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Commentary: Pine Forge Academy offers bright future for students

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By Wayne Humphrey

Pine Forge Academy, in rural Berks County, was founded 70 years ago this month. But its roots date to the 1700s, when abolitionist Quaker Thomas Rutter and his descendants - who affectionately refer to the property as "the Pine" - helped start the iron industry in Pennsylvania. They played an important role in our nation's early days, supplying munitions to George Washington's Continental Army and speaking out against slavery.

Rutter's Pine Forge mansion, along the Manatawney Creek, became a stop on the Underground Railroad and aided thousands of African Americans seeking their freedom. It later served as a dormitory for the Pine Forge Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist boarding school, which has expanded across a sprawling campus and now plans an ambitious new endeavor: the Paul R. Jones Student Life Center.

The \$10 million to \$15 million building is expected to be under construction by late next year and will house a cafeteria, auditorium, training and alumni areas, and high-tech library and museum dedicated to President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who worked for passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The project will be the talk of a 70th anniversary gathering this weekend, as former students gather to remember their formative years at the school.

"You made friends and stayed friends," said Cynthia Poole, former headmaster of the academy and a graduate who lived in the Rutter house as a student from 1959 to 1963. "There is no age gap when you have conversation about going to Pine Forge.

"You know you had a shared experience," she adds. "You became family."

Poole, a former Washington D.C., school official, is a member of the Pine Forge Academy Foundation Board and chair of the school's scholarship committee, which will be aggressively working to raise funds for the new building that is expected to be completed between 2018 and 2019.

In the meantime, students are back for the new school year and are getting re-acclimated to the campus, which includes a gym, conservatory, academic building, and boys' and girls' dorms.

The Rutter mansion, though no longer a dorm, is the center of activities during events focused on the history of the school and iron-making in the area. It needs restoration - another school project. Paint is peeling, wood is rotting, and many interior walls and ceilings need replacing.

The property - along with its historic buildings 50 miles west of Philadelphia - was purchased for \$42,000 in 1945 by the nonprofit Allegheny-East Conference Corp. of Seventh-day Adventists, which opened it as a coed college-preparatory boarding school for youths of color.

The school's graduates include Rear Adm. Barry C. Black, chaplain of the U.S. Senate; the Rev. Clifton Davis, a singer, song-writer, and actor on the TV series, *Madam Secretary*; Illo Humphrey, one of the world's leading medieval scholars; Wendell Cheatham, director of research for the U.S. Department of the Navy; Ronald Anderson, one of America's leading ophthalmologists; and Melodie Mayberry-Stewart, former IBM executive and former IT director for the State of New York, as well as the city of Cleveland. She is also the CEO of the Pine Forge Academy Foundation.

They are all evidence of the school's positive impact on young lives. Rutter, an English Quaker and staunch abolitionist, would have been pleased with the role his estate had in their success.

Rutter was a follower of George Keith, whose preaching in 1691 led to a split among Quakers. Rutter became the pastor of a small group of Keithian Baptists in Philadelphia.

By 1714, Rutter and his family settled along the Manatawney at William Penn's direction to determine whether the land possessed iron-ore deposits. He was friendly with local Indian tribes and purchased hundreds of acres in what would become Douglass Township in Berks County.

Rutter's mansion was constructed in three sections. The central and oldest was completed in 1725. Two wings were added, one between 1797 and 1817, and the other in about 1918.

While the manor house was used as a dorm, the gristmill on the property was used as an administration building and classroom building. The barn became a chapel, and the workers' cottage was housing for teachers and staff. Recently, another building - possibly centuries old but hidden by vegetation - was discovered on the property, and it had a massive fireplace.

Over the centuries, this transformed property became a place of help and safety for African Americans, and it continues to welcome and aid many more who now come for an education and a brighter future.

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