The History of Ambler Elementary School

Before 1868 no public schools existed. The children were educated in pay schools or subscription schools. These schools were operated from one to three months in the townships financially able to support them. In 1837 the Pendleton District had 22 schools—11 in what is now Pickens County.

The School Commissioners of Pickens District from 1828-35 and 1837-1852 were listed as Joseph Gresham, Chairman; Wm. L. Keith, Secretary /Treasurer; Silas Kirksey, Joseph B. Reid, F.N. Garvin, Samuel Mosley, J.R. Cox, W.C. Lee, J.A. Doyle, J.L. Kennedy, and M. Jones. Salaries of teachers were $10.00 per year per child for a First Class teacher, $8.00 per year per child for Second Class teachers, and $6.00 per year per child for Third Class teachers. This was just for teaching the free pupils in a school (limited to 4, 6, or 8 depending on the school). Parents who could were expected to pay tuition for their children.

The Civil War and Reconstruction changed school structure. The citizens of Pickens County who participated as Confederates were disfranchised. The electorate was now in the hands of those who had not aided the Confederacy. Public education began in 1868 when the new state constitution provided for teachers' salaries based on student enrollment. The first Superintendent of Education was Justus K. Jillson. In 1870 the first board of school commissioners was organized in Pickens County. Twenty-four trustees were appointed and a meager curriculum was decided upon.

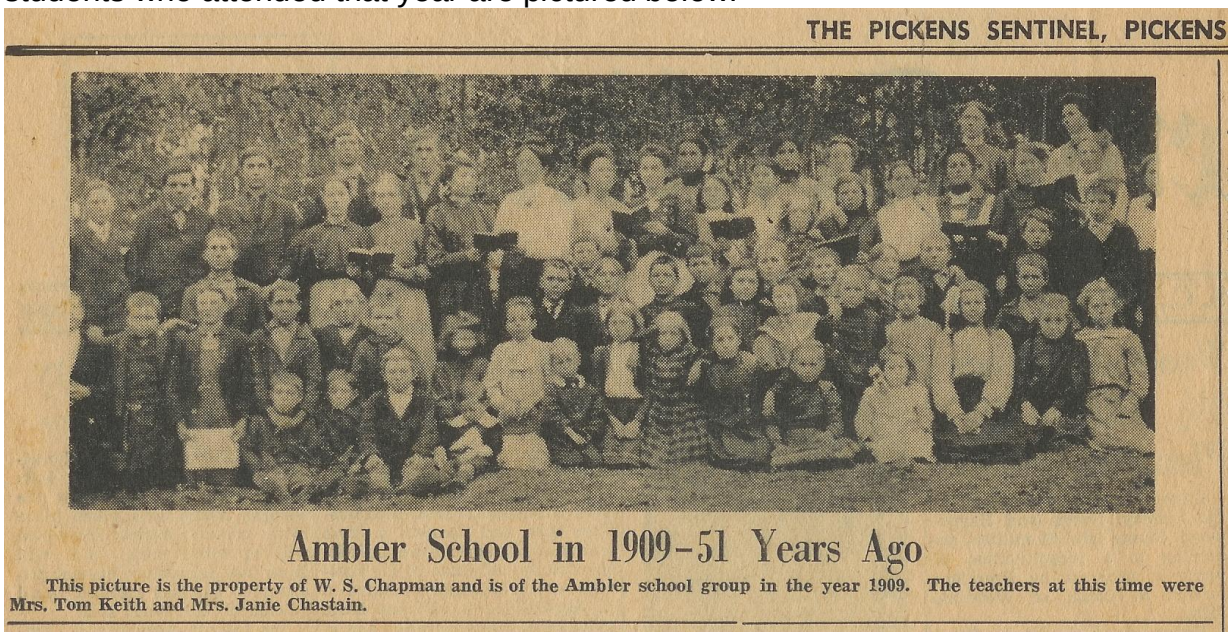
In 1893 the county was cut into school districts of approximately nine square miles each, and a one-room schoolhouse was placed near the center. Schools ran from a few weeks in the summer in the poorer districts to seven or more months in the better-off ones. In 1895 the constitution required separate schools for white and colored children.



