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Hamilton made a mark at Gold Hill Academy

Fort Mill history

By Louise Pettus Fort Mill Times

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Gold Hill Academy, north of Fort Mill, furnishes a good example of how a rural community built its first school in the pre-Civil War period.

It was a time when the only state support was a small tuition for paupers. The county provided nothing, as schooling was considered the responsibility of parents.

A group of residents, probably all fathers of the potential students, joined together and constituted themselves as a board of trustees.

Gold Hill's first trustees were Josiah Faris, chairman, James Boyd, James A. Garrison and Stephen P. Sutton. In May 1858, Charles L. Clawson deeded one acre near the Steel Creek road for \$10 along with right of way over his land.

Brantly H. Coltharp was hired as the first teacher.

In 1898 Jackson Hamilton came to teach. Gold Hill Academy was quite ordinary before Hamilton. He stayed only eight years, but those eight years soon became known as the institution's "Golden Years."

Hamilton, a native of Union County, N. C., was only 18 when he began teaching and 21 when he came to Gold Hill. He must have been a remarkable teacher. He was remembered fondly as "intense and brilliant," a man who taught with "enthusiasm and several hickory sticks in the corner."

In 1930, his former students formed the Jackson Hamilton Student Memorial Association, which had a reunion every summer until the membership was reduced to only a few elderly people in the early 1970s.

The reunion was held at the Pink Wilson Grove a few hundred yards from the old school. There were two special reminders of the past: the bell that called the students to their studies and a rock wall. Jackson's method of punishment was to have the students add rocks to a wall around the school. In eight years the wall grew to be 200 feet long.

In 1958 Grace Beacham Freeman wrote an article for *The Charlotte Observer* about Reunion Day at Gold Hill School. A program was planned, and the speakers were Gold Hill graduates who had distinguished themselves in the world. They came from all over the United States. The speakers remembered Jackson Hamilton with affection, and they especially remembered how they received their training as speakers.

Each Friday half of the student body was required to get up and make a speech before the

whole school. The speeches were memorized but there were not enough to go around, so some of the students repeated the speeches of others.

"The same recitations were repeated so often that the students needed only the first line and then could take it from there," Freeman wrote.

It was said that no Gold Hill Academy graduate ever flunked out of college.

One of the things that the old-timers remembered was that Hamilton would not tolerate tattlers. They admired him for that.

Hamilton left in 1905 and returned to North Carolina, but the parents managed to entice him to return for the 1908-'09 term.

At the end of the year he married a former student, Elsie Boyd, and took her with him.

In 1935 Gold Hill School consolidated with the Riverview School.

The old Gold Hill building on Whitley Road became a school for black children. The old Gold Hill school building burned on a reunion day. The Riverview school building was eventually torn down.

Of course, the children of the Riverview and Gold Hill areas now attend schools named for the communities in the Fort Mill School District.

- *Louise Pettus is a renowned local historian. "Fort Mill History" is sponsored each month by the Fort Mill Downtown Association. Check them out on the Web at www.fortmilledowntown.com.*