

August 5, 2020



Dear School Board Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to be involved in the choosing of a name for School #0031, formerly named J. J. Finley. As a committee, we recommend that School #0031 be named in honor of Carolyn Beatrice Parker: scientist, scholar, and American war hero. We are proud to make this recommendation after a deliberation that considered several hundred community-nominated names.

### **Early Life**

Carolyn Beatrice Parker was born in Gainesville in 1917, during the Jim Crow era. Her father, Dr. Julius A. Parker was a physician who graduated from Meharry Medical College, the first medical school in the South for African Americans. Carolyn Parker's maternal first cousin, Joan Murrell Owens was a marine biologist and was also one of the first Black women to complete a Ph.D. in geology. Six of Julius and Delia Parker's seven children completed advanced degrees; a seventh child died at age 9.

Carolyn Parker was educated in segregated public schools in Tampa, where she graduated from Middleton High School in 1933. She graduated magna cum laude from Fisk University with a bachelor's degree in physics in 1938. Between 1938 and 1940, Ms. Parker taught high school in Gainesville, possibly at the historically Black Lincoln High School. However, her name does not appear in Albert White and Kevin McCarthy's 2012 history of Lincoln High School, which highlights former teachers and includes lists of alumni. Several of Ms. Parker's siblings attended Lincoln, including Julia Leslie (Parker) Cosby, who--in 1966--became the first Black woman to teach in Alachua County's previously all-White schools, according to White and McCarthy. In 1941, Carolyn Parker completed a master's degree in physics at the University of Michigan. She was the first African American woman known to receive a graduate degree in physics.

## Overcoming Inequality and World War II

Carolyn Parker overcame tremendous obstacles on the way to completing her high school education in Jim Crow Florida. In Florida's separate and unequal schools, White-dominated legislatures and school boards drew tax resources out of Black communities and redistributed these to White schools. For example, in 1930, the Alachua County School Board allocated on average \$28.97 per White pupil per year while allocating on average only \$5.90 per Black student, according to the U.S. Census. Furthermore, the average value of White schools in



Alachua County was \$24,377, compared with \$8,350 for Black schools. In 1930, African Americans composed 44.6% of the total population in Alachua County. Educational allocations based on race were little different in Tampa, Miami, Jacksonville or any of Florida's other major cities during this time.

During World War II, while she was only in her twenties, Ms. Parker joined with millions of Americans to do her patriotic duty in the war against Nazism and fascism. Due to her superb mathematical and scientific skills, Ms. Parker was recruited to work as a research physicist with the Dayton Project, a division of the Manhattan Project in which scientists worked with the highly radioactive material *Polonium* (Po-210). According to the Atomic Heritage Foundation, Ms. Parker's team was tasked in 1943 "with separating and purifying the radioactive element polonium, which was to be used as the initiator for the atomic bombs."

According to the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History, African American scientists like Ms. Parker encountered a tremendous amount of racism in the Manhattan Project as their capabilities and skills were often denigrated by their White counterparts. Black scientists at the Monsanto Chemical Company's headquarters at 1515 Nicholas Road (one of the key sites of the Dayton Project) were often mistaken for custodians and they had to perform extra duties in laboratories due to racism. In 1944, Ms. Parker's team had achieved a high level of success separating Po-210 using "acid extraction methods" and expanded production required moving the operation into larger facilities.

Due to the top-secret nature of the Manhattan Project, few research scientists below the level of Enrico Fermi, Richard Feynman and J. Robert Oppenheimer realized that they were working on the devastating weapon that eventually became the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. In Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, it is revealed that due to fears of German espionage, the great majority of the scientists working below the level of Oppenheimer (that's 99.9% of the researchers, including Carolyn Parker) could not have known that they were engaged in an effort to build an atomic bomb that would eventually be dropped on the Empire of Japan.

The assumption of the scientists at the very top of the Manhattan Project--including Niels Bohr, Glenn Seaborg, Ernest Lawrence and others such as Albert Einstein--was that the atomic bombs were going to be used against Nazi Germany. Indeed, it was Dr. Einstein who approached the Roosevelt administration in a state of anxiety in 1939 with the belief that Werner Heisenberg and other German physicists were dangerously close to mastering the science that could lead to a practical application of nuclear fission. The idea of Adolf Hitler possessing such terrible power pushed President Roosevelt into action in creating the Manhattan Project. The United States' goal was to develop an atomic weapon before Nazi Germany did, with the idea that whichever nation succeeded in building the atomic weapon first would win the war. This was the tremendous endeavor that research scientist Carolyn Parker was engaged in for most of the war.

