

## **“Preparing to Meet the Challenge”: A Historical Sketch of Siggers High School**

By B. Brian Foster, with contributions from 25 alumni of Siggers High School<sup>1</sup>

In 1946, the community- and church-based schools that had sustained Black education in the Shannon area through the early twentieth century consolidated to form Shannon Colored High School, the first high school in Lee County dedicated to Black children. This moment marked the end of decentralized rural schooling and reflected broader shifts across the South, as communities moved toward collective investment in larger, centralized schools of secondary education.

In 1960, Shannon Colored School was renamed Siggers High School in honor of its longest-serving principal, Reverend Edgar Lemuel Siggers. The practice of naming schools after principals was common across northeast Mississippi—Nettleton’s Simms High School, for example, was named for Ulysses S. Sims—and reflected the central role of Black principals, who often carried the heavy responsibilities of institution-building and community leadership. From its founding until its closure in 1970, when it was converted into the integrated Shannon Elementary School, Siggers stood as a vital center of educational and civic life for Black families across Shannon’s core communities: Good Hope, Highs Chapel, Johnson Chapel, Pine Grove, St. John, Union Baptist, Pontocola, “the Flats,” and nearby towns including Verona and Plantersville.<sup>2</sup>

### **School Structure and Operations**

The school began as a frame building of about twelve rooms, located just off Old Highway 45 in the heart of Shannon. Though modest in resources, the building stood as a landmark achievement. Community members themselves built the structure, drawing on their skills as farmers, carpenters, and industrious workers. This collective effort reflected a long tradition of Black self-reliance in education, where schools were, of necessity, made for *and by* the people.

The first principal, Mrs. Arlene Augusta, served for about a year, overseeing the school’s earliest organization. She was succeeded by Mr. James T. McGlown, who held the dual role of principal and football coach in the late 1940s, helping to establish both the academic and athletic foundations of the school. Around 1948, leadership passed to Reverend Edgar Lemuel Siggers, a respected minister and educator from Tunica, Mississippi. Known for his discipline and

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<sup>1</sup> This history was a community effort. In 2021, Brian Foster approached Mr. Dexter Foster and State Representative Rickey Thompson to learn more about ongoing efforts to document the history of Shannon Colored School and Siggers High School. That same year, he began recording and organizing oral history interviews. By 2025, those efforts had grown into a substantial archive, with contributions from Mr. Alexander Anderson, Rev. Dr. John Anderson, Mrs. Gloria Cox, Mrs. Gloria Dabbs, Mrs. Bonnie Dilworth, Mr. A.B. Dilworth, Mr. Dexter Foster, Mrs. Mary Gardner, Mrs. Gloria Hodges, Mr. Archie Lee Ivy, Mr. Tommie Lee Ivy, Mrs. Tennie King, Mr. Danny Lyles, Mr. Paul Lyles, Mr. Tom Henry Lyles, Mr. Bobbie Randle, Mr. Robert Smith, Mr. Rickey Thompson, Mrs. Wilma Trice, Mrs. Jacqueline Woods, and Mrs. Ophelia Burdine Smith. Additional interviews—including with Mrs. Nancy Thompson, mother of Rep. Rickey Thompson—added further depth. These recordings formed the basis of *We Make*, a documentary film celebrating the school’s legacy, which also featured the voices of Mr. Jack Trice and Mr. James Oscar Trice. The full archive is preserved in the eGrove Research Repository at the University of Mississippi and in Foster’s *Black Volumes* Multimedia Archive. The writing of this sketch was supported by Mrs. Stella Ivy Smith. Alumni and community members are invited to help continue this work; if you have knowledge of the school’s history and would like to suggest additions—such as names of faculty or staff—please contact Brian Foster.

<sup>2</sup> In Shannon, as in much of rural Mississippi, neighborhoods such as Good Hope, Highs Chapel, Johnson Chapel, Pine Grove, St. John, and Union Baptist were named for the churches that helped hold them together.

emphasis on respectability and self-reliance, Rev. Siggers served for more than two decades and came to define the character of the school itself.

In 1960, with the construction of a new brick building—the structure that now houses Shannon Elementary—the school was renamed Siggers High School in his honor. That fall, Mary C. Wade School in Verona (grades 9–12) merged with Siggers, followed in 1961 by the merger of Plantersville School (grades 9–12). These consolidations expanded the student body and deepened the ties among Black communities in Shannon, Verona, and Plantersville—connections that remain strong today. The Class of 1961 was the first to graduate from the new Siggers gymnasium.

The school's leadership structure included the principal, a head teacher or class sponsor, and a faculty of twelve to fifteen teachers and staff. Teachers included Mrs. Deloris Bolden, Mrs. Opal Coleman, Mr. H.L. Cummings, Mrs. Annie S. Flemings, Mrs. Lula Bell Foster, Miss Eva D. Hathorne, Mr. T.H. Hardaway, Mrs. Delusia Hardaway, Mrs. Mary Jones, Mrs. Effie Lauderdale, Mrs. Zannie E. Lucas, Mrs. Marie T. McPherson, Mrs. Edith Roberts, Mr. Paul Shack, Mrs. Eloise Shumpert, Miss Nancy Ann Stone, Mrs. Betty S. Standifer, Mrs. Georgianna Thompson, Mrs. Retha Trice, Mrs. Erie Lee Wheeler, and Mrs. Woodruff. Mr. Frank Young also served as the school's "agent"—a role that combined business management with logistical oversight.

Most of these teachers were graduates of historically Black colleges and universities, including Mississippi Industrial College, Rust College, Tennessee A&I State University, Alcorn, Tuskegee, and Jackson State. Their presence reflected a regional Black professional class whose training and example carried deep meaning for the students of Lee County.

