditorium, and seven classrooms.

Apparently the school only lasted for two years. Classes were definitely held for terms 1901-1902 and 1902-1903. In March 1903 the building and land were bought by the Methodist Protestant conference and it was said that Dr. Rasco would continue as Principal. Nothing was found regarding a 1903-1904 term (or later) so it apparently closed, apparently due to financial difficulties. The building was still

⁴ Chilton County Call, 5/21/1897, 9/3/1897

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used, however, because in 1904 the Banner mentioned that “a large two-story building is the school house of the Protestant Methodists, on the opposite side of the railroad is the dormitory of the school. There is also a town public school.”⁵

The school’s founder and principal was Dr. Richmond Austin (R. A.) Rasco. Dr. Rasco later went on to serve in many college law schools and to found the University of Miami’s Law School. He became its first Dean. His obituary mentions that he was “the principal of Chapel Institute, Thorsby, Ala., from 1898 to 1900 and founded Thorsby Normal College two years later. From 1904 until 1908 he was superintendent of schools in Jemison, Ala., and in 1909 was called to the deanship of the college of law of Stetson University...”⁶ Newspaper articles said he was the founder of the Collins Chapel Institute and that he continued to be superintendent of it on through at least 1906.

Other teachers mentioned were Mr. and Mrs. Groves, Mr. Brown. Along with Dr. Rasco, a “Johnston” was mentioned in an advertisement as also a principal – likely “W. E. Johnston?” The original ad for the school lists “Rasco and Carmicheal” as contacts... that is possibly R. D. Carmichael.

The 1902-03 term listed study in bookkeeping, shorthand, typewriting, elocution, and music, including piano, organ, violin, guitar, mandolin, and brass band.

There was a “Normal School Society” that met during at least during 1902.⁷

Thorsby Institute



Thorsby Institute Recitation Hall / Bates Hall (1906-1924 burned).

Thorsby Institute was formed in 1906 and bought the old Normal School property in the summer of that year. It first opened on September 17, 1906 with William J. Lamkie as principal. This Normal School

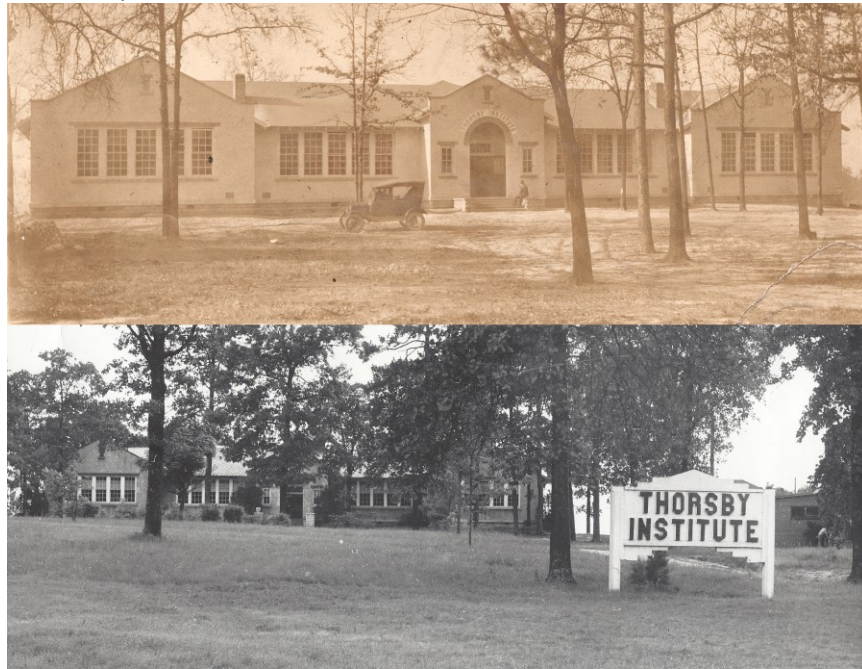
⁵ The Banner, 2/4/1904

⁶ Miami Herald, 11/17/1931

⁷ The Banner, 9/25/1902

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building was called Recitation Hall and later Bates Hall and it burned in 1924. The school was rebuilt in brick and re-opened in September 1925.



Brick Thorsby Institute school building built 1925.

Ms. Helen Jenkins became principal in 1917, succeeding William P. Lamkie, S. B. Groves, N. W. Hensen, and D. H. Herbert. She continued in that position until it was closed. The new brick building was named Helen Jenkins Hall.

Thorsby Institute closed due to financial difficulties and it became Thorsby High School in 1957.

The Thorsby Institute consisted of up to 35 acres and many buildings, including dorms. The early dormitory was the old Concordia Hotel building which had also been used at the dorm for the Thorsby Normal School. This dormitory burned on April 15, 1918.

Thorsby Public School / Thorsby Elementary School (second)

In 1924 discussions were begun about building a new public school for grades 1 through 9. Money was raised, plans were obtained from the State Board of Education, and some land was purchased at the intersection of Jones St. and Illinois Ave. After overcoming financial difficulties, the school was completed and opened on August 25, 1925. During the construction of this school, Bates Hall (the main building) at Thorsby Institute burned. A building design very similar to the elementary school plan was used for the new Thorsby Institute building which was also constructed and completed in 1925.

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New, brick, Thorsby Elementary School, ca. 1925

In time the grades taught in the building were reduced to 1 through 6. In 1975 the new Thorsby School building was built to house all grades "K-12" and the elementary school building was closed.



Thorsby Elementary School, Feb 2018, shortly before demolition.

Thorsby School (aka Thorsby High School)

In 1957, the recently closed Thorsby Institute deeded the property to the State Board of Education to be used as a public school site. It became the Thorsby High School and was used until the main building (Helen Jenkins Hall) burned in 1975. When the replacement building was built it was designed to be a K to 12 school and the elementary school students were moved into it as well.

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Thorsby School, ca 2022.



Map indicating locations for various Thorsby Schools.

References

The Banner / The Union-Banner

Mrs. Marietta (Grover) Bice articles

Mrs. Lucille McFarland archives.

Thorsby: Our Roots Our Fruits