

A stylized, dark silhouette of a person's face and hand is positioned on the left side of the page. The face is shown in profile, looking towards the right, with a hand raised near the chin. The background is a light, textured grey.

Celebrating Simms: The Story of the Lucy F. Simms School

Many people in the community have been working tirelessly for years to tell the story of the Lucy F. Simms School. This exhibition, the result of a year-long collaboration between community members and James Madison University students, builds on their work. Enslaved before the Civil War, Lucy F. Simms settled in Harrisonburg and taught over 1,800 students across three generations, becoming the most esteemed educator in the Shenandoah Valley. The building where you stand today was named in her honor, and has remained at the heart of the African American community in Harrisonburg to this day.

Please visit the companion website (<https://omeka.jmu.edu/simms>) to find out more about the images on display here and to view additional archival materials. The website will be updated with new artifacts as they become available, and we welcome you to contact us via the website to provide any comments or additional information.



AUNT LUCY

A Community of Faith

Before the Civil War, traditional education was denied to enslaved African Americans. However, religious instruction was sometimes tolerated and became a primary gateway for early African American education.

On the Gray plantation of Hilltop, one of the Gray children, “Miss Dovey,” devoted herself to teaching the older slaves to read the Bible. One student in particular, known as “Aunt Lucy” to the white community, used these Bible lessons to teach the younger generation, and is believed to be the grandmother of future educator Lucy F. Simms.

Harrisonburg’s freed black population used similar Christian knowledge and values to push successful appeals through the Virginia General Assembly that would allow a freedman to stay in Harrisonburg to be near his enslaved wife, children, and friends.

“Aunt Lucy seldom gave one of her brood a good word, but woe betide anyone else who gave them a hard one.”

—Nettie Gray Dangerfield

A Community of Growth

The end of the Civil War emancipated large numbers of African Americans who had previously been denied education.

Harrisonburg received aid from the government-sponsored Freedmen's Bureau, which enabled formerly enslaved persons to buy property, obtain an education, and find employment. The Bureau sent three teachers from New England to establish the first schools for African Americans in Harrisonburg, which were held in hotel rooms and church basements.

After Virginia instituted a statewide system of public education in 1870, African American education moved from these informal spaces to dedicated one-room schoolhouses. Sixteen schools for African Americans operated at various times in Rockingham County.



Painting of
Harrisonburg in 1867,
by Emma Lyon Bryan



Al Jenkins at Long's Chapel, September 23, 2007.

A Community of Hope

Outside of Harrisonburg, African American education flourished in Athens, a small town to the north later renamed Zenda. Formed in 1869 around a plot of land given for the purpose of erecting an African American church, Zenda became one of the most prosperous African Americans communities in the county. Many Zenda residents owned property, and education and religion were key aspects of life.

Instruction was held at the church, known as Long's Chapel, until a dedicated school building was erected in 1882. Students came from miles around to attend, furthering Zenda's status as a beacon of African American advancement.

After 1900, the population of Zenda began to decline with the migration of African Americans to cities. Restored in 2009, Long's Chapel stands to this day as a symbol of the fellowship and progress for the African American community in Rockingham County.



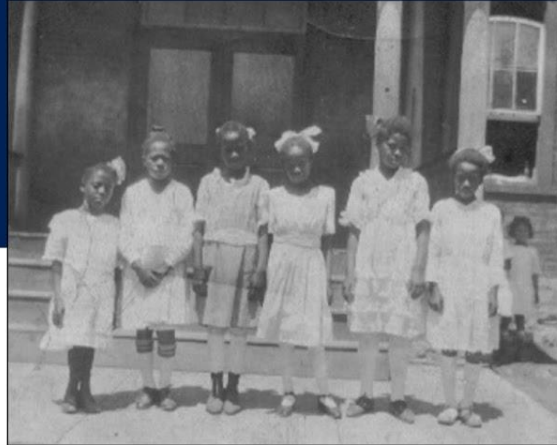
A Community of Togetherness

During segregation, many towns surrounding Harrisonburg were known as “sundown towns,” where white communities prohibited African Americans from being within the city limits after dark. Harrisonburg was more welcoming than these neighboring towns, making it safer for African American families to build a community. The Newmans (pictured above ca. 1903) were early trailblazers in the community, working in education, business, and for Federal agencies. George A. Newman came to Harrisonburg in 1875 as principal of the “colored school,” and worked here in education for almost 30 years.

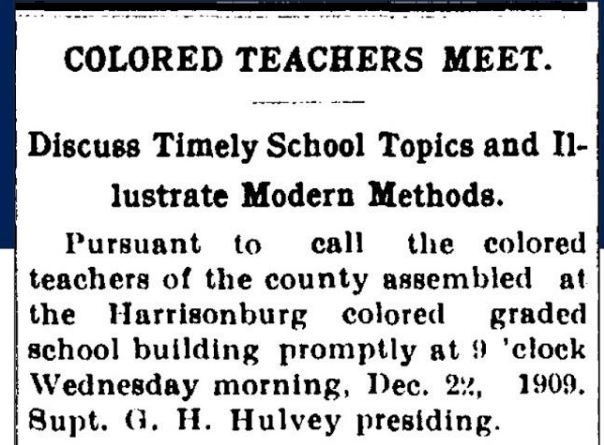
“So we must rise in self defence, though humble we may be. And show, by using common sense, that we will still be free.”
—George A. Newman



