266# Union Academy (Script by Peggy Macdonald)

After the slave-owning South was defeated in the Civil War, the most important things to freedmen and women were reuniting with family members separated during slavery, and learning to read and write, which was illegal under slavery.

According to Murray Laurie’s 1986 *Florida Historical Quarterly article*, “The Union Academy: A Freedmen’s Bureau School in Gainesville, Florida,” in November 1865 — two years before Union Academy was established in Gainesville — a white Massachusetts teacher named Catherine Bent arrived in town to teach 60 newly freed students in a modest building with no door or windows. She did not receive a warm welcome in Gainesville, which was feeling the sting of defeat after the fall of the Confederacy.

After the Civil War, there was an African-American majority in Gainesville. People who had previously lived on the outskirts of town moved to Gainesville to start new lives away from the plantations where they had toiled with their families.

Union Academy, the first public high school in Gainesville, was built by emancipated carpenters on land purchased by the school’s board of trustees in November 1867. The site was located at the corner of present-day Northwest First Street and Northwest Sixth Avenue. One Union Academy trustee and gifted carpenter, Johnson Chestnut, was enslaved when he first arrived in Alachua County in 1854 at Thomas and Serena Haile’s plantation near Gainesville. In 1868, Chestnut was elected to the Gainesville City Commission.

During Reconstruction, Union Academy extended the promise of education and access to equal opportunities for African Americans on a scale that had never been witnessed before. Union Academy’s last principal, A. Quinn Jones, was also the first principal of Lincoln High School, which was originally located at 1108 Northwest Seventh Avenue. Lincoln High School’s second location, 1001 Southeast Twelfth Street, is now the site of Lincoln Middle School.

Like Union Academy before it, Lincoln High School educated generations of students who went on to become leaders in the Gainesville community and beyond. The frame building was Gainesville’s premier school for African Americans until 1923, when Lincoln opened and the former Union Academy became a recreation center and later a retirement home. The building was demolished in the 1960s.

The Rosa B. Williams Center/352artspace at 524 Northwest First Street is located where Union Academy once stood. The Rosa B. Williams Center’s namesake, local civil rights activist Rosa Williams won the Rosa Parks Quiet Courage Award in 2014. A mural inside the building depicts Union Academy and its legacy in the Pleasant Street Historic District.