McJunkins at Ambler School about 1907. Note the wooden shutters and shingles of this building which was torn away in 1909. The youngest McJunkin child in this picture is E. Wyatt, the little boy on the front row who is wearing the dress. The oldest is Iler Dean, who is fourth from the left on the second row. Iler's future wife, Lillie Lynch is standing second from the left on the second row. Elbert McJunkin is fourth from the left on the back row and two more McJunkins are standing in the front row. Julius is sixth from the right and Hubert is second from the right

Although no record has been found, Ambler was probably built in 1893 as the school for the newly formed Ambler District. It had wooden shingles and wooden shutters. It sat across the road from the present building. In 1899 Ambler is listed as having one building for whites (on 9 sq. miles), two white teachers and 43 white pupils. This made a 21.5 pupil: teacher ratio. The session lasted five months. The greatest distance walked by pupils was 2.37 miles.

About 1906 the South Carolina Legislature passed an act to give school districts money for building. The district had to give an equal amount. So, in 1909 this building was torn down and the two-room schoolhouse was built. The students who attended that year are pictured below.



THE PICKENS SENTINEL, PICKENS

Ambler School in 1909–51 Years Ago

This picture is the property of W. S. Chapman and is of the Ambler school group in the year 1909. The teachers at this time were Mrs. Tom Keith and Mrs. Janie Chastain.

Improvements that were made to the building over the years can be seen in the pictures of it that still exist. Most notably, those who attended school in this building remember the bell tower, although it doesn't appear in early pictures.



They also remember the cloakrooms on either side by the front door. The playground was just a field at first with a couple of bases for baseball. In a later picture there are also basketball goals. This building sat about 50-100 yards further up the road than our present building. Remains of this building can still be seen on the nature trail.





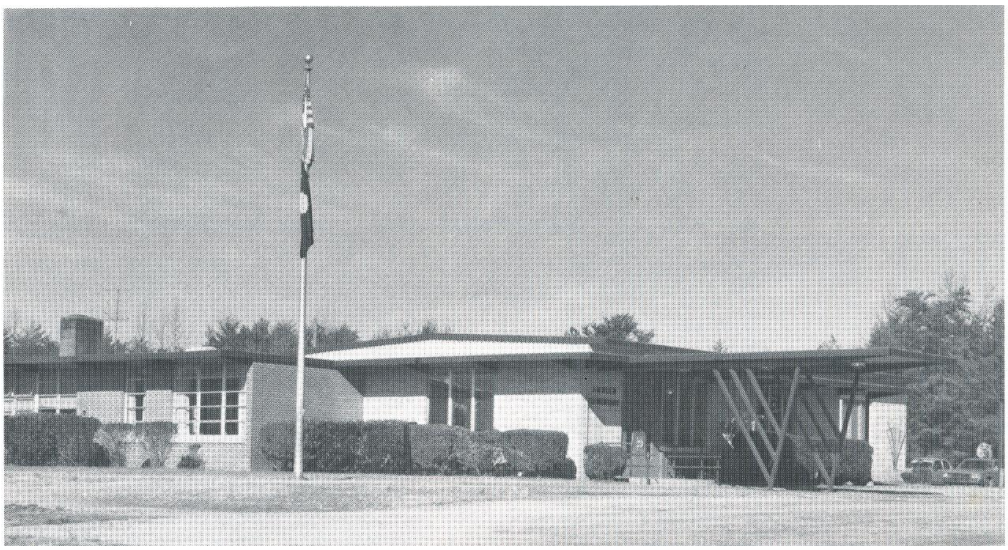


In 1947 a student at Furman, Katie Hendricks, wrote in her Master's thesis:

> Ambler is a two-teacher rural school with an enrollment of sixty-three pupils and grades one through seven are taught… Ambler School is near State Highway Number 183 but is directly located on a dirt road that goes through the community. A forest grows at the rear of the structure. A rocky topsoil makes play on the playground difficult. The building was fair with the exception of the following things: a few window panes were broken, the front steps were in a decaying state. A concrete porch has been built on the back, but it needs the finishing touches. The classrooms were decorated with posters, post cards, maps, curtains, children's drawings, and a reading chart. The furniture included double and single desks, a recitation bench, reading table, and an orange-crate book case. Ambler School is not in the position to accommodate comfortably its sixty-three pupils, because the seating capacity is not sufficient. The community should be made aware of this fact.

