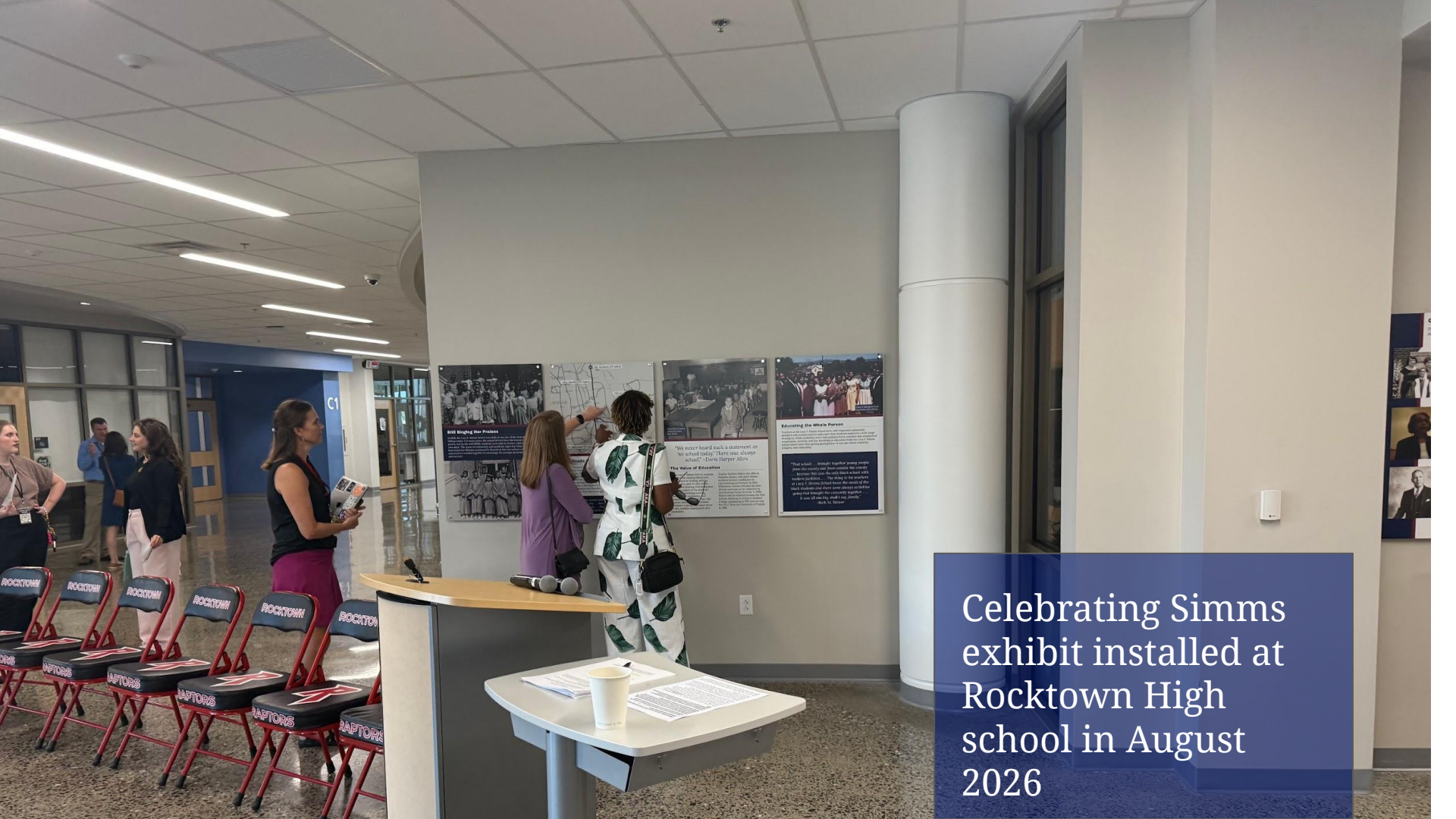




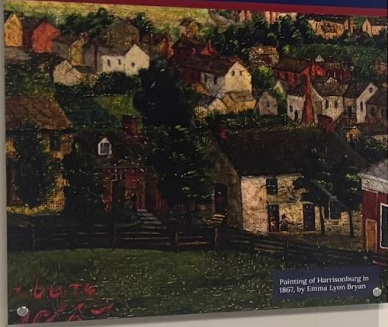
Celebrating Simms
exhibit installed at
Rocktown High
school in August
2026

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 state-funded public school system in 1862,

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.



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 below ca. 1900) were early trailblazers in the community, working in education, business, and for Federal agencies. George A. Newman came to Harrisonburg in 1879 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



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 Newfound neighborhood grew around it, Effinger Street School became the focus 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 worked toward development of various teaching techniques.

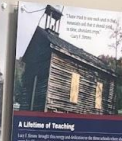


An Opportunity at Hampton

frustrated by the nature of educating those otherwise "lost and forgotten people," Miss Stearns graduated in 1877 just one year after William T. Washington left the school's next lowest grade, like Washington, Miss Stearns dedicated her career to education. She worked in Washington County schools for 2000 students across three generations. The war also found her in *Washingtonian* publications, which proved to be her stage for accomplishments. In 1872, a short profile read, "When you see Miss Stearns you would not be a whit the less proud of her successful years of service, well-rendered, judiciously given, and truly successful. How does she do it? Her education was so young."



A Lifetime of Teaching

[illegible]

Community Leader and Activist

In all education, time flows
responded to the needs of her
community with imagination
and care. Because most of her
students had working parents, Miss
Klein helped the students get
ready for school by cooking and
breakfasting their food. Her students
often expressed this affection by
bringing her lovely pinked flower's

After Klein also had a leadership
role in the 1960s Harlem Renaissance
movement, in 1964, she was
appointed president of the newly
formed "School Teachers
Association. The next year, she founded
and headed School Teacher No. 10,
also known as Teacher No. 10,
and a prominent member of the
"Colored People of the United Way
Council," according to *Harlem 1960*.



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

—Gary F. Stines



Mayor Deanna
Reed and
panelists





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."



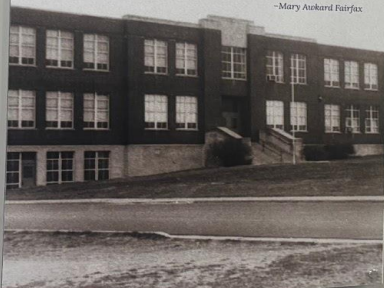
Integration

The 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 Fairfax and Barbara Blakey went on to teach in integrated schools such as Waterman Elementary School and Harrisonburg High 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.

"They lost the school. And it has never been the same."

—Mary Aunkard Fairfax



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 Ave 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 reclaiming past friends and neighbors.

SECOND REUNION

Elizabethtown School



Lucy F. Simms School

"We just had our most contribution to pass on the heritage we received from the experience of Eliza. Street and Lucy F. Simms schools, who did not have the good time to be their elementary."

—The Reunion Committee, 2002



MAY 24-26, 1985



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 bookstore. As the organization that was in the ground, computer lab, and bookstore, as the home for many community events such as the Great Entrepreneur and the Martin Luther King Jr. Festival, the center continues to be a vital part of the community. In 2013, organizers successfully raised funds to purchase the Center 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.

"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 Wiley

"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 has generations of African Americans together."

—Deanna Reid





Superintendent
Michael Richards'
and panelists



Panelists from left to right: Billo Harper, Howard Curry, Tim Van Schaik, Colleen Morris, Ryan Henschel, Kelly Troxel, and Michael Richards

