

Before the Civil Rights Era, there were few places in Greenville, South Carolina, that provided for the needs of African Americans.¹ Hattie Logan Duckett, a middle-class African-American woman, founded the Phillis Wheatley Center (PWC) in the 1900s to meet the educational, spiritual, physical, and social needs of the African-American community. Since the 1970s, the focus of the Center has shifted toward meeting the needs of the entire community.

Hattie Logan Duckett was born in Greenville to a Methodist pastor. After high school, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Claflin College, taught first grade at Union School, married Gilbert Duckett and moved to Florida. In 1911, she returned to Greenville and continued teaching.⁵ From her youth, Duckett, a dedicated Christian, was interested in helping others, particularly young African Americans.⁶ Within the community, her home was known as a “place of refuge” because of the hospitality she showed to lost African-American travelers, abused women, and anyone else in need.⁷ During World War I, she operated a canteen and social club for soldiers at Camp Sevier.⁸

In 1919, Duckett founded the Phillis Wheatley Association (PWA) to aid young African-American women.⁹ The African-American community contributed enough money to buy the

¹ “African-American” is the adjective form, while “African American” is the noun form of the phrase. “African-American vs. black,” *Grammarist*, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://grammarist.com/usage/african-american-black/>.

⁵ Duckett’s husband died after only 10 days of marriage. She may not have had such an impact in the community if she had been occupied with a family of her own. Lydia Dishman, “From Humble Beginnings: The Phillis Wheatley Center,” *Greenville Magazine*, 2003.

⁶ “Hattie Logan Duckett,” Hattie Logan Duckett Biographical File, South Carolina Room, Greenville Public Library

⁷ Duckett’s sister Mae recounts the story of a young woman with a baby who sought refuge in Duckett’s house. The young woman’s drunk husband had been following her and Duckett helped calm him down. Huff, 313-315; Bainbridge, “Hattie Logan Duckett created the Phillis Wheatley Center,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 June 2017; Dishman, “From Humble Beginnings.”

⁸ The Phillis Wheatley Center was not an entirely unique idea to Duckett. In 1911, Duckett’s friend, Jane Hunter, started an organization under the same name with a similar purpose in Cleveland, Ohio. Bainbridge, “Greenville Owes Debt to Duckett,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 14 March 2001.

⁹ The Phillis Wheatly Association is the organization the Phillis Wheatley Center facility. Phillis Wheatley was an 18th century African American poet, and her name became synonymous with the intelligence and the

Association a house on East McBee Avenue to serve as a social center for young African-American women.¹⁰ Duckett soon included boys in her program after they showed interest in her story hour and Bible classes.¹¹

The cost to maintain the Phillis Wheatley Home was too high for the African-American community alone, and Duckett sought assistance from Thomas F. Parker, a white civic leader.¹² Together with a biracial board, they raised enough money to buy a lot on East Broad Street, and the Phillis Wheatley Center was dedicated in 1924.¹³ The center housed the “Colored Branch” of the Greenville Public Library. The programs included a day nursery; classes in bible, cooking, sewing, and first aid; night classes for adults; and summer school for children. The facility included an auditorium to seat more than 500 people, a stage and dressing rooms.¹⁴

In order to keep the PWC running, compromises had to be made. When the PWA was reorganized, five of the nine board members were required to be white, including the president, vice president, and treasurer, the other four were required to be African American. Parker believed that white control of the association was the only way to gain financial support from the white community. In addition, there were very specific stipulations concerning how much financial support the African-American community was required to provide.¹⁵ Nevertheless without Parker’s support, the PWC would have been unable to continue.

potential that African Americans had for learning, many organizations being named in her honor. Judith Bainbridge, “Greenville Owes Debt to Duckett,” *Greenville (SC)*, 14 March 2001.

¹⁰ A.V. Huff, Jr, *Greenville: The History of the City and the County in the South Carolina Piedmont* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 314; Bainbridge, “Hattie Logan Duckett created the Phillis Wheatley Center,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 June 2017.