In 1955 land was purchased from Arthur Jones as the district made the decision to consolidate several rural schools. Though not a popular idea in some areas, notably the Oolenoy community, the present building was completed in1957. Students from Oolenoy, Pleasant Grove, Glassy Mountain, Town Creek, and Ambler all joined to form one big school of about 250 students at Ambler because of its central location. The first day of classes in the new building was February 25, 1957. Eyewitnesses to that day say that the children carried all their books over to the new building from the old one. There were no sidewalks or paving and the yard was muddy that day—red mud.

The new building cost $200,000 and consisted of one long hall with 10 classrooms. $20,000 was spent on equipment for the new school. It contained a cafeteria, auditorium, library, health room, teachers' lounge, principal's office, and conference room. The auditorium was the only one in the state at that time with air conditioning. The students were transported to school by six buses. Mrs. Jessie Clement was the principal. The building housed grades 1-7.



This building served the school relatively unchanged for around 40 years! Improvements were made when necessary and eventually five portable classrooms were placed to the right of the building. Over-crowding was relieved somewhat in 1994-95 when the sixth grade was moved to the middle school.

In 1994 plans were drawn up to add another hall with four additional classrooms and a gymnasium. The office area and lounge/workroom area were also renovated. All classrooms received carpet, a new paint job, and new cabinets. The entire building was reroofed and new windows were installed. In the fall of 1996 students in grades K-4 began classes in Griffin Baptist Church since the renovation was running behind schedule. Fifth grades met in the portables. In a few months all classes occupied the new school. All except one of the portables were moved out.





Unfortunately, the renovation was inadequate compared to the growth of the school. By the next year, two portables were added. The following year, two more portables returned bringing the total number of portables back to five again. Even now teachers must share portables and Reading Recovery and ESOL classes meet in what were originally closets behind the stage.



Improvements continue to be made. A new sidewalk was built in 2002 to correct a flooding problem near the portables. In February of 2004 an ice storm collapsed the awning when ice from the roof slid onto the top of it. The district corrected this by pouring another sidewalk further away from the building and erecting a new awning.

Principals Connie McDowell and Carlton Lewis wrote grants to get three different Americorps teams to come work at Ambler. They have helped clean up and reroute the Nature Trail, tutor at-risk students, create a fishpond with waterfall, and paint murals on the hall, cafeteria, and library walls. The latest team also helped by skating with students at “Skate Night,” emceeing the annual Talent Show, helping teachers in classrooms, and scanning pictures with students for the Ambler History Project.

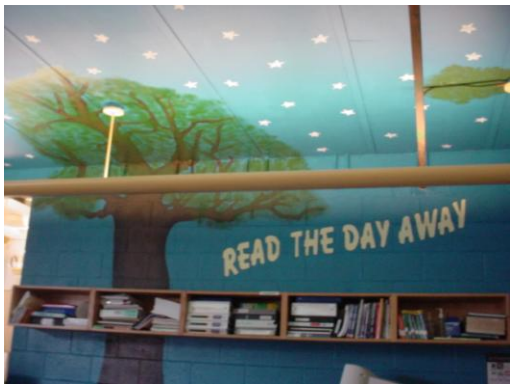




Nature Trail sign and mural in the hall

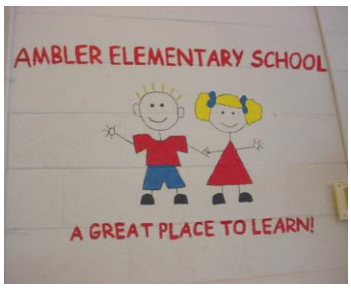


The Fish Pond





Murals in the Library







Logos painted in the cafeteria

The newest project taken on by PTA is to create a patio area in the courtyard behind the gym. We look forward to using this area for many years to come.

