

The atkins saga: where tradition meets the future

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The sleek modern architecture, crafted from glass and gleaming metal, arcs overhead and rests on a bed of white cement blocks. On the right, three printed canvases proclaim what is to be found inside this facility: “Biotechnology,” “Pre-Engineering,” “Computer Technology.” The large functional script and bright colors leave no room for doubt. Above the canvases, a row of wooden plaques, adorned with grayscale faces and golden inscriptions.

Across from this wall of declaration is the front office, its transparent front allowing the visitor to peer into the warm maroon-accented interior.

Computer screens embellish the room, perched over and beside a bronze bust of a man who could never have imagined the technology in the school which bears his name. The set-up appears eccentric at first glance, perhaps, but to the studied observer there is absolutely nothing amiss. Simon Green Atkins was born in 1863. His parents were African-American farmers whose lives had previously been spent in slavery.

One can only imagine the joy with which they sent their eldest son to school in the small town of Haywood. Despite the disadvantages of race and an informal rural education, Atkins became North Carolina legend. He taught at several educational institutions and played a leading role in the American Negro Academy, the first scholarly organization for African-Americans. Atkins founded the North Carolina Negro Teachers Association, as well as Slater Industrial Academy, a collegiate school that is now known as Winston-Salem University. When Winston-Salem chose to dedicate a new African-American school in 1931, the esteemed name of Atkins was assigned. Atkins would still have been alive and actively promoting education at the time.

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For Atkins the man lived in both present and future, educating young people and teachers to ensure an intellectual future for his race. It was perfectly fitting to name a high school in his honor, a high school that would educate in his spirit. The first Atkins High School building now has a different name. Although the construction remains intact and another high school operates on the campus, for a while the Atkins institution ceased to exist. Then, in the early 2000s, Simon G.

Atkins's mission of enhancing the prospects for future generations was revived. Simon G. Atkins High School was rebuilt in a new location: a state-of-the-art facility with the latest technology. The school's goal was not quite the same this time, however. Instead of being a racial school for African-Americans, a long-outdated mode of education, Atkins would be a "magnet" school focused on teaching students how to be a part of frontier science and industry. There is no obvious connection between the aims of the old and new Atkins, unless one penetrates to a deeper level.

Simon G. Atkins Academic and Technology High School (2010) races toward a future of virtual reality and personal genome sequencing, while maintaining the Atkins tradition of educating young people to be citizens with character and a career.