

Eppes, Charles Montgomery ^[1]

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25 Dec 1858 - 31 Jul 1942



Charles M Eppes, seated 1st row center. Pearce-Roger Kammerer Private Photograph Collection. Used by permission.
See also: [Eppes, Henry](#) ^[2] (father of Charles Montgomery Eppes)

Charles Montgomery Eppes, a noted African American educational leader, was born enslaved in Halifax County, North Carolina, on December 25, 1858, to parents Henry Eppes and Lavinia Eppes. Charles M. Eppes enjoyed a noteworthy, and at times controversial, career as an educator in North Carolina until his death on July 31, 1942. He married twice: first to Sarah E. Hobbs on April 1, 1887, and then to Anna Lee Enos on December 2, 1903. Eppes' father, State Senator [Henry Eppes](#) ^[3], had a twenty year career as an elected state official representing Halifax County. Like his father, C.M. Eppes was a vocal supporter for the education of African Americans and an "independent Republican." Eppes was an important leader who was one of a handful of African Americans described as being given "full power to represent, speak for, and work for the betterment of the Negro people educationally" by the State Teachers' Association for the Colored Race of North Carolina. C.M. Eppes' career began at the end of the Reconstruction Era and ended on the eve of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Charles M. Eppes' formal education started with [Freedmen's Bureau](#) ^[4] Schools directed by the Union Army after the Civil War, followed by the Parochial School under the auspices of the Episcopal Church, and five years' attendance at Shaw Institute, which became [Shaw University](#) ^[4]. Additionally, Eppes studied at numerous summer Institutes and by way of correspondence courses. He also partook in year-long summer courses at Hampton Institute, Shaw, and the Agricultural and Mechanical College for the Colored (now [North Carolina A&T University](#) ^[5]).

Civic and religious affiliations for C.M. Eppes were numerous: the Masons; Odd Fellows; Good Samaritans; Civic League; Royal Knights of King Solomon; Knights of Gideon; A. M. E. Zion Methodist Church. Eppes was a charter member of the North Carolina Negro Teachers' Association, and during the Great Depression, [Governor O. Max Gardner](#) ^[6] sought Eppes' leadership in the Re-Employment Commission of Eastern North Carolina, as was well the state's Interracial Commission. Over his lengthy career, Eppes made positive impressions on influential men in the state. Eppes was able to capitalize on his leadership abilities to strengthen educational opportunities for African Americans in the Jim Crow South when racism was rabid and support for "colored" education was unpopular among many whites.

Eppes' career as an educator began in 1875. From 1875-1877, he taught school in New Hanover County, and in Goldsboro, 1880 to 1885, where he also served as the City Editor for the Goldsboro Carolina Enterprise newspaper. In 1885, Eppes moved to Edgecombe County and to work in the school system until 1899. He was appointed Superintendent of the State Normal School at Plymouth, North Carolina, and remained there until 1903. From Plymouth, Eppes moved to Greenville, North Carolina, where he was the Supervising Principal and teacher of the Colored Schools in Greenville until 1942.

Before arriving in Greenville, North Carolina, Eppes often found himself embroiled in controversy and conflict. Altercations stemmed from his prominence as a leader of education for African Americans involved gunplay, to charges of immorality, forgery, and mismanagement of the Plymouth Normal School. While leading the Plymouth Normal School, Eppes' enemies succeeded in having authorities launch a formal investigation of him in 1899. In the course of the inquiry, it was discovered that in 1877, an eighteen year old C.M. Eppes had, in fact, served a one year prison sentence for a false charge of forgery while a teacher in New Hanover County. It was also determined that he was restored to citizenship by order of the Superior Court of New Hanover county in 1895. Despite these normally career ending revelations, the conclusion of the 1899 inquest ended in Eppes' favor. The investigative body found that the charge and conviction of forgery against Eppes in 1877 bore "no criminal intent," and the 1899 charges of mismanagement of the Normal School in Plymouth were motivated by the "brutal political prejudices" of the day. While Eppes may have been a defeated political pawn in 1877, he emerged unscathed in 1899 when the "first and foremost men of the State of both races" vouched for his good conduct,

leadership, and morality.