¹¹ “Negro Leader Dies in City,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 July 1956.

¹² Bainbridge, “Hattie Logan Duckett created the Phillis Wheatley Center,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 June 2017; Huff, 314.

¹³ “Negro Leader Dies in City,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 July 1956; Bainbridge, “Greenville Owes Debt to Duckett,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 14 March 2001.

¹⁴ Thomas F. Parker, “The Phillis Wheatley Center,” *The Southern Workman*, 54, no. 11 (November 1925): 497-503.

¹⁵ Parker, “The Phillis Wheatley Center,” 497-498.

During the Great Depression, the PWC focused on aiding the unemployed by maintaining a list of qualified African Americans who needed work and by connecting them with potential employers.¹⁶ The federal Emergency Relief Administration also maintained an office at the center that provided meals, clothes, and wood for heating to those in need.¹⁷ The center provided much needed aid during this period, although it continued to be understaffed, overcrowded, and in debt.¹⁸

During the late 1930s, the NAACP led a clandestine enfranchisement movement in Greenville. In 1895, the South Carolina state constitution had been modified to discourage African American voting by requiring them to pay a poll tax and pass a literacy test. In 1939, the NAACP focused on helping African Americans register to vote, and they succeeded in helping 230 register. The KKK retaliated with various intimidation tactics, some resulting in violence. As a result, the PWC denied the NAACP a meeting place at the center, most likely so that the center could keep its funding from the Community Chest, although the PWC may have also been concerned with the safety of those they served.¹⁹

In 1942, during World War II, President Roosevelt approved funds to renovate the PWC and to rent its facilities as a recreation center for African-American soldiers stationed at Greenville Army Air Base in Greenville County. African-American soldiers were also given Red Cross nurse and civil defense training there.²⁰ Although PWC programs were somewhat curtailed

¹⁶ “Negro Center Aid in Getting Colored Help for City Folk,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 March 1930.

¹⁷ Bainbridge, “Phillis Wheatley Center Dates Back to a 1925 role,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 10 May 2018; “Mrs. Duckett’s Center Helped All Races,” 14 February 1975, unidentified newspaper clipping, Phillis Wheatley Association/ Community Center File, South Carolina Room, Greenville Public Library.

¹⁸ Phillis Wheatley Association Annual Report 31 May 1937 to 1 June 1938, 31 May 1938 to 1 June 1939, 1940 to 1941 PWA/ Community Center File, South Carolina Room, Greenville Public Library.

¹⁹ Bainbridge, “Bravery and Defiance: NAACP Beginnings,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 4 May 2016. In 1938, the NAACP organized classes to explain the process of registering to vote and to prepare for the literacy tests, which involved interpreting select articles from the constitution. As a result, 34 African Americans voted in 1939.

²⁰ “FDR’s Approval Given Allotment for Overhauling,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 December 1942; Bainbridge, “Dates Back.”

by military use of the center, it continued to host music, literary, social, and educational clubs, and sponsored game and play nights, parties, and other sorts of recreation. The center also offered classes in the Bible, music, sewing, cooking, midwifery, pre-school, recreation, and first aid.²¹ Finally on June 20, 1944, the PWC celebrated paying off its mortgage.²²

Duckett died on July 25, 1956, following a four-year illness. In recognition of her service to the African-American community, the board of trustees of the Greenville County school system named the Hattie Duckett Elementary School in her memory.²³

After Duckett retired in 1948, Edgar “Tiny” Smith became the director of the PWC and served until 1967.²⁴ At that time, 503 people were enrolled in PWC clubs, and the center was visited by an average of 94 people per day. To expand the center’s recreational, educational and cultural programs, Smith hired Jeannette M. Foster as the women and girls’ program director, and James Richard Bates as the men and boys’ program director.²⁵ In the 1960s, the center cooperated with the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce to provide a class and seminar preparing African Americans to enter job markets that had previously been closed to them.²⁶

Alphonso W. Allen became the executive director from 1968 to 1970. Under his leadership, the PWC began offering all-day summer programs for children funded by the United

²¹ “Center Here is Very Busy,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 12 October 1944; PWA Annual Report 1940 to 1941.

