

IMPORTANT NORTH CAROLINA WOMEN

CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN (1883–1961)

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ♦ *Describe the achievements of Charlotte Hawkins Brown and the personal characteristics that enabled her to be successful.*



Charlotte Hawkins Brown

Charlotte ("Lottie") Hawkins was born in 1883 in Henderson, North Carolina. To escape the increasingly severe racial segregation of the South, her mother moved her family to Cambridge, Massachusetts, when Charlotte was about five years old.

She attended grammar school in Cambridge and the Cambridge English High School. Not only was she an excellent student, but she acquired a life-long love of art and developed her artistic talent. She sometimes drew other students' portraits for extra funds.

An incident in Cambridge changed Brown's life. While attending the English High School, she was a babysitter for a small child. One day she was pushing the child's stroller while reading a book — in Latin — by Virgil, the famous Latin poet. A woman saw her and was struck by the scene, so she spoke briefly to Charlotte. The woman was Alice Freeman Palmer, who had been the president of nearby Wellesley College. Soon afterwards, Palmer helped Brown with her expenses at Salem Normal School. (At the time, a "**normal school**" was a school that trained future teachers.) Palmer and Brown became friends.

After studying for just one year at Salem Normal School, Charlotte received a job offer from the American Missionary Association to teach at a small school for African American students in North Carolina. She accepted, and in the autumn of 1901, at age 18, she began teaching at what was then the Bethany Institute, which was located near Greensboro in Guilford County.

However, this school closed within a year due to its troubled finances. But Brown decided to stay in the community and build her own school. She named it the Palmer Memorial Institute in honor of her friend and mentor, Alice Palmer.

According to the school's charter, its purpose was to teach "improved methods of agriculture and industrial pursuits generally." However, the school did not teach only those subjects. The Palmer Institute became both a high school and a normal school, preparing young people to become teachers, farmers, and industrial workers, as well as good parents. A small percentage of the school's graduates went on to college.



Palmer Memorial Institute's Graduating Class of 1943

Brown had a remarkable ability to raise funds while managing the day-to-day operations of the institute. The Palmer Memorial Institute became nationally known as one of the country's best boarding schools for African American young people. Brown received six honorary degrees and became friends with prominent figures such as Booker T. Washington and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as many wealthy philanthropists. She is often associated with two other black women educators, Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Helen Burroughs. They are sometimes called the "three Bs of education."

Charlotte Hawkins Brown married twice, but both marriages were brief. She had no children, but she helped raise several children in her extended family. Brown retired as president of the Palmer Institute in 1952. She died in 1961.

The school remained open until 1971, but it was not the same without Charlotte Hawkins Brown as its leader. After a fire destroyed the school's main building in 1971, the Palmer Institute closed. However, by that time, the public school system in Guilford County was integrated, and more educational opportunities existed for African American families.

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Write a paragraph describing the educational institution that Charlotte Hawkins Brown created.

Using information from the reading, describe three personal characteristics that enabled Charlotte Hawkins Brown to create and manage the Palmer Memorial Institute.

Explain why Charlotte Hawkins Brown's school was called the Palmer Memorial Institute.