Effinger Street School, early 20th century



Students outside of Effinger, ca. 1930s



Daily News Record, December 28, 1909

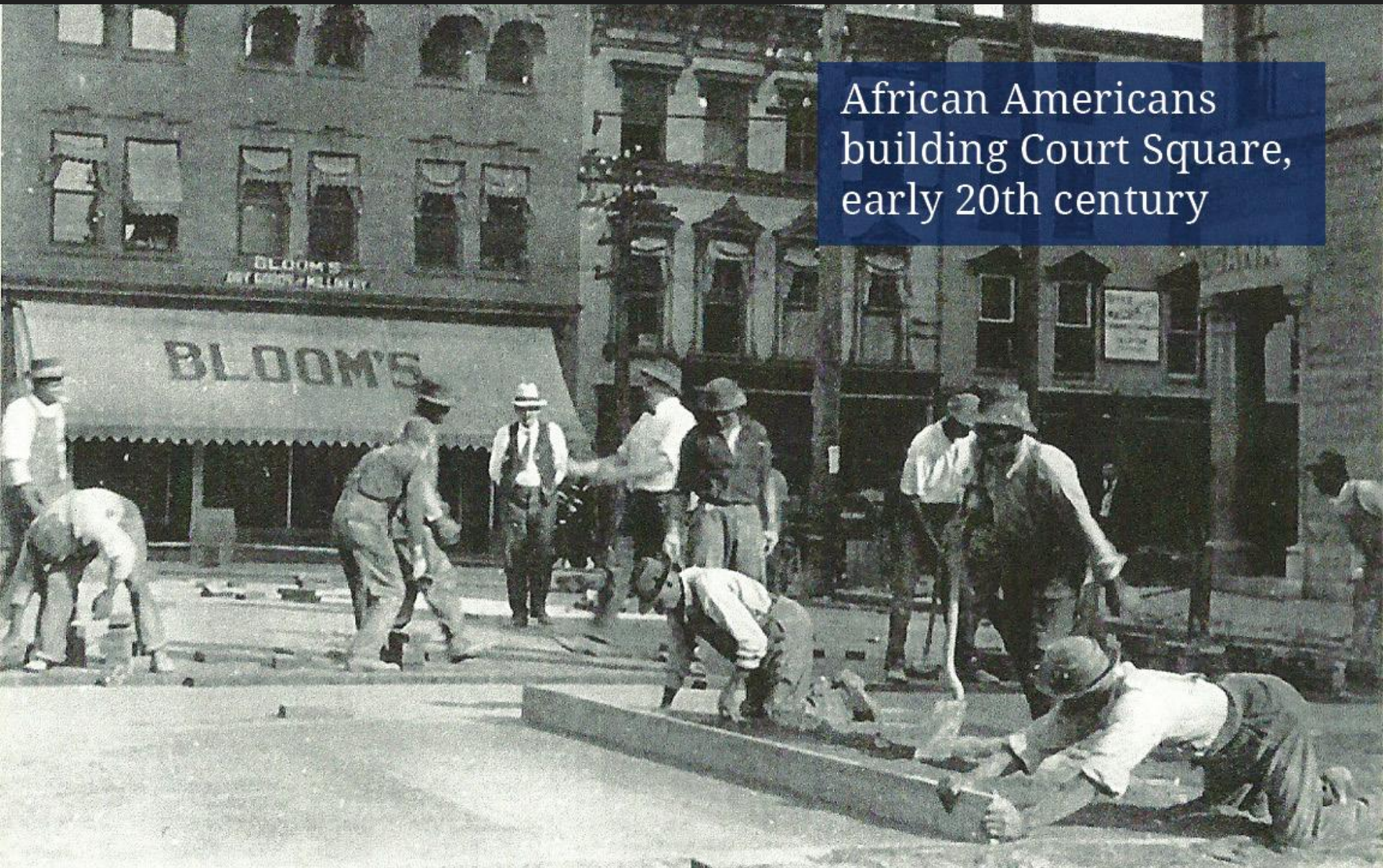
A Community of Progress

In 1882, the Effinger Street School was built in Harrisonburg and became the primary center for African American education in Rockingham County until 1938. As the Newtown neighborhood grew around it, Effinger Street School became the locus of a tightly-knit community of faith and family. It served as a community center and a thriving and innovative school. Harrisonburg's African-American teachers were ambitious and progressive educators. They formed the Colored Teachers' Association, which held monthly meetings where they read papers, held discussions, and performed demonstrations of various teaching techniques.

The First Baptist
Church, Harrisonburg's
first and oldest African
American church, 1873



African Americans
building Court Square,
early 20th century



Wm M. Joseph
5.66 A.

Col. Sch.

Map detail of
Harrisonburg in 1916,
showing the location of
the “colored school”

Page of arithmetic exercises from Ulysses Grant Wilson's gradebook, early 20th century

Arithmetic

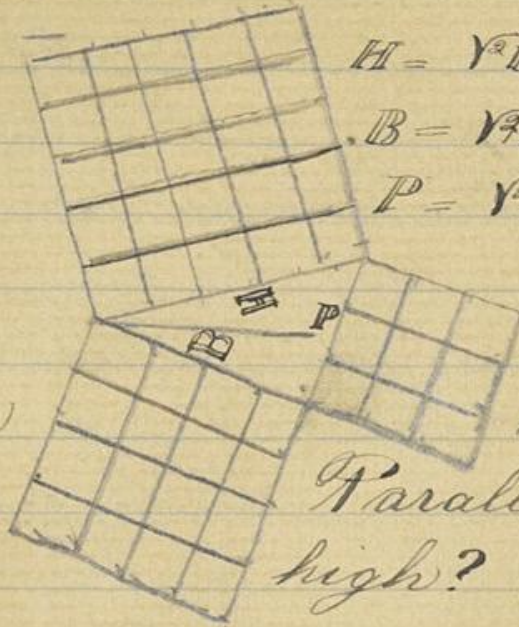
$$H^2 = B^2 + P^2. \text{ Hence}$$

$$B^2 = H^2 - P^2. \text{ Hence}$$

$$P^2 = H^2 - B^2. \text{ Hence}$$

Problem.

What is the distance between the lower corner corner of a 3 ft. wide & 3 ft

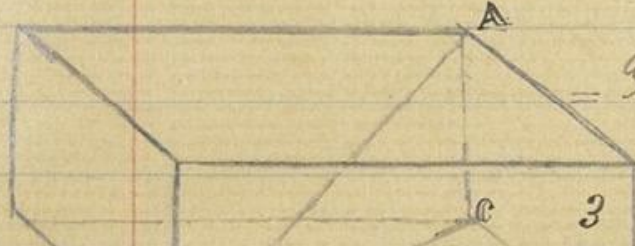


$$H = \sqrt{B^2 + P^2}$$

$$B = \sqrt{H^2 - P^2}$$

$$P = \sqrt{H^2 - B^2}$$

distance between and the opposite Parallelepiped 4 ft long, high?



= Parallelepiped

Let

A & B = the distance required



L. F. Simms

Lucy F. Simms is remembered as one of the most influential leaders in African American education in Harrisonburg. Miss Simms was born into slavery in 1856 to the Gray family, who purchased her grandmother from a nearby cousin of Abraham Lincoln. It was long believed that Miss Simms was born here in Harrisonburg, either at the Collicello estate or at Hilltop Plantation, both owned by Algernon Gray. However, recent evidence suggests that she may have been born in Roanoke, during the Gray family's brief relocation to an estate they owned further south.

Regardless of her origins, Miss Simms was living in Harrisonburg at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation. Following her own education at Hampton Institute, Miss Simms returned to educate the Harrisonburg community. Her advocacy is commemorated by the Lucy F. Simms School, named in her honor in 1939.

*“I am teaching and working for
my race.” –Lucy F. Simms*

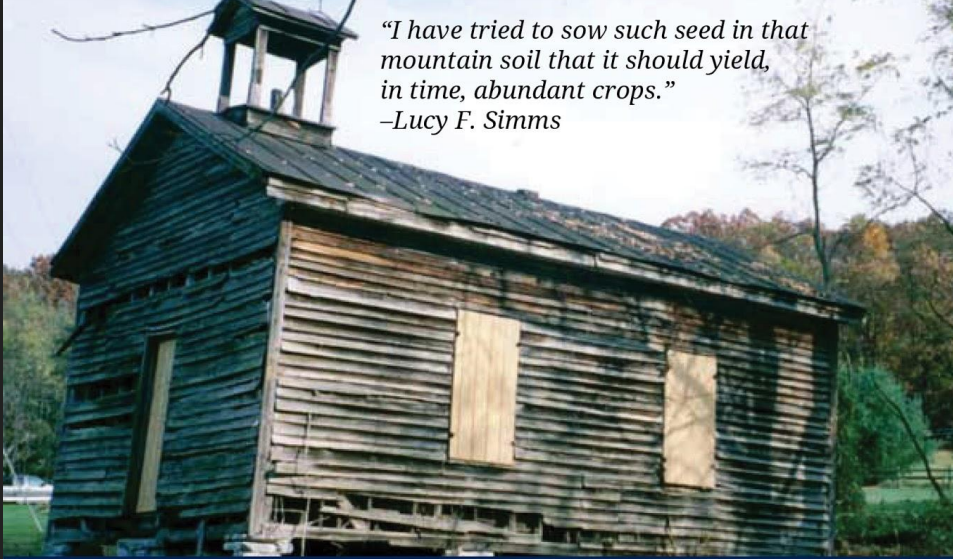


An Opportunity at Hampton

In 1874, Lucy F. Simms enrolled at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, a school founded with the mission of educating former slaves to “teach and lead their people.” Miss Simms graduated in 1877, just one year after Booker T. Washington, the school’s most famous graduate. Like Washington, Miss Simms dedicated her career to her community. She returned to Rockingham County to teach over 1800 students across three generations. She was often featured in Hampton publications, which praised her for her energy and accomplishments. In 1929, one such profile read: “When you see Miss Simms for yourself and at the same time dwell upon her record of years of service, you will wonder, perhaps become a bit envious, and say to yourself, ‘How does she do it? How does one stay so young?’”

"I have tried to sow such seed in that mountain soil that it should yield, in time, abundant crops."

–Lucy F. Simms



A Lifetime of Teaching

Lucy F. Simms brought this energy and dedication to the three schools where she spent her 56-year teaching career, starting in Athens Colored School, later known as Zenda, in 1877. A desire for fair pay led her to Harrisonburg, where she taught out of the basement of the Harrisonburg Catholic Church. There, however, the janitor frequently threw out her student's work in preparation for Sunday services. Eventually the growing number of students prompted the construction of Effinger Street School, where Miss Simms taught alongside her half-brother, Ulysses Grant Wilson, for the next 52 years. At Effinger, she took on what was often described as a maternal role with her students, treating them with kindness, high expectations, and respect.



Lucy F. Simms with
three generations of
students, 1928



Community Leader and Activist

As an educator, Miss Simms responded to the needs of her community with thoughtfulness and care. Because most of her students had working parents, Miss Simms helped the students get ready for school by combing and brushing their hair. Her students often returned this affection by bringing her freshly picked flowers to decorate her desk.

Miss Simms also took a leadership role in the wider Harrisonburg community. In 1914, she was appointed president of the newly founded Colored Teachers' Association. She was a choir member and Sunday School teacher for the John Wesley Methodist Church, and a committee member of the "Colored Division" of the United War Work Campaign, during World War I.