²² “Report for Year Given at Center,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 June 1944.

²³ Before she died, friends suggested the Phillis Wheatley Center be renamed the Hattie Logan Duckett Center, but she humbly opposed the proposal. Those attending her funeral were told to not send flowers because she said she had “received her flowers in life and did not want any sent when she died.” “A Visit to Remember,” Hattie Logan Duckett Biographical File, South Carolina Room, Greenville Public Library; “Negro Leader Dies in City”; Ruth Ann Butler, “Phillis Wheatley Center History,” PWA/ Community Center File, South Carolina Room, Greenville Public Library, 1.

²⁴ Leola Clement Robinson-Simpson, *Black America Series: Greenville County South Carolina* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 92; “Negro Leader Dies in City,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 July 1956. Hattie Duckett served as a community counselor after she retired. “Phillis Wheatley Adds Two New Directors,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 15 June 1948.

²⁵ As president of the center’s board of trustees, Cary L. Page sought to enlarge membership and to expand the center program. “Playgrounds Needed Here,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 22 January 1948; “Adds Two New.”

²⁶ Butler, 1; Robinson-Simpson, 92.

Fund of Greenville. After morning instruction, students could participate in the Enrichment Program at Sterling Recreation Center, which included classes in woodworking, sewing, and swimming.²⁷

In 1970, John A. McCarroll became the executive director of the PWC until 2001; his two main goals were to promote self-sufficiency of the PWC and to enhance quality of life in the community. During his tenure, he increased the annual budget from \$60 to \$1.8 million. The center grew to include two buildings, a medical clinic, and three satellite locations in Greer. He added new programs including a Big Brothers and Big Sisters program to provide role models for fatherless boys and girls from single parent homes, Midnight Basketball to keep youth off the streets, a youth theater, and a reading project.²⁸

McCarroll grew up in Tigerville, South Carolina. He enjoyed sports in high school and planned to go to college on a football scholarship. Influential people in his life directed him towards teaching, and he earned a degree from South Carolina State University. He taught and coached at Lincoln High School in Taylors.²⁹ When in 1970, courts forced South Carolina schools to racially integrate, McCarroll was transferred to formerly white Travelers Rest High

²⁷ In 1967, Sterling High School burned down leaving the gym and a small music building that were turned into a community center dedicated in 1970. Greenville County Rec, "Sterling Community Center," *Greenville County Parks, Recreation, & Tourism*, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://greenvillerec.com/parks/sterling-community-center/>; Sam Zimmerman, "Enrichment Students Mix Play with Study," *Greenville (SC) News*, 7 August 1970; "Phillis Wheatley to Operate Under Special UF Fund," 9 June 1971; Robinson-Simpson, 93.

²⁸ The Big Brothers and Big Sisters program, open to both African Americans and whites, continued to be racially segregated. McCarroll, the director, explained "We didn't want to saddle them with more problems in addition to the ones they already had," but without the context it is hard to know what he meant. Ruth Bixby, "Retiring Phillis Wheatley Director Leaves Legacy of Stewardship, Hope," *Greenville, (SC) News*, 14 March 2001; "'Thanks for Big Brother' Praise Enough for Baer," *Greenville (SC) News*, 29 March 1970

²⁹ Donna Isbell Walker, "John A. McCarroll worked to make the world a better place," *Greenville News (SC)*, 1 February 2015; Robinson-Simpson, 94; Jimmy Cornelison, "'Challenge' is John McCarroll's Middle Name," *Greenville (SC) News*, 18 February 1992; "Working with People Satisfying- McCarroll," *Greenville (SC) News*, 16 September 1972; Bixby, "Retiring Phillis Wheatley Director."

