

Six

Palmer Memorial Institute

Charlotte scraped her shoes on an old wooden board, trying to remove the red clay “glued” to the soles. How in the world do they get anything to grow in this, she wondered. It was the first sunny day they had seen all week, and red mud was everywhere, including all over Charlotte’s shoes and the bottom of her dress.

“Having a little trouble there, Miss Hawkins?” Reverend Baldwin said, carrying a newly-sawed board across the field toward the building being worked on.

“It’s this red clay, Reverend Baldwin. I just don’t see how it serves any purpose.”

The reverend smiled as he lay down the board. “Well, the good Lord put it here for some reason.”

“Maybe to teach me patience,” Charlotte said before she laughed.

Charlotte, Reverend Baldwin, and some of the students and parents had worked all morning, trying to fix up an old building. Charlotte had persuaded Reverend Baldwin, who owned it, to let the school use it for a dorm. The girls and teachers could sleep in the loft upstairs, and the boys could sleep downstairs. Transforming the building had become a community project, with everyone wanting to help. Charlotte smiled with satisfaction.

Until she looked around her at all the work that needed to be done. She sat down on a rock and sighed. The hot, muggy air clung to her, and she thought once more of the fresh ocean breeze off the New

England coast. Even though she stayed busy, she had never lost her homesickness. She missed having someone to talk with about books and music. Charlotte spent most of what little spare time she had writing letters home to her family and friends, and then waiting anxiously for a reply. Whenever the mail came, she always tore through it, looking for letters. She had read the few books around the community, and had even started in the evenings reading a dictionary.

“Miss Hawkins. Miss Hawkins!”

Charlotte jerked around, startled to see Mattie standing over her.

“I’m sorry, Mattie. I didn’t realize you were speaking to me.”

A big grin spread over Mattie’s face, then she laughed out loud.

“Miss Hawkins, where do you go?”

Charlotte shielded her eyes from the sun. “What do you mean, where do I go?”

“When you start staring off like that. Where do you go? Back home up North, or off to someplace in those books you’re always talking about?”

Charlotte pointed at her shoes. “I was just thinking how nice it would be if I could wash my feet off in the ocean water.”

“That would be nice,” Mattie said, “nice and cool, but all I have to offer you is some pork chop, a piece of corn bread, and some water.”

Feeling the pangs in her stomach, Charlotte said, “That sounds wonderful.”

Mattie brought her a plate and a cup with the food and water. While Charlotte began eating, Mattie asked, “Do you think we’ll get this building finished by the end of the week?”

Charlotte knew why Mattie asked; it was time for the crops to be harvested, and she wanted the building done so her family could get back to work on their farm. “I think so, Mattie.” She could tell by the way Mattie’s eyes narrowed that she wasn’t convinced.

“There is still a lot to do before anyone can live there,” Mattie said.

She pointed at the worn boards on the sides, and the weeds growing tall at the edges of the building.

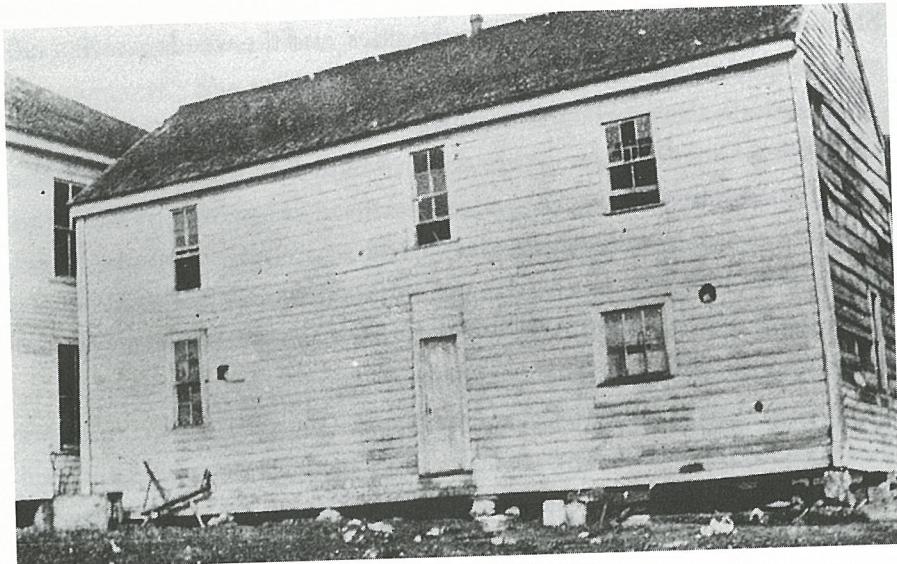
Charlotte also saw boards sagging in the middle, and mud caked on everything. She felt more worried than Mattie, but the work had to be done for the school to have a chance to succeed. The children who lived far away couldn't walk through bad weather, so if they were to attend during the winter, they needed a place to stay. The whole school year, since there was so much farm work in the spring and fall, only lasted about five months.

Just as the doubts made her head hurt, Charlotte closed her eyes and visualized the children in the dorm on a cold winter's night, huddled around the wood stove. She read to them a poem by Walt Whitman. Their eyes lit up as the magic of his words touched them and became a part of the rest of their lives. Charlotte opened her eyes and folded her napkin. "You're right, Mattie, there is a lot to be done, but look how far we've come. Thanks so much for the lunch." Even though I'm still not used to eating fried pork, she added silently. Still, I try to be thankful for whatever I get. "Mattie, don't worry about your crops. Everything will get done. Somehow everything will get done."