"When I calculate the time I have been teaching by years, it seems quite a while, but, when I calculate by dollars and cents, it seems but a short while."

—Lucy F. Simms



"We do not forget each other even after school days are over." –Lucy F. Simms

Miss Simms Remembered

When Lucy F. Simms passed away at home in 1934, her funeral was the most widely attended in the history of African-American funerals in Harrisonburg. Former students, fellow educators, and neighbors came to pay their respects to the woman who gave more to African-American education in Harrisonburg than any other person in her time. According to one newspaper account of her funeral, "children of the Effinger Street School lined the driveway from the gate to the grave." Newtown Cemetery, where she is buried, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2015. Her house, though extensively renovated, still stands at 231 East Johnson St.

When the Effinger Street School was finally replaced in 1938, the School Board chose to name the new school in her honor. Below is the Lucy F. Simms School song dedicated to its namesake, Miss Lucy Frances Simms.

*Dear Lucy Simms, Dear Lucy Simms,
You are our fondest hopes and dreams.
May your dear light shed all its beams
On all of us dear Lucy Simms.
We are your sons and daughters true,
We Would to you be loyal too.
We will stand firm for all that's right;
We must be worthy in thy sight.*

*Dear Lucy Simms, Dear Lucy Simms,
Despite what-e'er the years may bring.
We'll raise to thee our lofty hymns
As thy eternal praise we sing.
Let centuries roll on and on,
Sunshine or shadows compass me.
We'll be content before thy throne;
To lift our loyal praise to thee.*



Teacher Lucy F. Simms,
standing, second from
right, poses with her
students in 1905

Teacher Lucy F. Simms,
standing at right, poses with
her students at the Effinger
Street School in 1928

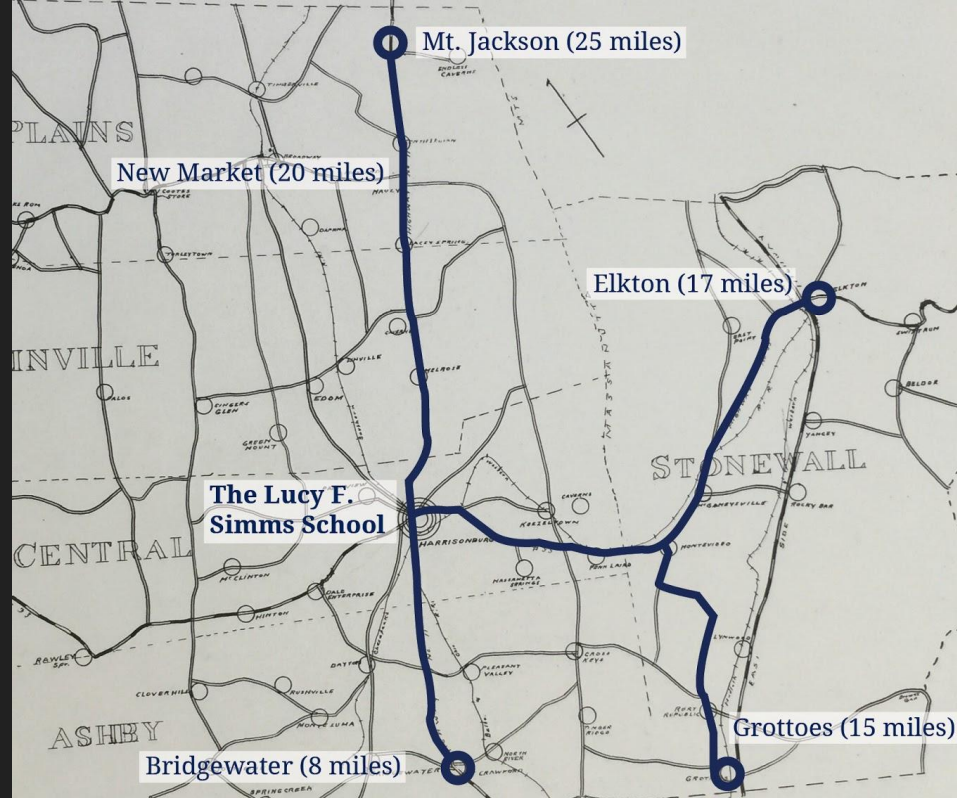




Still Singing Her Praises

In 1938, the Lucy F. Simms School was built on the site of the Gray family's former Hilltop estate. For many years, the school did not have the resources to offer all grades, but by the mid-1950s, students were able to receive a full high school education. The sense of community and academic rigor that Miss Simms had fostered in her lifetime continued to flourish at the new school, where parents and teachers worked together to encourage the younger generation's growth and success.





Many Roads to Simms

The Lucy F. Simms School was the only school for African Americans living in Rockingham County. Students commuted to school every day from as far as Elkton, Grottoes, Bridgewater, New Market, and Mt. Jackson, passing as many as two white high schools on the way to theirs. Many students made the trip on segregated local bus routes. Others relied on parents and one another to make that important journey every day, carpooling at first and eventually getting ahold of a makeshift bus. A few students traveled over forty miles to school from homes in Woodstock, Virginia and Franklin, West Virginia, staying with friends or family during the week so that they could get an education.

"I was very nervous, scared, you know, a country boy . . . now I've gotta make that trip to the city. . . . But I was excited because it was something new, something different. . . . The only downside of it—I had to get up at six o'clock in the morning!" –Tommy Ross



Miss Mary Francis
Awkard's class, late
1950s

“We never heard such a statement as ‘no school today.’ There was always school.” –Doris Harper Allen

The Value of Education

At the Lucy F. Simms School, students not only took classical liberal arts courses such as reading, writing, mathematics, and the arts. Music, theater, and drawing were integrated into every aspect of the students’ experience, fostering learning, creativity, self-expression, and community involvement. They also received industrial arts and home economics training to prepare them for the available employment after graduation.

Teacher Barbara Blakey also offered business classes, and many Simms students became trailblazers in Harrisonburg and beyond. In 1969, Wilhelmina Johnson became the first African American to be employed by Harrisonburg Social Services. In 1966, Sheary Darcus Johnson became the first African American to enroll at Madison College, graduating in 1970 and earning her Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1988.



Educating the Whole Person

Teachers at the Lucy F. Simms School were well-respected community members who worked hard to make sure their students mastered a wide range of subjects. While academics were their primary focus, teachers also emphasized cooperation, courtesy, and fun. Receiving an education from the Lucy F. Simms school meant more than getting good grades — it was also about creativity, integrity, and citizenship.

“That school . . . brought together young people from the county and from outside the county . . . because this was the only black school with modern facilities. . . . The thing is the teachers at Lucy F. Simms School knew the needs of the black students and there were always activities going that brought the community together. . . . It was all one big, shall I say, family.”

—Ruth M. Toliver

Great Teachers Remembered

The Lucy F. Simms School had many great teachers. Here, we celebrate three of them.



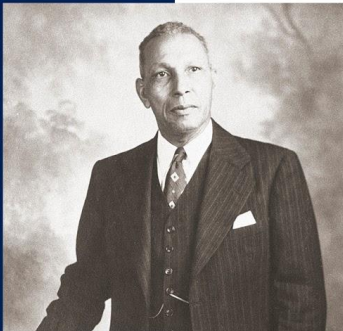
Mary Awkard Fairfax

A graduate of Effinger Street School, Miss Fairfax received her master's degree from Columbia University, and taught at the Lucy F. Simms School for 24 years. She used her talents in performing arts to organize the school plays and operettas, and was a pianist for the school's chorus.



Barbara Blakey

Miss Blakey moved to Harrisonburg in 1955, teaching business at the Lucy F. Simms School. She received her Bachelor of Science degree from Virginia State College; in 1971 she graduated with her master's degree from Madison College. Miss Blakey is remembered for teaching skills that extended beyond the classroom.



W. N. P. Harris

Professor Harris served as principal at the Effinger Street School and the Lucy F. Simms School from 1917 to 1951. He earned a master's degree in Greek from Lincoln University and, according to Ruth M. Toliver, was a role model for his students: "He would make them look within themselves to determine what was important."