School and demoted to assistant coach.³⁰ He then abandoned teaching and became the executive director of the PWC.³¹

By 1972, the PWC needed a new facility to accommodate its expanding programs and because its building on East Broad Street was deteriorating.³² Three-and-a-half years later, the PWC had raised enough funds to build next to Beck Middle School on Greenacre Road. The building was completed in 1977 but not dedicated until a gym was built the following year.³³

In the 1980s, a theater program, called the Phillis Wheatley Repertory Theatre for Youth, was started at the PWC. It began as a part of PWC's After-School and Summer Program led by Dwight E. Woods. Woods had moved from Chicago in 1973, where he had been involved in the theatre program of his church. He organized his first production at the PWC in the late 1970s and worked in subsequent Summer Programs until he was hired full-time in 1985. The Repertory Theatre, which performed at the 1989 regional conference for the NAACP in Alabama, grew to become an important program at the PWC.³⁴ Woods wrote some of the musicals they performed, including the anti-drug musical "Don't Give Up on Your Dream."³⁵ Phillip Boykin, who had been a part of the Repertory Theatre in the 1980s, was nominated for a Tony Award in 2012 and a Grammy Award in 2019.³⁶ After Woods died in 2013, the Repertory Theatre was renamed the Dwight Woods Phillis Wheatley Repertory Theatre.³⁷

³⁰ Schools in South Carolina were first integrated on February 17, 1970. Mike Hembree, "A Look Back at How Black Athletes Navigated Greenville's integration in the 1970s," 16 February 2020.

³¹ Cornelison, "Challenge."

³² "Phillis Wheatley Needs New Building," *Greenville (SC) News*, 29 July 1974; Robert Wilson, "New, Increased Facilities Lead Needs of Phillis Wheatley Center," *Greenville (SC) News*, 29 June 1972.

³³ Lucy Emerson, "Wheatley Move is End of Era," *Greenville (SC) News*, 2 June 1977; "Phillis Wheatley Center Dedicated Today," *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 August 1978.

³⁴ Marty Berry, "Dwight Woods: A Talented Man with Multiple Titles," *Greenville (SC) News*, 24 February 1989.

³⁵ "The Phillis Wheatley Repertory Theater for Youth: 'Don't Give Up on Your Dream!'," Phillis Wheatley Association / Community Center File, South Carolina Room, Greenville Public Library.

³⁶ Walker, "Greenville Native Nominated for 2019 Grammy Award; Local Record Label Has One, Too" *Greenville (SC) News*, 7 February 2019.

³⁷ "Woods Shaped Many Young Lives," *Greenville (SC) News*, 7 February 2013.

In 1999, the PWA began expanding the center to relieve overcrowding and to allow it to serve a wider audience. The health clinic was moved to the old building and the center administration was moved to the new 11,000-square-foot addition. The Earle and Eleanor Sargent Foundation donated funds to the PWC's library, which was renamed the Earle and Eleanor Sargent Library.³⁸ A new street, LeGrand Boulevard Extension, eased access to the center.³⁹ The new headquarters opened in December 1999.⁴⁰

During the first decade of the 21st century, the center went through several directors and was financially unstable after it lost much of its federal and state funding, about 1/3 of its budget.⁴¹ In 2001, Dr. William Ross Jr. became the executive director after McCarroll retired. Ross hoped to bridge the education gap between African Americans and whites, to increase services for seniors, and to focus on fund raising, but he resigned barely two years later.⁴² Dayatra Baker-White succeeded Ross in February 2003. Baker-White, a lawyer, had volunteered at the center for 25 years and had served as the board president for two terms. The center was in such financial straits that she cut expenses, laid off 31 employees, and worked without a salary

³⁸ Kathy Spencer-Mention, "Library Will Be New Chapter," *Greenville (SC) News*, 13 July 1999. The Mauldin Library Branch planned to donate old equipment to the Phillis Wheatley Library.

³⁹ E. Richard Walton, "Phillis Wheatley Launches \$1.6 million expansion," *Greenville (SC) News*, 20 January 1999; Walton, "Phillis Wheatley Expanding," *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 January 1999.

⁴⁰ Walton, "New Headquarters Opens New Era at Phillis Wheatley," *Greenville (SC) News*, 9 December 1999.

