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Charlotte Hawkins Brown and Palmer Memorial Institute: What One Young African American Woman Could Do

Charles W. Wadelington, Richard F. Knapp

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In the fall of 1901, Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1883-1961) jumped off a Southern Railway train in the unfamiliar backwoods of Guilford County, North Carolina. She was black, single, and barely eighteen years old and had come alone from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to begin her first real job as a teacher at a small, struggling school for African Americans.

She stayed for over half a century. When the failing school was closed at the end of her first year, Brown remained to carry on. With virtually no resources save her own energy and determination, she founded Palmer Memorial Institute, which she would lead for fifty years. As other black private schools across the state vanished, Brown built Palmer up to become one of the premier academies for African American children in the nation.

A remarkable example of achievement in the face of segregation and discrimination, the story of Charlotte Hawkins Brown and her school continues to provide a model of educational success born of dedication and hard work.

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