Students stand on the
steps of the Lucy F.
Simms School



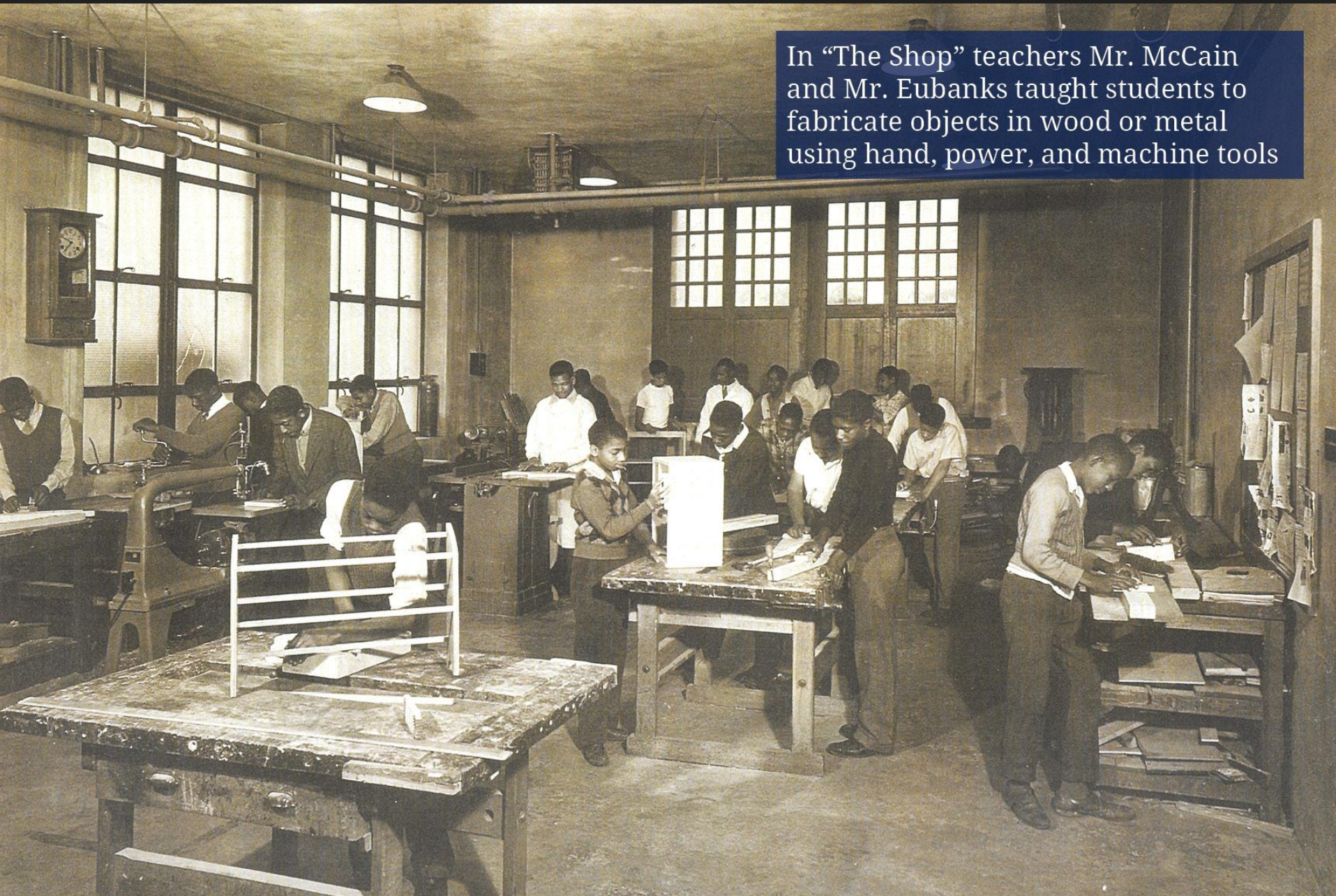


The graduating class of 1942,
including Julia Howard, Mary
F. Williams, Ruth Jones, and
Beulah Walker

Students practice
new skills in a home
economics class



In "The Shop" teachers Mr. McCain and Mr. Eubanks taught students to fabricate objects in wood or metal using hand, power, and machine tools



Celebrating students pose for a picture in one of the Simms classrooms



Students shyly pose
for the camera before
they sing





Life After the Bell

The Lucy F. Simms School was about more than just academic achievement. There were many thriving after-school programs for both students and the community as a whole.



Theater in Education

Doll Theater

The Lucy F. Simms School placed a great emphasis on the arts, not only in their after school programs, but within the classroom as well. In order to teach her students about international cultures, teacher Mary Awkard Fairfax set up doll shows where her young students would dress their dolls in costumes from around the world.



Ebony Players

According to Doris Harper Allen, the Ebony Players were organized, produced, and directed by Theodore (Buddy) Toliver in 1940. These girls were known for performing musical skits, most notably their production of the *Ziegfield Follies*. Their costumes were made through the Home Economics department, and included white aprons, red bandanas, and black t-shirts.



Operettas

Operettas were a rich tradition for many years at the school. The students put on productions varying from the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* to *Peter Rabbit*. Parents, as well as members of the Newtown community, would come together to make elaborate costumes for the actors. Mary Awkard Fairfax said the community cared so deeply about these productions that they would “pack the auditorium and people would even sit in the hall.”



Go Bulldogs!

On the Court

Basketball was always popular at the Lucy F. Simms School. Girls and boys teams competed all over Virginia and won many championships. To the left is a picture of the 1952 girls' team featuring from left to right (back) Delores Jones, Sarah Blakey, Evelyn Jones, Margaret Buck, (front) Hattie Mitchell, Doris Washington, Sally Frye, and Rosa Brown.



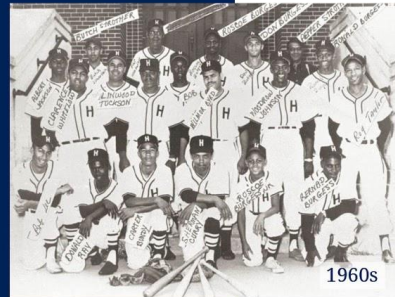
On the Field

The football team at Simms, better known as the the Bulldogs, won numerous championship games. Like the basketball team, they were a point of school pride. Pictured is the school team of 1958, the year after it was started. Football "has a way of opening a lot of doors," according to Howard Curry, seated on the far right of the front row.



In the Outfield

Students who were interested in sports often played different things in each season to stay in shape. In the spring, the boys would play in the community baseball league. The team gathered in the picture here, along with their coach, Junius Whitelow, was playing in the 1960s.





A Community of Music

At the Lucy F. Simms School, music and arts brought the students and community together. Church and school choirs, like the one pictured below, were important aspects of life in the Newtown neighborhood. Groups such as the Bundy's Boys Band, seen above, were started and led by Lucy F. Simms students. These beloved groups and their music represented an important point of contact between formal education and community life in the Newtown neighborhood.





A May Day court featuring King Rob Washington and Queen Margaret Buck in the center, with the Queen's ladies Loretta Price and Mary Johnson in front

May Day Celebration

May Day at the Lucy F. Simms School was an important day of celebration and ceremony for the whole community.

Celebrated on May 1st to welcome the arrival of spring, May Day featured a variety of activities such as wrapping the May Pole, a community potluck, and the performance of song, dance, and poetry. Teachers, students, and parents all put effort into making the day great.

The highest honor at the festival was to be crowned as the May Day Queen or King. They presided over the celebration from the front steps of the school with their court.

The students dressed in homemade costumes, often using creative materials such as crêpe paper. Ruth M. Toliver explains, “the children kind of felt, well, we can’t tear this—this is special.”