⁴¹ Beth Padgett, "Phillis Wheatley Trying to Go 'Back to the Future,'" *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 April 2007.

⁴² Ruth Bixby, "New Director Relishes Duties at Phillis Wheatley," *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 March 2001; E. Richard Walton, "Spartanburg Educator Replaces Veteran Leader of Wheatley Association," *Greenville (SC) News*, 27 July 2001.

until January 2004.⁴³ G. Eric Carpenter became the next executive director in 2005, followed by Joan Peters in 2006, and Donna Mosely Coleman in 2007.⁴⁴

In 2014, the PWC was once again in disrepair without adequate funds to repair it. The executive director since 2013, Darian Blue, went to great lengths to raise funds to plug the leaky roof. Blue spent five days living in a tent on the PWC roof to raise funds.⁴⁵ In 2016, the Dwight Woods Phillis Wheatley Repertory Theatre put on a production of “The Sound – A Motown Tribute” to raise funds.⁴⁶ From late 2016 to 2018, the center was closed because the building was in disrepair and it lacked funding.⁴⁷ In 2017, the center repaired the roof and made other necessary renovations through its partnership with Greenville County.⁴⁸

The center celebrated its 100-year anniversary when it re-opened in 2019 as the Phillis Wheatley Community Center (PWCC) to reflect its new start. The center collaborated with other non-profits to restore services and to address the needs of the community, including the Greenville County Recreation, Sunbelt Human Advancement Resources, Greenville Area Parkinson Society, Eckerd Connects, and Goodwill’s Youth and Family. In addition, the center offered K-12 afterschool programs, summer Day Camp, Spring Break Camp, and the Phillis

⁴³ Betty Solomon, “Phillis Wheatley All About Role Models,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 21 July 2003; Walton, “Baker-White to Lead Phillis Wheatley,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 20 October 2003; “Saving Phillis Wheatley,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 29 October 2003; “Solicitor: Upstate Attorney Stole from Civil Rights Leader’s Trust,” *WYFF4*, 22 September 2011, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.wyff4.com/article/solicitor-upstate-attorney-stole-from-civil-rights-leader-s-trust/6998528>. There is a discrepancy about how many people were cut, Walton’s article says 29 while Solomon’s article says 31. As a retired stockbroker, Dayatra Baker-White’s financial acumen made her seem like a qualified director, but in 2011 she was sentenced to ten years in prison for siphoning money from an estate trust of a NAACP leader.

⁴⁴ “Fresh Leadership,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 4 March 2005; Walton, “Top Executive at Wheatley Leaving Post,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 16 September 2006; Padgett, “Phillis Wheatley Trying to Go ‘Back to the Future.’”

⁴⁵ Angelia Davis, “Phillis Wheatley Director Takes Fundraiser to the Roof,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 6 October 2014.

⁴⁶ Davis, “Dancing Around Buckets, Repertory Theatre Raising Money to Fix Leaking Room,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 14 February 2016.

⁴⁷ Georgia Gay, “Phillis Wheatley Center Turns 100 but Doesn’t Let it Show,” *Greenville (SC) Journal*, 4 October 2019.

⁴⁸ Davis, “Phillis Wheatley Community Center Celebrates 100 Years with Plans for the Future,” *Greenville (SC) News*, 16 March 2020.

Wheatley Repertory Theatre. The center was funded by Greenville County Recreation, the Jolley Foundation, the United Way, and the Hollingsworth Fund.⁴⁹

The PWC played an important role in the African-American community before social services existed. Although it struggled financially throughout its history, the center continued to receive support from the community and has developed into a self-sustaining, non-profit organization that continues to play an important role in the economically depressed areas of Greenville.

⁴⁹ Davis, "Phillis Wheatley Center Celebrates;" Greenville County Rec, "Phillis Wheatley Community Center," *Greenville County Parks, Recreation, & Tourism*, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://greenvillerec.com/parks/phillis-wheatley-community-center/>.

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