

Black History Month traces its origins back to Negro History Week. Negro History Week was first declared in 1926 by Carter G. Woodson, a noted author who wanted an annual celebration of Black history. He also hoped that it would promote knowledge of people and events that were excluded from classroom textbooks of the time. The idea of Negro History Week was not immediately accepted by all states but gradually grew roots in the hearts and minds of people across the country. In 1969, it was suggested that the observance could be stretched out over the entire month of February. The idea took hold, and the first Black History Month was observed the following year. Since then, the importance of Black History Month has been recognized more and more.

This month, we have countless reasons to celebrate Black History Month, both on a local and national level. However, we can also celebrate Black History within Southwestern. Many people today are familiar with the Hillcrest Washington Youth Home. However, some might not be familiar with the origin of the Washington part of the name.

The Booker T. Washington Home, known originally as the Colored Orphan Asylum, began operation in 1883 on Evansville's west side. It was not the first orphanage in Evansville but was the first one dedicated to serving Black children. The city wanted to provide for needy youngsters but divided them by skin color. The home was staffed with a head matron and a group of housemothers.

**The Grand Jury Recommends a
Larger Chicken House for
Colored Orphan Asylum**

Into the 1900s, the school was praised for its care of the students in spite of the conditions of the facility. In 1949, the County Council allocated \$430,000 for "building of Hillcrest, the home for white orphans, and repairs to Washington, Negro orphanage." However, more than a year later, when the cost for constructing the Hillcrest building was tabulated, it consumed all the funds. The plan, then, was to "concentrate on Hillcrest, at least for now." This would leave no money for the Booker T. Washington Home, which reportedly had a "brigade" armed with mops, chasing leaks around the building every time it rained. Newspapers reported that citizens from multiple organizations united in protest.

These kinds of discussions continued for more than a decade until a final decision was reached. Like most of the country was realizing, the rationale of "Separate But Equal" didn't work, because separate could never be equal. In 1965, Hillcrest and the Booker T. Washington Home united into one integrated agency. A newspaper article quoted County Welfare Director Dale Work as saying the change was made "for social and economic reasons and not because of any pressure of complaints of racial discrimination." He added, "By using the two buildings to separate the older children from the younger children without regard to race, we can better tailor their activities."



MOTHERING EVERY child in her neighborhood comes natural for Mrs. Alex (Mary) Rucker of 1759 Judson, head matron and "substitute mother" for the 34 Negro children at Washington Home. Her sleepy-



HAPPY FACES of these youngsters at Washington Home for Children show that modern thinking has come a long way since the time of Oliver Twist.

When Booker T. Washington Home joined with Hillcrest, it brought with it a rich history, the history of hundreds of children who lived and grew up in a caring but segregated world. Sustained for decades by the dedication of its staff, who worked to make the most of underfunded facilities, the home kept its doors open to children in need. Now part of Hillcrest's history, the story of the Booker T. Washington Home is part of Evansville history, Southwestern history, and Black history. Know it. Celebrate it!