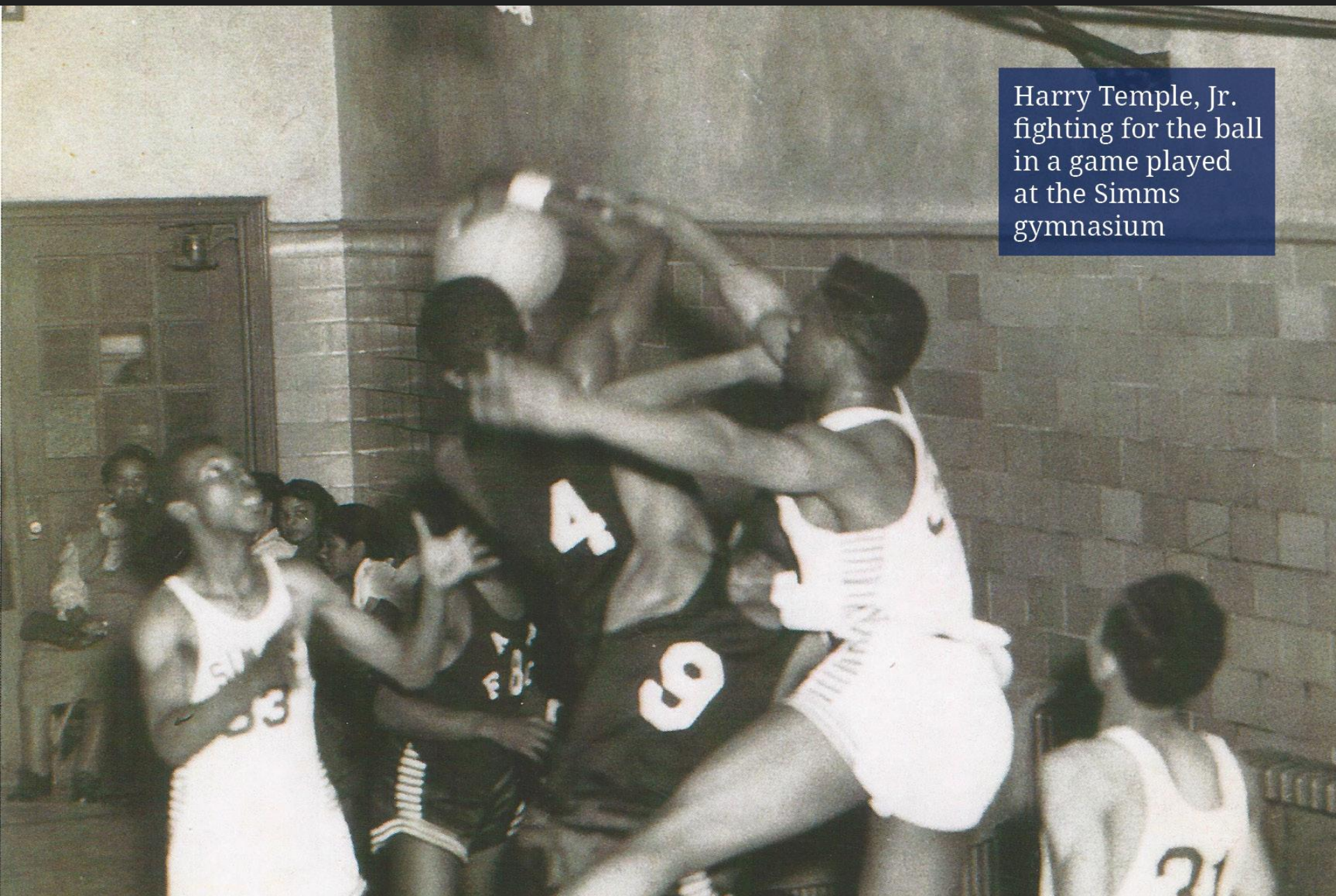


Students
performing a
Tom Thumb
wedding

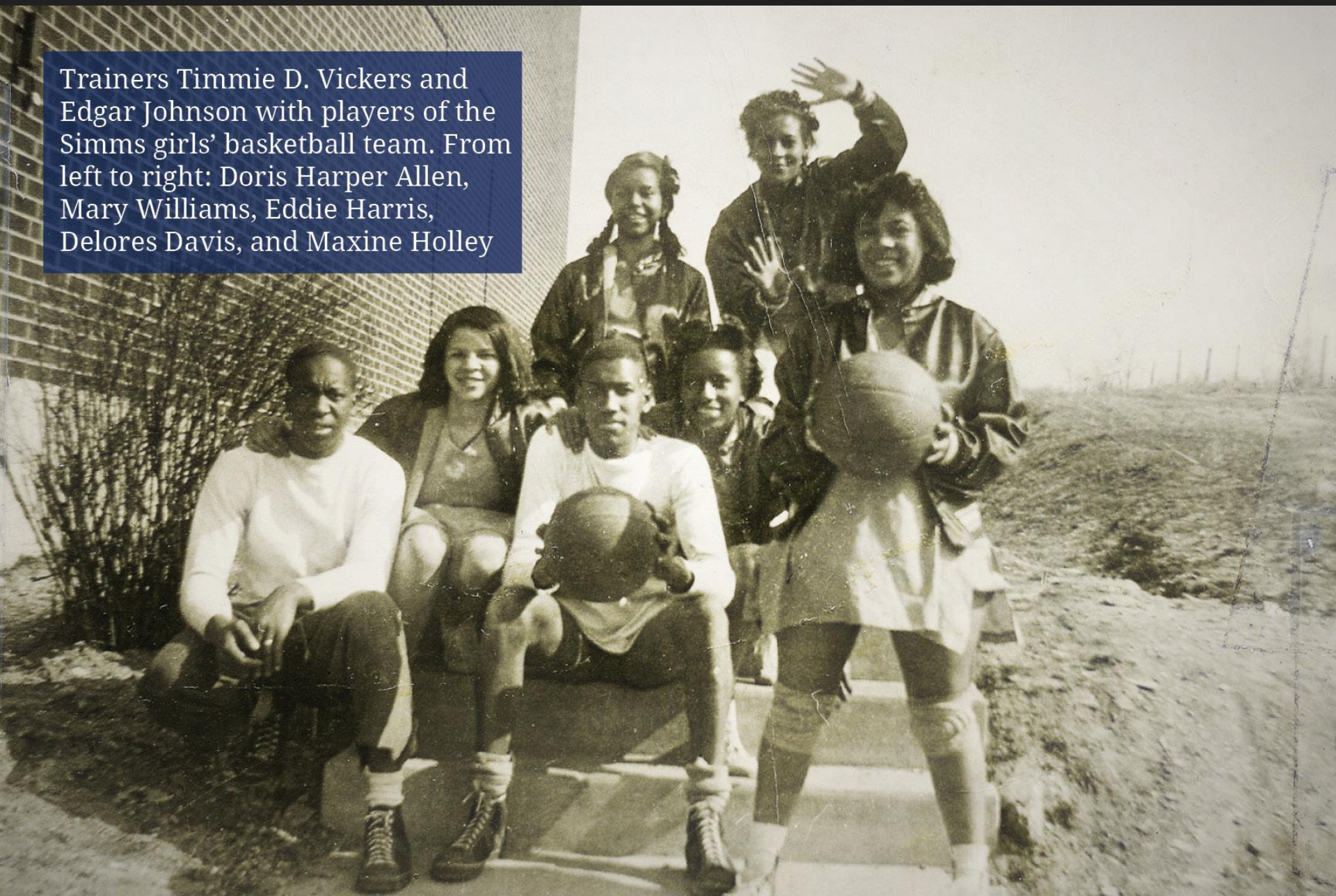


Young dancers
performing in
a traditional
operetta

Harry Temple, Jr.
fighting for the ball
in a game played
at the Simms
gymnasium



Trainers Timmie D. Vickers and Edgar Johnson with players of the Simms girls' basketball team. From left to right: Doris Harper Allen, Mary Williams, Eddie Harris, Delores Davis, and Maxine Holley



