



Mary Jean Taylor faced many challenges in her quest to become the first black student to receive a diploma from East Aurora High School in 1902.

First Black Graduate Fought For the Right to Go to School

by Robert Lowell Goller
Town and Village Historian

An overflow crowd of teachers, families, School Board members and local residents gathered at the East Aurora Opera House, located on the northwest corner of Main and Church streets, to celebrate the 25 members of the Class of 1902.

As tradition dictated, students performed musical selections, and several graduates stood before the crowd to recite orations on topics ranging from “The Making of America” to “Napoleon Bonaparte.”

Then Mary Jean Taylor took the stage to present what the *East Aurora Advertiser* called “one of the best orations of the evening.”

According to the newspaper, in her essay, entitled “Up from Slavery,” Mary Taylor “painted in a graphic word picture the struggles of the race to gain knowledge and respect and become intelligent American citizens.”

Those gathered at the Opera House on the evening of June 23, 1902, were eyewitnesses to East Aurora history.

Mary Taylor, it is believed, was the first black student to graduate from East Aurora High School.

Until now, what we’ve known about Mary Taylor was limited to what was written on the back of her portrait in the archives of the Aurora Town Historian’s Office. The short inscription mentions only that she was likely the first black student to graduate from East Aurora High School and that she attended the Baptist Church. (The inscription also erroneously included her in the Class of 1901, which has led to inaccurate historical accounts since then).

However, recent research into Census and newspaper records sheds light on the many hurdles Taylor jumped to secure an education.

Mary and a younger sister were born after her parents and three older siblings moved to New York from Kentucky sometime between 1879 and 1884.

What exactly brought the Taylor family to East Aurora remains uncertain, but Census records indicate her father Reuben was a horse trainer, most likely for a local livery or perhaps for Cicero Hamlin’s world-famous horse farm on the west end of the village. Although his children were listed as literate, according to the Census records, Reuben Taylor could neither read nor write.

As was common practice at the time, black residents were specifically denoted as “colored” in newspaper accounts and in local directories. The abbreviation “col.” appears after Reuben Taylor’s name in the 1901-1902 East Aurora village directory.

The circumstances under which Mary Taylor attempted to enroll in the local school remain unclear. But there is no doubt that she and her family faced discrimination.

While states such as Kentucky required school segregation at the time, the situation was only slightly better in many parts of New York, where “separate but equal” was allowed after a 1900 state court ruling. The law was not repealed in New York until 1938.

While many East Aurorans may have welcomed Mary Taylor into the school, racism was prevalent in many corners of the community. Documentation shows that several East Aurorans attended nearby Ku Klux Klan rallies around this time.

The 1902 newspaper account of Mary Taylor’s graduation also provides a hint of the battle she faced for a place in the classroom: “Miss Taylor is a young colored girl who has been making a brave fight to secure an education.”

The death of her mother Emma when Mary was about 10 years old no doubt exacerbated the struggle.

“The death of Mrs. Reuben Taylor, colored, occurred on Friday last,” the *East Aurora Advertiser* reported in a short article on Thursday, Aug. 22, 1895. “A husband and several children mourn her loss.”

In 1900, according to the Census, the 16-year-old Mary was living in a small rented house on Mechanic Street (later renamed King Street) with her widowed father, 24-year brother and 33-year-old sister-in-law, 22-year-old sister, 21-year-old brother and eight-year-old sister, who also attended school. (The Taylor home, located near Persons Street, no longer exists.)

NAME	RELATION	SEX	AGE	UNITED STATES	EDUCATION
Reuben Joseph Taylor	Head	M	46	United States	col. Can't read
Leopold Taylor	Wife	F	36	United States	col. Can't read
Emma Taylor	Sister-in-law	F	28	United States	col. Can't read
Summa Taylor	Sister	F	11	United States	col. At Home
Mary Taylor	Sister	F	28	United States	col. Can't read
Reuben Taylor	Sister	F	21	United States	col. Can't read
Pratt Edward Taylor	Head	M	64	United States	col. Grammar

Mary Taylor and her two sisters in the 1905 State Census.

The records suggest that Mary also worked to support the family while attending high school. Around the same time the *East Aurora Advertiser* was listing her among students excelling on Regents exams, the Census listed her occupation as “domestic servant.”

About three years after her graduation, the 1905 New York State Census shows Mary working as a housekeeper and living on Hamburg Street with her 28- and 12-year-old sisters. Neither she nor her siblings can be found in the Census records for East Aurora after that. Her father, who is not listed in the 1905 Census, may have died shortly after Mary’s graduation. A one-sentence death notice for a Reuben Taylor appeared in the April 16, 1903 issue of the *Advertiser*.

One can only imagine the pride of an illiterate father as he witnessed his daughter not only graduate high school, but also make a lasting impression on her community.

According to the *Advertiser’s* account of the 1902 graduation ceremony, Mary Taylor’s speech “was bright and spicy throughout.”

“She commenced with the Emancipation Proclamation, and spoke of Booker T. Washington and his work,” the newspaper account noted.

Her speech might have made some less-progressive members of the community uncomfortable, but, according to the newspaper, “At the close of Miss Taylor’s oration she was accorded the heartiest applause ever given a graduate of East Aurora High School.”

Robert Lowell Goller is the eighth Aurora town and East Aurora village historian since the office was created 100 years ago. The Historian’s Office is open for research Wednesdays from 1-4 p.m. Visit www.townofaurora.com/departments/historian for more information. The Town Historian’s Office can also be found on Facebook at “Aurora Town Historian” and on Instagram at “auroratownhistorian.”