It is vital to understand that for the scientists working on this project it was Germany--and not Imperial Japan--that was to be the potential target IF the bomb was developed. Placing the proper historical context on this situation means understanding that for most Americans, World War II was perceived by the participants as an existential struggle for human survival. We use terms like "democracy" today. However, can we really understand the stakes of war where the very question of human survival was at stake during a time when Nazism and fascism were seizing control of entire regions of the world? This was the righteous cause that Ms. Parker put her talents to work on in order to help defeat Nazism.

The leading Manhattan Project scientists were shocked when they discovered how and where the bombs were going to be deployed by President Truman. Scores of the top scientists based in Chicago signed a statement urging against using the bombs against Imperial Japan. However, it must be emphasized that outside of a relatively small group of researchers including Professor Leo Szilard, very few scientists realized how and where the bombs were going to be deployed.

To reiterate, the way the Manhattan Project had to be organized--given the capacity of Germany's far-flung spy operations--was to minimize the knowledge that scientists working on the component parts had about the central goals of the project. And here, even the top scientists were not always knowledgeable about said goals. As a junior scientist who had not yet had the opportunity to earn her Ph.D., Carolyn Parker played no role whatsoever in decision-making about the implementation of the atomic bomb.

In summary, Ms. Carolyn Parker did her patriotic duty in helping the United States win the war, using her brilliant scientific talents and analysis. In doing so, she had to overcome a significant amount of racism and sexism by White male scientists. Tragically, Ms. Parker died of leukemia at age 48--before she could earn her Ph.D. In 2008, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health determined that leukemia was an occupational risk of working with polonium. Hence, the people of the United States and certainly Gainesville owe Ms. Carolyn Parker a great debt of gratitude for making the ultimate sacrifice for our nation. We have the historic opportunity to make sure that the brilliance and commitment of Carolyn B. Parker is "hidden" no more.

### **After the War**

Ms. Parker continued to work as a research physicist at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio until 1947. From 1947-1951, she taught as an assistant professor at Fisk. In 1952, she was employed as a physicist in the geophysics research division at the Air Force Cambridge Research Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a leading research laboratory that emerged from the closure of the M.I.T. Radiation Laboratory and the Harvard Radio Research Laboratory after World War II. In 1951, Ms. Parker entered the physics graduate program at M.I.T., where she earned a second master's degree in physics in 1953 and completed coursework for a Ph.D. Ms. Parker was elected to the Sigma Xi Scientific Research Honor Society at M.I.T. However, she was unable to complete the process of defending her doctoral dissertation and graduating because she contracted leukemia. A true "hidden figure," Carolyn Parker died in 1966, at age 48, and is buried at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Gainesville.



If the committee's recommendation is accepted, Carolyn Beatrice Parker Elementary would be the first school in Alachua County to be named in honor of an African American woman. We recommend it in hopes that this choice will

clearly display the growing desire in the community of Gainesville to do the following:

- to reflect a more complete record of history representing all members of our community,
- to share compelling and inspiring stories of "hidden figures" of prominence in our past,
- to engender meaningful dialogue about race and equity within our schools and across our community, and
- to plant seeds that we may individually and institutionally nurture on the journey toward truth and reconciliation.

Sincerely (members of the Renaming Committee in alphabetical order),

Kelly Brill Jones, Principal of the School

Kali Blount, Community Activist

Ashley Bryant, School Board Selection (Robert Hyatt)

Roger Cox, School Board Selection (Gunnar Paulson)

Vivian Duncan, School ESP Representative

Pastor Chipper Flaniken, School SAC Committee Representative

Kim Collins Gregg, Board Selection (Tina Certain), Teacher ESE

Dr. Patricia Hillard-Nunn, Historian\*

Rachel Khoury, The Gator Chapter of NAACP Representative

Dr. Jeffrey King, Community Activist

Karen Kirkman, Historian

Dr. Hal S. Knowles, III, PTA Parent Representative

Dr. Peggy Macdonald, Historian

Dr. Paul Ortiz, Professor of History, UF; NAACP Historian, Alachua County Chapter

Richard Hays Powell, Board Selection (Eileen Roy)

Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Community Activist

Dr. Carlee Simon, Board Selection (Dr. Leanetta McNealy)

Florence M. Turcotte, Historian

Stephanie Walker, Teacher Representative, Teacher 4th Grade

Faye Larvetta Williams, Community Activist

\* Dr. Patricia Hilliard-Nunn began the decision-making process with the Renaming committee. She became ill shortly after the committee's first meeting. She passed on August 4, 2020. Dr. Hilliard-Nunn was a brilliant teacher, social justice activist and filmmaker. She did so much in Gainesville and beyond to bring the hidden history of African Americans' contributions to the public's attention.