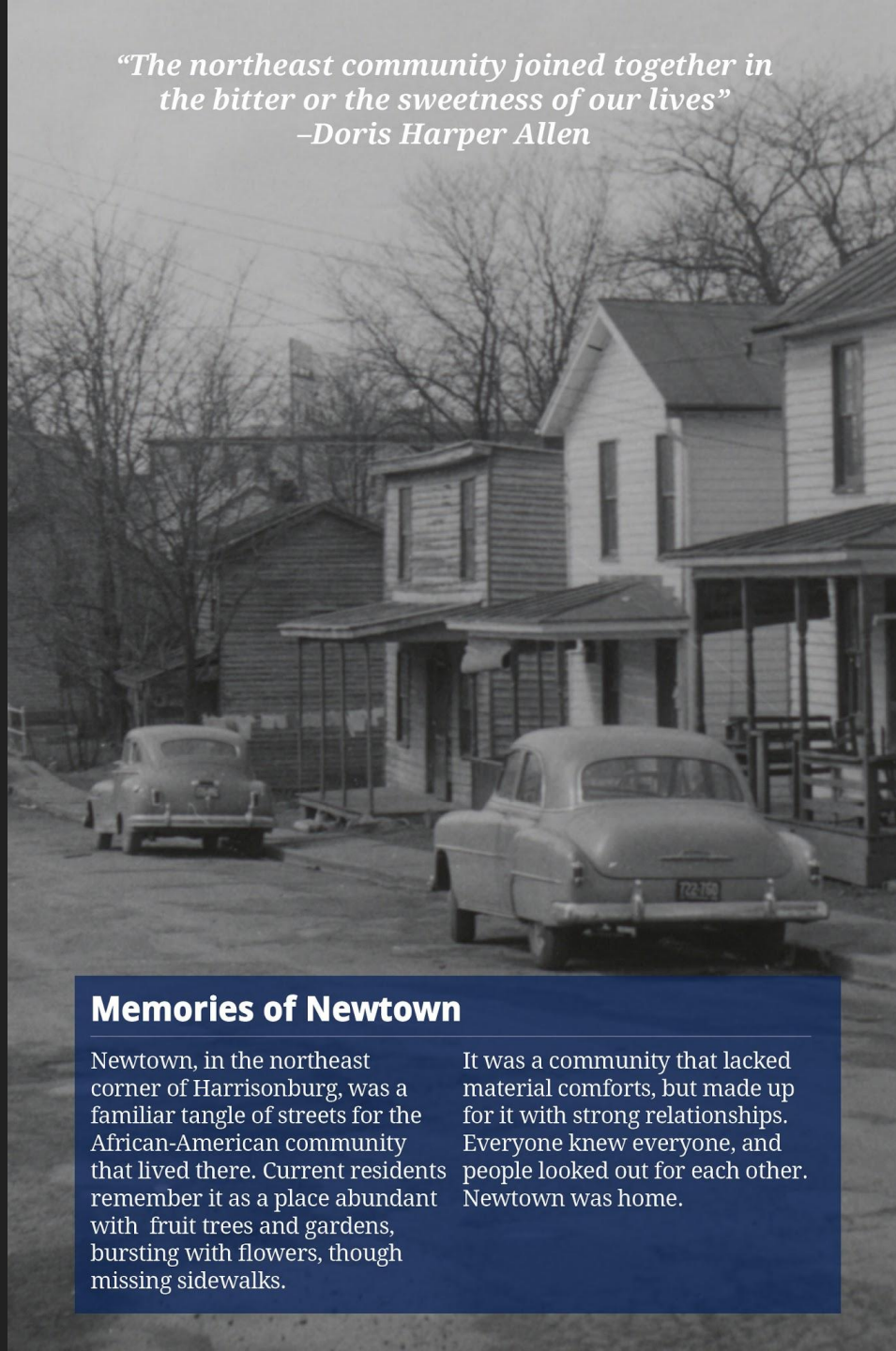


Choir director Nathaniel Moore and the Lucy F. Simms Choir. On the left piano is Nancy Hackman, the choir teacher at Harrisonburg High School. Mrs. Hackman played a crucial role in welcoming Simms students to Harrisonburg High School after integration.

The Bundy's Boys Band performing down Main Street in the early 1950s



*"The northeast community joined together in
the bitter or the sweetness of our lives"
-Doris Harper Allen*



Memories of Newtown

Newtown, in the northeast corner of Harrisonburg, was a familiar tangle of streets for the African-American community that lived there. Current residents remember it as a place abundant with fruit trees and gardens, bursting with flowers, though missing sidewalks.

It was a community that lacked material comforts, but made up for it with strong relationships. Everyone knew everyone, and people looked out for each other. Newtown was home.



Map of the Northeast
Neighborhood, 1961

Newtown as It Was

The Lucy F. Simms School was at the heart of Newtown, a neighborhood in northeast Harrisonburg with a lively mixture of homes and businesses. If you took a stroll around Newtown, you would find an ice cream parlor, grocery stores like Miss Lena's, restaurants like the Chicken Shack, and Tankins' barbershop. There were also tea rooms such as Johnson's, where patrons dressed for elegant Sunday afternoons, and the famous Colonnade, which featured a pool hall, a dance hall, and an arcade. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the Blue Circle Club hosted Christmas parties for neighborhood children.

1. The Blue Circle Club 2. Bethel AME Church 3. Miss Lena's Store





Jo, Wanetta, and Carrie
Ray Curry at John
Wesley Church

“Sunday people wore their hats, they had white gloves; they were dressed to perfection.” –Ruth M. Toliver

Church Life

Alongside the Lucy F. Simms School, the local churches were at the center of community life. People would walk from all over town to attend services at the Bethel AME Church, John Wesley United Methodist Church, First Baptist Church, and the Mennonite Mission. Ladies, gentlemen, and children all arrived in their Sunday best.

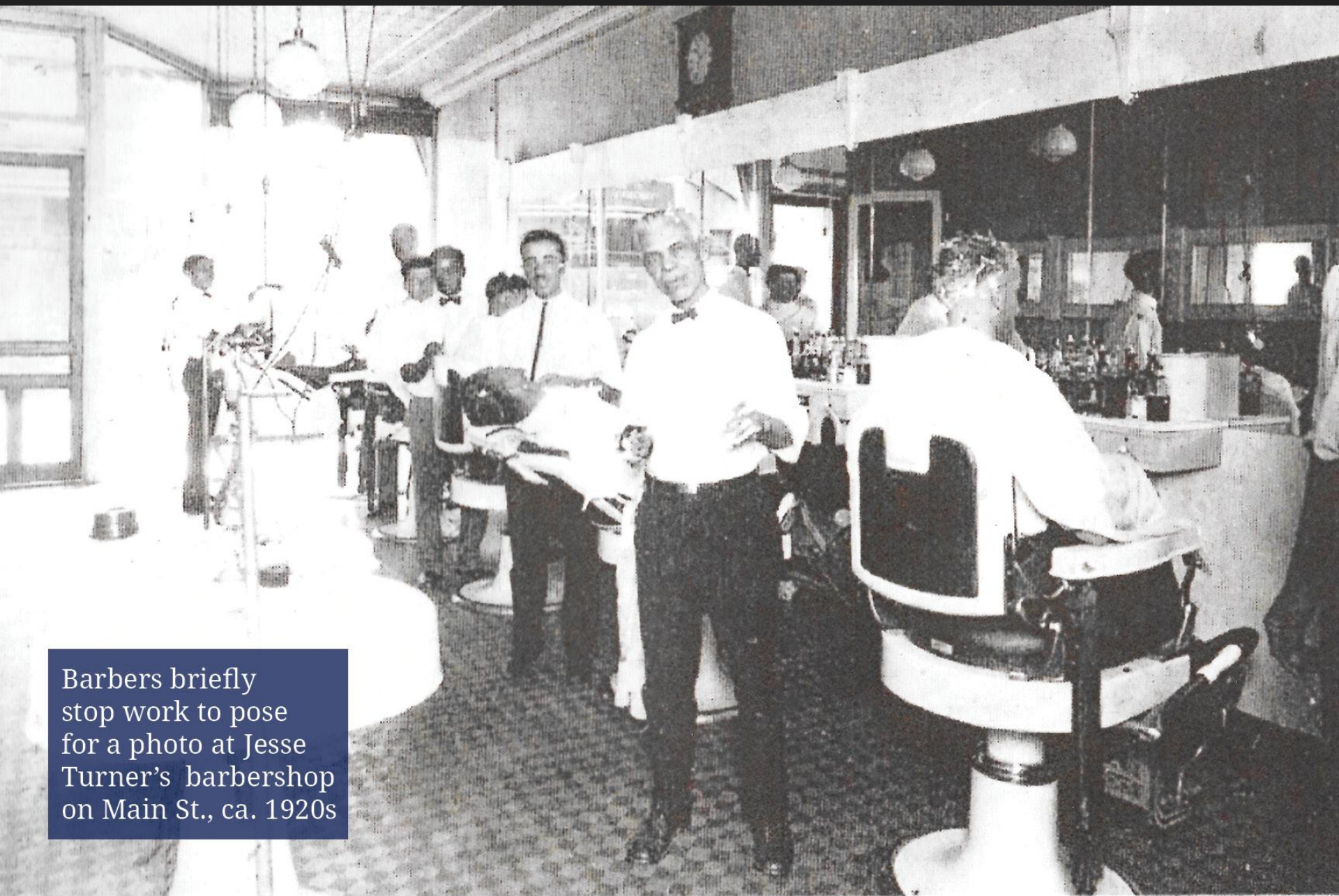
The community gathered together on this day to worship, no matter the distance they had to travel. For church members who were too sick to attend, their names would be included in the program and remembered in the service.