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Everything did get done, and Palmer Memorial Institute opened on schedule, though the hard work continued. Food and supplies were hard to come by. Teachers and students ate two meals a day, usually consisting of corn bread, molasses, peas, and beans. Meat was seldom served. In order for the school to run, students had to do chores which included making beds, laundry, building fires in the pot belly stoves, and carrying water from the well to the dorm.

In her later years Charlotte remembered what it was like when Palmer started: "In a little white church, which was school and church combined, my life's work began. The plastering was broken, and half the window panes were out. With these crudities and its homemade log



Palmer's first school building
Courtesy of N.C. State Historic Sites

seats it seemed to me a forlorn, forsaken place, and yet those fifty-two or sixty boys and girls, barefooted and unkempt, heartened me with their bright questioning eyes, and in a little while, I forgot the isolation and hardships and lost my very soul in trying to help them."

Charlotte became involved in all aspects of life in Sedalia. Religion had always been important to her, and she helped with church functions and the Sunday School. She took it upon herself to visit families in the community, sometimes wading through creeks to get to their log cabins.

Her first year in Sedalia, Charlotte had lived in the tiny room in the loft of the church. Without window shades or curtains, she had to move her bed from corner to corner to escape the sun's rays, or to keep it dry when it rained—the roof had holes in it.

After her second year in Sedalia, Reverend Baldwin resigned from helping with the school. Charlotte needed help, so she hired Lelia Ireland, a graduate of Barber-Scotia Seminary in Concord, North Carolina.

lina. Lelia brought her own enthusiasm and energy, and helped Charlotte in every way she could, including fund raising. In 1904 the two women wrote one thousand letters by hand to raise money, earning five hundred dollars. Charlotte wrote, "Many a night, Miss Ireland and I would write twenty-five to thirty letters by hand to New Englanders whose names I had learned, and this was our procedure. We would write the letters, then take them into our little room and place them on the table and kneel to ask God's blessing upon them that they might find their way into the hearts of the people to whom they were addressed."

They used the money to lay the foundation for Memorial Hall. The building was completed in 1905.

Those first years saw hard work and changes. Challenges came in every shape and form, but Charlotte held onto her faith and mission, and worked through each one. She began to see students graduate, and go on to successful lives. In the 1907 class, one graduate became a pastor, one a physician, and others became principals, teachers, and farmers.

As Palmer changed, so did Charlotte. In 1911 she married Edward Summer Brown, also an educator. She met him one summer while she was home in Cambridge. He, like many other African-American students attending Harvard, chose not to live on campus. He came to Charlotte's mother's house, looking for lodging, and Charlotte found him there. They fell in love, and after marrying, Edward moved to Sedalia and taught at Palmer.

Within five years, suffering from differences in their beliefs about education techniques and in their ambitions, they divorced. Edward left to go teach in a similar school in South Carolina.

Charlotte helped organize the North Carolina State Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, for the purpose of helping improve the lives of Negro women in the clubs' communities. In 1915 she became the second president of the organization and remained in the office until

1936.

Charlotte wrote her first book, *Mammy*, in 1919. It was a novel about a slave who had been loyal to her masters all her life. When she grew old, her masters showed no gratitude toward her, and she died in a blizzard, still trying to serve them. The book told a heart-breaking tale about the way many faithful slaves had been treated by their owners.

By 1917 Palmer Institute had grown into four large buildings: two dorms, an Industrial Building, and Memorial Hall which contained classrooms, offices, and a kitchen. Just as the school's fortunes seemed their brightest, disaster struck. On the last day of the year, fire destroyed the Industrial Building, which included the Manual Training Department, the Home Economics Department, and the primary grades. The Commissary, the small building that contained all the produce the students had grown, also burned to the ground.

Charlotte's first reaction was to plan a trip up North to try to raise funds for the reconstruction, but Mr. Edward P. Wharton convinced her that the people of his home city of Greensboro would contribute enough money to keep the school going.

On a Sunday afternoon, Charlotte took a group of student singers and performed a concert at the Municipal Auditorium in Greensboro. The citizens of that city did just as Mr. Wharton promised and pledged more than one thousand dollars toward a new building, one that would eventually be named the Alice Freeman Palmer Building.

The *Greensboro Daily News* carried an account of the concert on Monday, January 7, 1918. "Hundreds came who couldn't find seats. All standing room was taken and scores turned away."

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During the first years of Palmer Institute, Charlotte shared the educational philosophy of Booker T. Washington, the black leader and educator. They both believed in industrial learning. Most of the students who attended school were from the surrounding community,

and usually stayed in the community after graduation. They needed skills to lead productive lives, so the boys learned how to plant crops, raise livestock and poultry. Girls learned how to sew, cook, and run a home.

As she moved into her middle-age, Charlotte wanted to expand the students' interest in books and music. She planned to give the children of a small rural community something they could keep with them all their lives, an appreciation of the larger world around them. She wrote that she wanted to make their homes "happy intelligent centers. Where the beauty of a picture, a good book, as well as a field of corn, could be appreciated." She added as many books and musical works to Palmer Institute as she could, and the students' interest skyrocketed, just as she had planned.



The Class of 1916, with faculty in the rear
Courtesy of N.C. State Historic Sites