

Elizabeth Randolph: Education History-maker in Charlotte

Draft by Tom Hanchett, community historian
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Elizabeth Garland Schmoke Randolph was a trailblazing women in top leadership at Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools during the 1950s – 1970s. After two decades as a classroom teacher, she moved into administration as principal at University Park Elementary in 1958. When the U.S. government began offering incentives for school systems to launch kindergarten classes in the 1960s, she led the effort that made kindergarten part of all CMS elementary schools. She went on to head CMS's implementation of the federal Title I program, aiding high-poverty schools. In the 1970s, she was tapped to co-lead the district, part of a four-person team that functioned as Superintendent of Schools during implementation of busing for racial balance. She was celebrated as WBT Woman of the Year – the city's highest honor. The main building of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools administrative campus is named in her memory.

Elizabeth “Libby” Schmoke Randolph grew up in a remarkable family. Her father John Hagan Schmoke saved enough on a carpenter's wages to raise six children, four of whom went to college.¹ In particular, her brother Murray Schmoke “graduated from Morehouse College in 1949 and became a civilian chemist for the U.S. Army at the Edgewood Arsenal and the Aberdeen Proving Ground,” according to a 1991 story in the *Baltimore Sun*. Murray's son Kurt (Libby's nephew), the newspaper went on, “was a star quarterback in high school; a Rhodes Scholar in college; a clean-cut young federal prosecutor who shocked the [Baltimore] political establishment, first ... with a successful, grass-roots, outsider's campaign for state's attorney and then, with a similar campaign for mayor in 1987.”² Kurt Schmoke won election as Baltimore's first Black mayor and served twelve years until 1999.

For young Libby, however, the most influential family member was her mother Pearl Johnson Schmoke. “My mother was a teacher and I was her oldest child,” Randolph later remembered. “She told me she wanted me to be a teacher, too.”³ In Charlotte historian Mary Kratt's book *New South Women*, Randolph dug deeper into those memories. “All six Schmoke children grew up knowing they were going to college. She taught out in the county, and when she came home, we had dinner, then we got out our books and our homework and sat around the table and studied.”⁴

The family lived in Raleigh, North Carolina, where Shaw University was close at hand. Shaw ranked among the best Black educational institutions in the South. It had been the first to achieve university status, in 1873, and was known for pioneering offerings in medicine and law. In the 1960s, NAACP leader Ella Baker would make the university a training ground for what became the Student Non-Violent coordinating Committee. Through all of that, Shaw set its main

task as training teachers. Libby enrolled amid the Great Depression of the early 1930s, paying her tuition in part with money earned playing piano in church.⁵ In 1936, the national Black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* carried a photo of the school's top senior, solemn-faced in her cap and gown, with the caption "Miss Elizabeth G. Schmoke graduated magna cum laude, highest honor student."⁶ She would later earn a Masters degree from University of Michigan, taking classes during her summer breaks.

Like her mother, she went out to teach in rural and small-town schools – taking positions first in the mountains of Rutherford County, then in the village of Wake Forest, then in the small city of Burlington.⁷ "The entire community looked up to the teacher," she later recalled.⁸ In 1944 the energetic superintendent in Charlotte, Dr. Elmer Garinger, hired her to come to the state's largest city.⁹ At West Charlotte High, she quickly became a beloved teacher of English, also supervising the drama program and Student Council. She went back to school herself as one of the first Black graduate students in the School of Education at UNC Chapel Hill where she earned the Advanced Certificate in School Administration in 1958, the gateway credential to become a principal.¹⁰

Later that year, Dr. Garinger tapped Randolph to be the founding principal at the new University Park Elementary School. Today it is hard to grasp the importance that the position of school principal held in the era of segregation. African Americans ran no public agency nor any corporate office, so to be a principal in charge of a school's budget, its physical plant and its roster of teachers was to be one of Charlotte's top Black executives.