Social Life

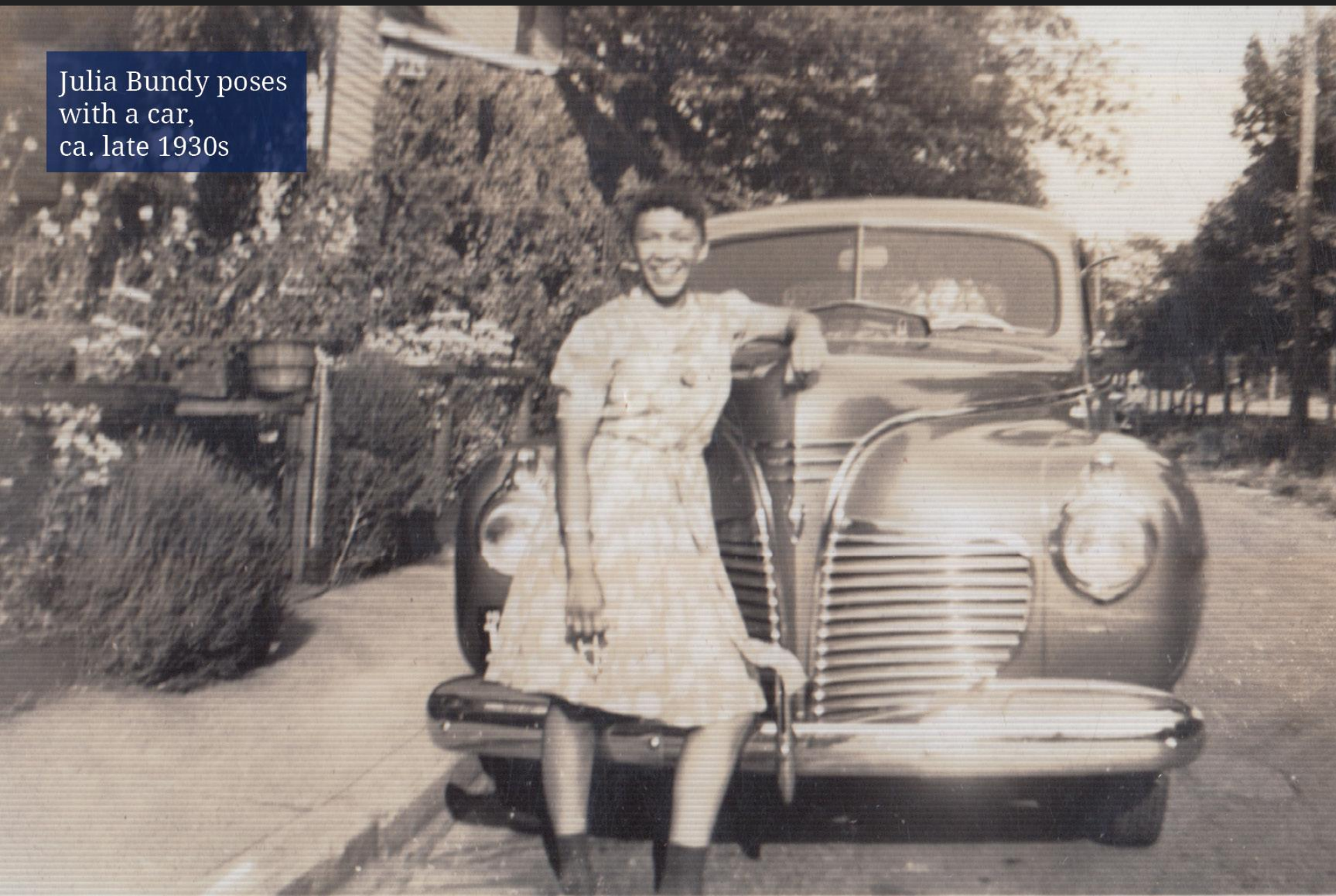
The majority of Newtown's social gatherings took place in homes around the neighborhood, and festive lawn parties were often held in people's yards. Lawn parties were known for their bright string lights, singers, homemade ice cream, country ham sandwiches, and good company. Newtown residents also spent summer days relaxing at community spaces like Harris Pool, built thanks to the vision and fundraising leadership of Mr. Kent Frances, a local African-American businessman. Ruth M. Toliver describes her "fondest memories of growing up" as "memories of Harrisonburg. . . . It was just one of the communities where you felt safe."



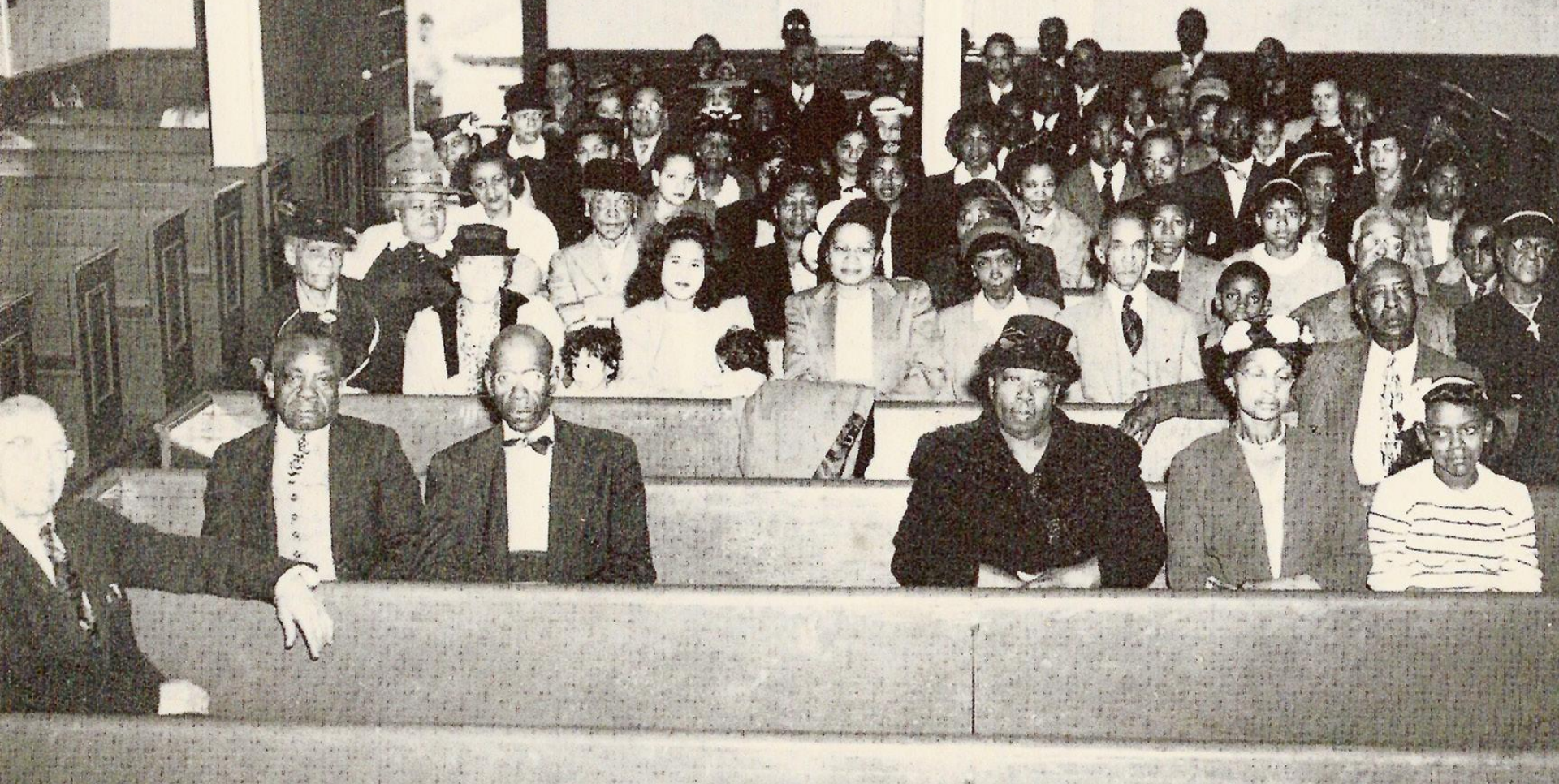


Barbers briefly
stop work to pose
for a photo at Jesse
Turner's barbershop
on Main St., ca. 1920s

Julia Bundy poses
with a car,
ca. late 1930s



Citizens' meeting at the First Baptist Church, ca. 1940s





The men of John Wesley Methodist Church, ca. 1940s



Bobo Sampson and
Mary Lewis sit on a
stoop, ca. 1940s

Wanda Lee Toliver and
Betty Buck, ca. 1955



***“They lost the school. And it
has never been the same.”
–Mary Awkard Fairfax***

Integration

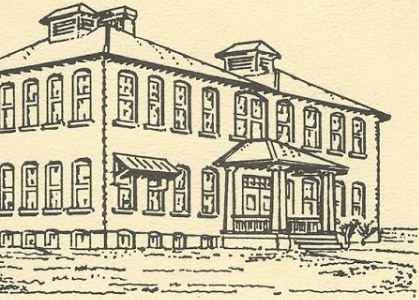
Lucy F. Simms School closed as a part of national school integration, with the class of 1965 being the last to graduate. Many teachers at Simms lost their jobs during the transition, although educators like Mary Awkard Fairfax and Barbara Blakey went on to teach in integrated schools such as Waterman Elementary School.