Throughout his life, North Carolina powerbrokers helped Eppes' to achieve his goals. Former Governor of North Carolina and head of Greenville's Graded Schools, Thomas Jarvis [7], was impressed with C.M. Eppes and wanted him to lead Greenville's Colored School system in 1903. Jarvis also made special arrangement for Eppes to meet Booker T. Washington when he visited nearby Washington, North Carolina, in 1910. Booker T. Washington wrote a letter to Governor Jarvis and admitted that he "...found Professor Epps to be a sensible, strong man."

Like many who had actually lived as slaves, C.M. Eppes' viewed direct confrontation with white state officials to be destructive for blacks' progress in North Carolina. Immediately after the Wilmington Coup of 1898 [8] Charles Eppes, and other black North Carolina leaders, publicly pronounced agreement with Booker T. Washington's estimation of what caused the Wilmington Riots of 1898: black involvement in politics. Eppes' answer to the problem of advancement for his race in the late 1800s was not to fight in the political arena, but to cultivate sympathy, protection, and goodwill with the state's white leaders, not destroy it. Furthermore, Eppes believed that if a cadre of black educational leaders would simply follow Booker T. Washington's accommodationist precepts, then whites in North Carolina would support the essential piece of black progress: education. White supremacists, in both parties, dominated state government politics in North Carolina in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This reality left black leaders, like Eppes, believing that the responsible thing to do was to appeal to white leaders who would help build black schools for their children.

By the 1930s, the N.A.A.C.P. had been trying to rally blacks in the state to take a less passive approach to racial inequalities. They believed that the slow path recommended by Booker T. Washington had run its course. Washington had urged cooperation and accommodation with whites; the N.A.A.C.P. called for confrontation in the courts. Eppes agreed with Booker T. Washington and maintained that favorable change would best come from working with the existing power structures of North Carolina and avoiding political agitation, thereby avoiding racial conflict.

Louis Austin's newspaper, *The Carolina Times*, a de facto organ of the N.A.A.C.P., had maligned Eppes and other conservative African American leaders for their seeming unwillingness to confront whites. The paper had castigated Eppes and his veteran educational leaders for being not merely accommodationists, but for being complicit enforcers of Jim Crow inequalities. For Eppes, criticism was nothing new. He had been staring down ideological enemies for decades: a 1902 newspaper wrote that Professor Eppes had stood "like a granite shaft he towers above the ghouls and maligners of his race." Eppes never wavered from his core belief that antagonistic race relations in North Carolina were the road to ruin for African Americans.

By 1941 though, the rift between Eppes and Louis Austin had healed, to a degree. *The Carolina Times* honored Eppes' decades-long leadership when it dedicated its entire May 31, 1941, issue to Eppes lifetime of work for the improvement of African Americans. It editorialized that *The Carolina Times* did "...not always agree with all the methods used by some of our race leaders, but we trust the time will never come when this newspaper will be so blind, so narrow in its conception that it cannot see the good a man has done and pay tribute to him for doing it."

Eppes' tenure in Greenville, North Carolina, cultivated favorable relationships within the Jim Crow societal structure to successfully, and peacefully, expand educational opportunities for African Americans. He safely guided the steady increase in schools for African American children, and saw a sizeable growth in the number of students and teachers in the city. Just before his death, the Greenville Colored Industrial High School was renamed for Eppes. Today, C.M. Eppes' name lives on in Greenville at C.M. Eppes Middle School.

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[Education](#) ^[10]

[Educators](#) ^[11]

Authors:

[Hill, Steven](#) ^[12]

Origin - location:

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[Halifax County](#) ^[14]

[New Hanover County](#) ^[15]

[Pitt County](#) ^[16]

[Greenville](#) ^[17]

[Washington County](#) ^[18]

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Years:

1858 - 1942

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