In 1959 she and husband John took out the permit to build a handsome house at 1616 Patton Avenue in McCrorey Heights.¹¹ The neighborhood, developed by Black college president Rev. H.L. McCrorey, was home to many of Charlotte's African American doctors, ministers, educators and other professionals during the decades after World War II. She and John Daniel Randolph had wed in 1950 in a ceremony covered in detail by the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He was an electrical engineer, then working for Union Trust Company in his hometown of Rochester, New York.¹² He followed his bride to Charlotte, where he organized the maintenance operations at the huge new Brookhill Village, an apartment complex developed for blue-collar Black families.¹³ He passed away in 1963.¹⁴

In 1964 U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty, which aimed to use government to better the lives of poor Americans, especially in the South. LBJ's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for the first time sent Federal dollars to local public schools. Charlotte decided to use some of the money for kindergarten classes, then a rarity in America. Elizabeth Randolph became the point person for CMS, adding kindergartens first to low-income schools, then to most Charlotte elementary schools.¹⁵ Between 1967 and 1973 the school system went from having a single kindergarten at Davidson Elementary School to having 41 classes throughout the county. The Charlotte initiative became a model for statewide implementation of kindergartens across North Carolina during the 1970s.

Being in the CMS central office was, in itself, a milestone, she later recalled to historian Kratt: "Under segregation, Black persons didn't even go to the central office unless they were janitors."¹⁶ Over the years her responsibilities in CMS administration increased. She directed the

Title I program, the new ESEA funding stream that aided low-wealth schools. Later she became the curriculum chief for the school system. She gained a national reputation, the first Black woman elected President of the 30,000 member Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.¹⁷

During the 1970s, the national Civil Rights spotlight focused on Charlotte, thanks to the 1971 Supreme Court decision in *Swann v Mecklenburg Schools*. Charlotte implemented an energetic program of busing to create racial balance in every school. At the height of those efforts, CMS fired its superintendent and put a four-person team in charge for the 1976 – 1977 school year as it sought a new chief. Elizabeth Randolph was one of the four — the first African American female in top leadership at CMS. “She was one of those who really spearheaded integration in the schools,” the *Charlotte Observer* quoted white principal Bob Davis as saying years later. “I don’t believe that integration would have been so successful without her.”¹⁸

Outside of work, she gave generously of her time to what would now be called “community-building.” She was active in Charlotte’s teachers’ association, which connected educators beyond the classroom – serving as president of the African American branch of the organization during the early 1950s.¹⁹ She took delight in recruiting members to the YWCA. She served for many years on the Y’s local board, involved initially in the segregated Black branch named in honor of poet Phyllis Wheatly, and later in the integrated institution.²⁰ She especially cherished her involvement in Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. Sororities and fraternities played a big role in community life – long after college – for African Americans. “Graduate chapters” were a way for well-educated adults to connect and work together to create social events and civic projects. In 1963 for example, as AKA’s local Program Director, she organized seventy-five of her sorors in a “Mecklenburg County Stay-In-School Committee” which provided summer educational experiences and one-on-one coaching in study habits to discourage drop-outs.²¹ Over the years she held many local and regional offices in the sorority, including Mid-Atlantic Regional Director and also National Parliamentarian.²²

Elizabeth Randolph died in 2004 at age 87 but her legacy lived on.²³ *An African American Album: The Black Experience in Charlotte Mecklenburg*, a book of vintage photographs that she edited for the Charlotte Mecklenburg public library in 1993, continued to be a much-consulted resource; in 2006 the library updated it as *Thriving in the Shadows* with additional content by journalist Fannie Flono.²⁴ In 2017 CMS announced it would name the main office tower at its new administrative headquarters in Randolph’s honor.²⁵ A news article the same year called attention to the philanthropic fund that Randolph established 1993. Now known as the African American Community Fund, incorporating bequests from Randolph and early twentieth century Black entrepreneur Lethia Jones Henderson, it disburses tens of thousands of dollars annually. Projects include Freedom School Partners, which brings summertime education opportunities to students at sites across Mecklenburg – work that Ms. Randolph would surely be personally involved in if she were here today.²⁶