Because many students came from rural areas across the county, transportation was critical. Community members again stepped up to meet the need. Mr. Edgar Trice was the school's first bus driver. Other bus drivers included Mr. Spencer Jackson, Mr. Rozealous Rogers, Mr. Charlie Smith, Mr. Charlie Trice, Mr. Tom Wood, Mr. Lumpkins. Together they ensured that children from miles away could attend school each day, making education accessible to a far wider circle of families.

### **Curriculum and School Culture**

Siggers High was remembered not only for its curriculum—from academic courses such as arithmetic, English, and science to vocational training in home economics, agriculture, and shop—but also for the culture of care that infused daily life. Teachers were deeply invested in their students, often fashioning supplies by hand or quietly covering costs themselves so that all Siggers students could feel like they belonged. That ethic of dignity and pride shaped how students carried themselves and how families thought about the school.

The cultural life of the school was just as important as the classroom. Annual talent shows, May Day celebrations, and Baccalaureate services became hallmark events that drew in the wider community. Perhaps most beloved were the school's plays and operettas, which filled the auditorium with parents, grandparents, and neighbors from across Lee County. Alumni recall those evenings with fondness, moments of performance and pride that, in their memories, remain inseparable from the broader foundation Siggers provided for life beyond the county.

The symbols of school spirit carried deep meaning. Siggers' motto was, "Preparing to Meet the Challenge." The school's colors were purple and gold, its mascot a Black panther, and its Alma Mater—sung at assemblies and graduations—anchored generations of students with the refrain:

*Siggers High, O Siggers High  
Dearest spot on earth to me  
Siggers High, O Siggers High  
Where we'll always long to be*

These traditions gave students a shared sense of belonging and stitched together the school's identity.

Extracurricular life at Siggers was robust. Students participated in choral groups, the Future Farmers of America, cheerleading, and a range of athletic teams. Under Coach James T. McGlown, the school fielded its first all-Black football team in the 1945–46 school year. Nicknamed the Purple Monsters, the team wore borrowed uniforms from the white Shannon High School and practiced on its field—a telling reminder of both resourcefulness and segregation. Players on that pioneering team included Simon Barbee, Oscar Calmease, Sonny Calmease, William Earl Fields, Jake T. ("Skeet") Flemings, Robert "Pee Wee" Forbers Sr., George Hardin, Jimmie "Bilbo" Harris, Sam Lauderdale, Clarence Lyles, Spencer Lyles, Sammy McGlown, T.C. McGlown, and Cedric Thomas. Their participation set the stage for the long tradition of athletics that followed at Siggers and that, after integration, helped build Shannon High School's athletics program into [Description to be added].

### **Freedom of Choice and Integration**

By the mid-1960s, even as Siggers thrived academically and culturally, the pressure of federal desegregation mandates began reshaping the landscape of education across Lee County.

In 1967, under Mississippi's "Freedom of Choice" plan—a measure adopted across the state and widely criticized for delaying full desegregation—Black students were given the option to transfer to previously all-white schools. At Shannon, nine seniors and several underclassmen took that step, remembered by alumni as "going over yonder." Those nine seniors were Robert Clay, Linda Dell Cox, Gloria Linda Forbers, Robert Forbers Jr., Arma Jean Heard, Harvey Lee Ivy, Molly Jamison, Roxie Jean Ruff, and Willie George Smith. Their choice required considerable courage, leaving behind the familiarity of Siggers for an environment where acceptance was uncertain.

Experiences during the transition varied. Many alumni recall receiving strong instruction and academic preparation at Shannon High School, even as they recount mistreatment by some teachers and peers. Stories include being ignored in class, receiving inaccurate grades, being unfairly disciplined, and dealing with hateful comments and name-calling from peers. Yet nearly all point back to Siggers as the foundation that prepared them to persist through adversity.

By the fall of 1968, full integration was in place. The Class of 1969 became the first fully integrated graduating class of Shannon High School, while Siggers was restructured as Shannon Elementary School—a role it continues to serve today.

The closing of Siggers brought with it the loss of much of the school's material history. Class portraits, trophies, banners, accreditation documents, and other artifacts were discarded, leaving a lasting void in the collective memory of alumni. Even so, the school's legacy endures in the lives it shaped and the generations it helped set on their way.

### **School Legacies**

Siggers graduates went on to become educators, healthcare professionals, ministers, public officials, veterans, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders. Many remained in or returned to Shannon, serving the community that had first nurtured them. Their influence is still visible in schools, businesses, churches, and local government—a living testament to the strength of the foundation Siggers provided.

More than fifty years after the school's closure, the Mississippi House of Representatives passed a resolution in February 2020 honoring Siggers High School as the first African American high school in Shannon. The resolution commended its academic excellence, cultural impact, and the success of its alumni—including principals, doctors, and lawyers. It affirmed what generations of students already knew: Siggers was a “good school,” remembered fondly and respected for its role in education and community life. Copies of the resolution were sent to the Lee County School Board, the district superintendent, and the Capitol Press Corps.

In the years that followed, Dr. Brian Foster (Shannon High School Class of 2007) collaborated with alumni and community members to create the Siggers High School Oral History Project. Their voices and memories became the foundation for *We Make*, a documentary celebrating the school's legacy. In 2025, a permanent historical marker was dedicated at the former school site, ensuring that Siggers would be remembered not only in memory but in the physical landscape of Shannon.

Siggers High School may no longer stand as it once did. Its walls are gone, but its spirit, history, and legacy remains—in the people and communities of Shannon—*preparing generations, still, to meet the challenge.*