While African Americans in Harrisonburg and across the country were granted greater educational opportunities, many of them felt they lost a sense of community as a result of integration.



COND REUNION

Effinger Street School



Lucy F. Simms School



MAY 24-26, 1985

Reconnecting with the Past

The Lucy F. Simms School was left officially vacant for many years after its closing, although certain groups used the building, such as The Arc of Harrisonburg and Rockingham. Several members of the Northeast neighborhood would later establish a reunion committee to bring former classmates back together. Their first reunion was held in 1982, and many others came later. These efforts began the process of reuniting past friends and neighbors.

"We feel that we must continue to pass on the heritage we received from the instructors of Effinger Street and Lucy F. Simms schools who did not have the word can't in their vocabulary."

—The Reunion Committee, 1982



The renaming of
historic Cantrell Ave.
to Martin Luther
King, Jr. Way, 2013

Continuing Education

After extensive renovations, the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center was founded in 2005. It now supports after-school and community organizations that use its gymnasium, computer lab, and basement. As the home for many community events such as the Gospel Extravaganza and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast,

the center continues to be a vital part of the community. In 2013, organizers successfully lobbied officials to rename Cantrell Avenue after Martin Luther King, Jr.—a major milestone for Harrisonburg's African-American community. The Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center was used as a base for these efforts.





School officials, teachers, and family members celebrate the 2015 Lucy F. Simms Educator of the Year Award recipients. This annual award, which recognizes excellence in local education, was named after Miss Simms due to her “unswerving fidelity to the principles of service, loyalty, and dedication.”

Two young girls jump rope at the Boys and Girls Club of Harrisonburg and Rockingham in the Lucy F. Simms Center, where most of the group's meetings are held



Makyah Matthew
sports braids at
the 2011 African
American Festival in
Ralph Sampson Park,
adjacent to the Lucy
F. Simms Center



Performers singing in
the Gospel Extravaganza,
sponsored by the
Northeast Neighborhood
Association, at the Lucy F.
Simms Center in 2013



“The Lucy F. Simms Center is where we started from. We used to have to rent out other buildings for our class reunions, but we’re fortunate to have use of the center now.”

–Betty Lou Winkey

“Having lived beside it for many years, it’s nice to see the old school being put to good use. The center has helped bring back some memories from childhood.” –William Martin

“The Lucy F. Simms Center means a lot to the community. I hope that everyone will support the wonderful work that has been done in remembrance of the school.”

–Sharon Barber

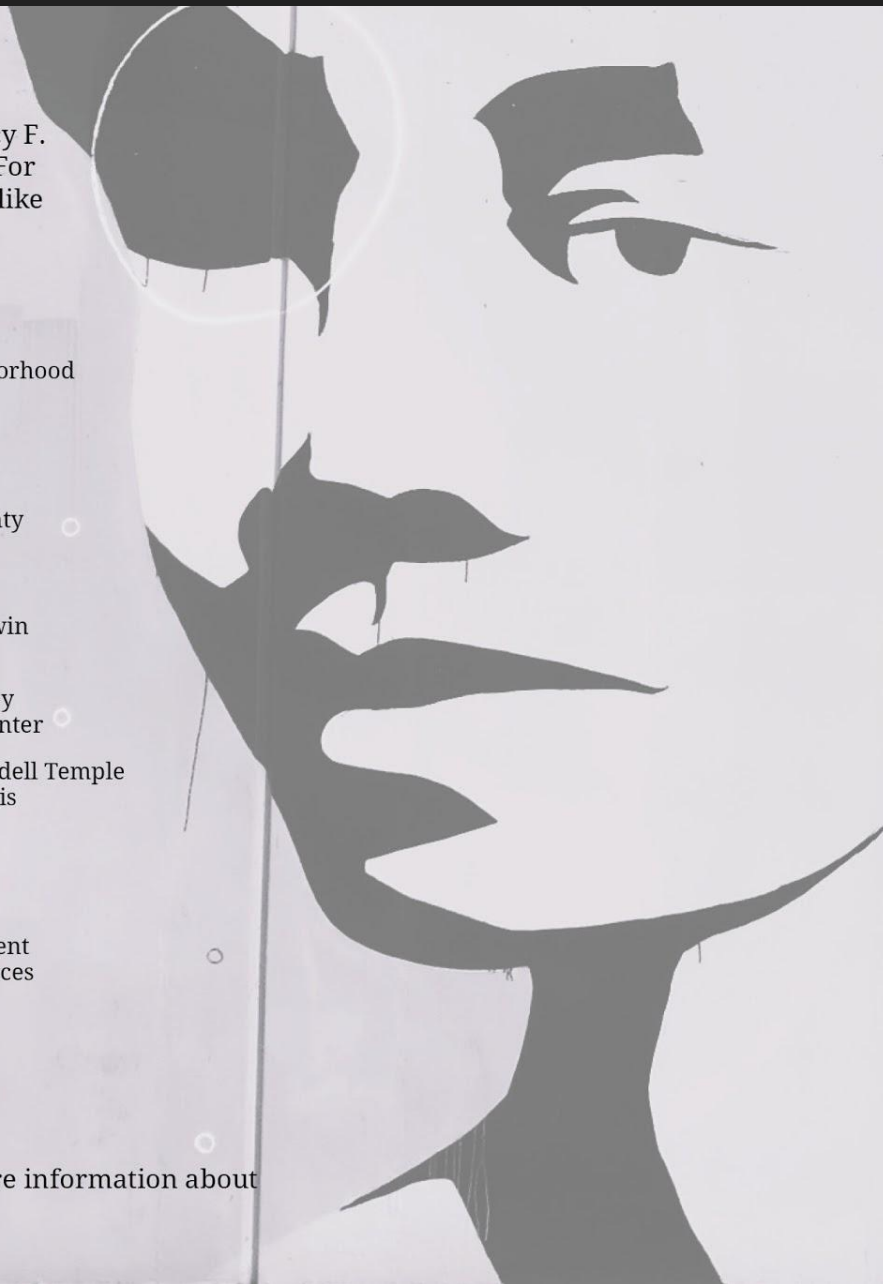
“Lucy F. Simms School is more than a building; it is the foundation of who we are as African Americans in the Northeast Community. The legacy of this building ties generations of African Americans together.” –Deanna Reed

Acknowledgements

This exhibit would not have been possible without the help of former Lucy F. Simms students and members of the Harrisonburg and JMU community. For sharing their images, research, memories, expertise, and time, we would like to thank:

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Reverend Harold L. Brown, Sr.	Digital Communications Consulting, JMU	Steven Reich
Judith Carter Brown	Faculty Senate Mini-Grant, JMU	Rockingham County Circuit Court
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Howard Curry	Libraries and Educational Technologies, JMU	Andre Shank
Daily News-Record	Office of Research and Scholarship, JMU	Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Center
Nettie Gray Dangerfield	Special Collections, JMU	Collection of Wendell Temple and Carlotta Harris
Dorothy Dickerson	Al Jenkins	Lowell Toliver
Special Collections, EMU	Gregory Johnson	Ruth M. Toliver
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First Baptist Church	Robin Lyttle	Virginia Department of Historic Resources
Twila French	William Martin	DeLois Warr
Hampton University Archives	Massanutten Regional Library	Tom Wilcox
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