At Elizabeth Randolph’s death in 2004, the *Charlotte Observer* wrote an extensive editorial of appreciation. “Mrs. Randolph life is a sterling example of a life well-lived. Her impact is broad and deep,” the *Observer* concluded. “This community is lucky to have reaped the benefits.”²⁷



Elizabeth Schmoke is at left in this image: "Scenes at Shaw Commencement," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 27, 1936.

The same photograph of her also appeared in the August 1936 edition of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*.



Observer Photo by JIM WILSON

Interim Supervisory Board: Elizabeth Randolph, Jo Foster, John Phillips, Chris Folk

Randolph

Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph: Now a zone assistant superintendent; widow; reared and educated in Raleigh; lives at 1616 Patton Ave; educator 40 years, all but 8 in Charlotte-Mecklenburg; served as administrative assistant in the department of school operations for 3 years; director of Elementary and Secondary Education Act activities 6½ years; B.S. from Shaw University, M.A. from the University of Michigan, a d v a n c e d certificate from University of North Carolina.

Foster

Jo Graham Foster: Special assistant to Dr. Rolland Jones in charge of community relations; native of Rowesville, S.C.; 61; lives at 1520 Maryland Ave. with husband James B. Foster; has a daughter, Mrs. Thomas A. McClure of Winston-Salem and twin 8-year-old grandsons; in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools since 1946 as teacher, librarian and administrator; principal of West Mecklenburg High School from 1960-1973; seeking reelection to a third term in House of Representatives; A.B. from Columbia (S.C.) College.

Phillips

John W. Phillips: Currently zone assistant superintendent; native of Catawba County; 57; lives at 2421 Inverness Rd. with wife, the former Derusha Darden, daughter Nancy, 22, and son Bob, 19; served 3½ years as assistant superintendent for school operations, 10 years as assistant superintendent of elementary education; elementary school teacher, principal and administrator in Winston-Salem schools before joining Charlotte-Mecklenburg system in 1962; B.A. from Lenoir-Rhyne College in 1940, M.A. from George Peabody College in 1949.

Folk

Chris E. Folk: Formerly reporting directly to Jones, Folk will continue his duties as communications services officer in the interim team; his duties as communications ser-46; he and his wife Mitzi reared here; live at 3909 Fellsway with 4 children, Chris Jr., 12, Bob, 10, Mark, 8, Margaret Ann, 4; in public relations for the school system since 1973, assistant to the superintendent 9 years; taught English and journalism 3 years at his alma mater, Central High School; B.A. Duke University 1952, masters of education University of Texas, PhD in education Teachers College, Columbia University.

A four-person team jointly took on the role of Superintendent of Schools for Charlotte at the height of busing for racial balance. Elizabeth Randolph is shown at left. *Charlotte Observer*, August 20, 1976.



Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph

Mrs. Randolph, 87, of Charlotte, NC departed this life on Saturday, December 4, 2004 at Asbury Care Center. Memorial Service will be held on Saturday, December 18, 2004, 12 Noon at First Baptist Church-West, Dr. Ricky A. Woods, pastor, officiating.

Organizational Memorial Services will begin at 11:15 AM and are open to the public.

Mrs. Randolph had a distinguished career in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Known for her integrity and visionary leadership, she achieved eminence as an educator who raised the level of student achievement and staff development. She came to Charlotte in 1944 as a public school teacher and retired almost forty years later, in 1982, as Associate Superintendent for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System.

She endeared herself to a genera-

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Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph," obituary in the *Charlotte Observer*, December 15, 2004.

