

Introducing Mr. Lyles and Mrs. Crouch
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During segregation, when white and African American students attended separate schools, many schools for blacks bore the names of prominent black historical figures, like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. But in the early 20th century, Alexandria named its schools in honor of the City's early African American educators. Parker-Gray School, which opened in 1920, was named for John F. Parker, the principal of the Snowden School where African American boys once attended, and Sarah A. Gray, who served as principal of the Hallowell School where African American girls went to school.

In 1934, Alexandria announced plans to open a new school to serve to the growing black community on the south side of the city. Located in an old silk factory, Lyles-Crouch opened in 1935. Like Parker-Gray, Lyles-Crouch was named to recognize the contributions of two local educators of color — Rozier D. Lyles and Jane A. Solomon Crouch.

Rozier D. Lyles was born in 1863 in Alexandria as a free person of color. Both his parents were born as free people. When Rozier's father, Reverend Richard H. Lyles, was a teenager, he worked for a white school that was run by the Hallowell family prior to the Civil War. His father's exposure to education might have been the spark that ignited Rozier to become a teacher. The Lyles family had the means to educate Rozier and all their other children. In addition to being a reverend at Roberts Chapel (today Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church), Richard Lyles also worked as a caulker on ships. The Lyles family owned a number of real estate properties throughout Alexandria.

Rozier started teaching elementary school around 1883 at the Snowden School, Alexandria's first public school for African American boys. In 1889, he married Mary Etta Henderson. By 1892, Mary had died from consumption and Mr. Lyles never married again. He continued to teach at Snowden School until Parker-Gray School opened in 1920, when he became one of eleven teachers selected to be the first teachers at the new school. He taught sixth grade and was known as a strict teacher who focused on mathematics, prompting his students to nickname him "Mr. Mathematics." Mr. Lyles and his niece, Laura Dorsey, were teachers at the same school until he retired at the end of the school year in 1929.

In his retirement, he found employment with the Belle Haven Golf and Country Club. On November 30, 1933, Mr. Lyles died. He had spent 46 years as a teacher in Alexandria. Less than two years after his death, Lyles-Crouch School opened. With this school named in his honor, his family and former students saw that Mr. Mathematics would always be remembered.

While some people believe the school was named to recognize a teacher named Caroline "Carrie" Crouch, it very likely a tribute to Carrie's mother, Jane Solomon Crouch. In 1935 when the school opened, Carrie was still teaching and was known by

her full married name, Carrie Crouch Brooks. But her mother, born 100 years earlier, was the educational pioneer.

Although her father had been enslaved, Jane Solomon was born free in Alexandria. Jane and her sister Sarah attended the St. Frances Academy, a school in Baltimore run by an order of Catholic nuns. During the years of slavery, it was against the law in many states to teach enslaved people to read and write. In Alexandria, which was part of the District of Columbia at the time, there were some opportunities for African Americans to attend school and Jane also went to a school in Alexandria run by a woman named Sylvia Rogers. But when Alexandria again became part of Virginia in 1847, authorities cracked down and closed such schools.

As a young woman, Jane wanted to use her education to teach others of her race and while she feared the risk of teaching enslaved children, she did teach free people of color. When the Civil War began in 1861, Union troops immediately occupied Alexandria and soon hundreds and then thousands of people seeking freedom from slavery came to Alexandria. Jane and others saw the importance of empowering them through education and in October 1861, she and Sarah Gray established the St. Rose Institute on South West Street where former slaves could attend school in the evening.

By this time, Jane had married a man named Frederick W. Nicholls Crouch. Their daughter Carrie was born around 1867 and Jane was committed to Carrie's education, sending her to the school in Baltimore that Jane had attended. Mrs. Crouch wrote that she wanted Carrie to receive a "thorough course of training" so that "her usefulness may be a blessing to her race."

After years of teaching during slavery and wartime, in 1870 Mrs. Crouch became officially qualified through an examination to teach public school in Alexandria. She first taught second grade girls and later taught third and fourth grade at the Hallowell School which was located on North Alfred Street. She continued to improve her own skills, attending a summer session at what today is Hampton University.

During the 1881-82 school year, Mrs. Crouch became seriously ill and was unable to continue teaching. On March 12, 1882, she died of a respiratory infection, probably pneumonia or tuberculosis. Her funeral at St. Mary's Church brought an "overflowing attendance," according to one account. Alexandria officials recalled her as an "excellent disciplinarian and devoted to her work" and also noted that "though her acquirements were limited, she made the best use of them for the elevation of her race, and deserves their grateful remembrance."

The contributions and commitment of Jane A. Solomon Crouch were remembered more than 50 years later when a new school bearing her name opened to serve Alexandria's African American students.