A life well-lived

Educator Libby Randolph set bar high for civic service

Twenty-five years ago when Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph was named Woman of the Year in Charlotte, one admirer summed her life up this way: "Her achievements provide an example not only for the black community and for women, but for all people." The 87-year-old "Libby" Randolph died Dec. 4, but her legacy lives on in the stellar example of civic service she set during and after her four decades as an educator.

These days, many in Charlotte may not recognize her name. After all, Mrs. Randolph retired from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system as an associate superintendent more than 22 years ago. When she died, she was living at the Asbury Care Center.

But the long-time educator left her mark in innumerable ways on Charlotte, this region and the state - most profoundly, and not surprisingly, in education. Her 46 years as an educator - 38 with CMS - spanned both segregated and desegregated public schooling, and she is credited with helping CMS through the rocky transition. Colleagues and others have said they don't believe school desegregation would have been successful without her and that she was instrumental in assuring blacks that it would work.

But her contributions to education did not begin or end with school desegregation. As coordinator of CMS' Title I program, she helped develop a kindergarten program that became the model for the state's program that began in 1970. She was part of the statewide task force that lobbied the legislature for state-supported kindergarten. Additionally, she was part of a four-person interim management team that ran CMS for year while the system sought a new superintendent. That superintendent, Jay Robinson, named her associate superintendent for curriculum and development in 1978.

Mrs. Randolph gained a national reputation for



FILE PHOTO

Elizabeth Randolph sits in her den filled with plaques and awards recognizing her work.

her knowledge of curriculum issues and was the first North Carolinian to be president of the national Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

When she retired from CMS in 1982, she said she would still remain involved in the civic life of this community. She was true to her word. She served on numerous boards and committees, and supported causes ranging from expanding the public library to pregnancy prevention.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Randolph received many honors during her lifetime. But she said her most gratifying reward has been her students. She taught English at West Charlotte High for 14 years and was the first principal at University Park Elementary. She was a caring, supportive educator who pushed students to excel. Many of those students still gratefully acknowledge her impact on their lives.

Mrs. Randolph's life is a sterling example of a life well-lived. Her impact is broad and deep. This community is lucky to have reaped the benefits.

¹ “Kurt Schmoke’s Family Always Emphasized the Education of the Children,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 31, 1991. On-line at: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/376715080/>

² “Kurt Schmoke’s Family Always Emphasized the Education of the Children,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 31, 1991. On-line at: <https://www.newspapers.com/image/376715080/>

³ “Memorial Service for Mrs. Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph, Sunday, December 18, 2004,” funeral program on line at https://mccrorey.historysouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Randolph_Elizabeth_Schmoke.pdf

⁴ Mary Norton Kratt, *New South Women: Twentieth Century Women of Charlotte, North Carolina* (Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 2001), pp. 182 – 184.

Kratt drew upon an earlier interview: Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph, 1993 oral history with Jennifer Greeson in the collection of Special Collections, Atkins Library, UNC Charlotte. Transcript and audio on-line at:

<https://repository.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc:1477> (transcript, part 1 of 2)

<https://repository.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A1458> (audio, part 1 of 2)

<https://repository.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc:1478> (transcript, part 2 of 2)

<https://repository.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A1479> (audio, part 2 of 2)

Also consult Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph, oral history with Rhonda Mawhood for “Behind the Veil” project, Duke University Archives. Audio is on-line

at: http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/behindtheveil_btunc02044/

⁵ “Other’s Helper: Urban League to Honor Pioneering Educator,” *Charlotte Observer*, March 10, 1996. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/628017984/>

⁶ “Scenes at Shaw Commencement,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 27, 1936.

⁷ Taught in Wake County Schools: “County Teachers Named for Coming School Year,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, August 16, 1939.

⁸ Mary Norton Kratt, *New South Women: Twentieth Century Women of Charlotte, North Carolina* (Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 2001), pp. 182 – 184.

⁹ “Memorial Service for Mrs. Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph, Sunday, December 18, 2004,” funeral program on line at https://mccrorey.historysouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Randolph_Elizabeth_Schmoke.pdf

¹⁰ “Memorial Service for Mrs. Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph, Sunday, December 18, 2004,” funeral program on line at https://mccrorey.historysouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Randolph_Elizabeth_Schmoke.pdf

¹¹ “1616 Patton Avenue,” on the *McCrorey Heights: HistorySouth.org* website. On-line at <https://mccrorey.historysouth.org/1616-patton-avenue/> “McCrorey Heights: Making History in An African American Neighborhood,” February 8, 2022, on-line at: https://charlottenc.gov/planning/HistoricDistricts/Documents/McCrorey_Heights_LocalDistrictDesignationReport_Draft.pdf

¹² “Miss Schmoke Married in Brilliant Ceremony,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1950.

¹³ The complex was developed by local real estate leader C.D. Spangler using FHA 608 funding subsidies. Construction stated in Fall of 1950. “\$2 Million Negro Housing Job Begins Thursday,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 31, 1950.

¹⁴ “J.D. Randolph,” funeral notice, *Charlotte News*, December 5, 1963.

¹⁵ “Deposition of Elizabeth S. Randolph,” 1973, for *Swann v. Mecklenburg*. Julius Chambers Papers, Special Collections, UNC Charlotte. [Contains detailed information about Randolph’s work in establishing kindergartens] On-line at <https://repository.charlotte.edu/islandora/object/mss%3A59661/pages?display=grid>

¹⁶ Mary Norton Kratt, *New South Women: Twentieth Century Women of Charlotte, North Carolina* (Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 2001), pp. 182 – 184.

¹⁷ “Memorial Service for Mrs. Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph, Sunday, December 18, 2004,” funeral program on line at https://mccrorey.historysouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Randolph_Elizabeth_Schmoke.pdf Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph,” obituary in the *Charlotte Observer*, December 15, 2004. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/631088191/>

¹⁸ “Elizabeth Randolph,” *Charlotte News*, April 23, 1982.

¹⁹ “Orientation Program Set for City’s New Teachers,” *Charlotte News*, August 6, 1952. “Teachers Map Year’s Plans,” *Charlotte Observer*, October 10, 1952.

²⁰ “YWCA Branch Seeking 1500 New Members,” *Charlotte Observer*, April 4, 1952.

²¹ “Charlotte Women Battle Drop-Out Problem,” *Charlotte News*, November 7, 1963.

²² “Sorority Plans Year’s Events,” *Anderson Independent-Mail*, November 5, 1975.

²³ “Elizabeth Schmoke Randolph,” on the *Wikipedia* website, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Schmoke_Randolph

²⁴ Elizabeth S. Randolph, editor, *An African American Album: The Black Experience in Charlotte Mecklenburg* (Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 1993). On-line at: <https://www.cmstory.org/exhibits/african-american-album/african-american-album>

Fannie Flono, *Thriving in the Shadows: The Black Experience in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County* (Charlotte, Novello Festival Press, 2006.)

²⁵ “She Broke a Racial Barrier at CMS. Now the Community Says Thanks.” *Charlotte Observer*, February 16, 2017. On-line at: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article133131684.html>

²⁶ “Long After Their Deaths, Two Visionary Women Continue to Shape Charlotte Through Their Giving,” *Q City Metro* website, August 4, 2017. On-line at: https://qcitymetro.com/2017/08/04/httpswww-fftc-org/_Angela_Lindsay_/_Promoting_the_Power_of_Philanthropy_/_Pride_Magazine_/_September_26_2019_/_https://www.pridemagazineonline.com/promoting-the-power-of-philanthropy/ Ken Garfield, “Building on a Legacy of Black Giving,” on the *Foundation for the Carolinas* website, August 18, 2021. <https://philanthropyfocus.org/building-on-a-legacy-of-black-giving/>

²⁷ "A Life Well-Lived: Educator Libby Randolph Set Bar High for Civic Service," *Charlotte Observer*, December 16, 2004.