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

A Companion Booklet to the First Permanent Exhibition of African-American History in Harrisonburg, Virginia, at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center, April 2016

VOICES FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD: At the opening of Celebrating Simms, 25 April 2016

"I'm a 1962 graduate of Lucy F. Simms School. I was born and raised here and was the Valedictorian of my class. . . . It was a beautiful school [with] wonderful teachers. Teachers that not only taught, but acted as parents and guardians because they took care of us and made sure that whatever we did and learned here was a permanent part of us. That was the beauty of this. What I learned here at Simms I was able to take out of here and pass on to others. . . . That is the cornerstone of education. Pass it on, not just hold it in, but pass it on."
–Henry Whitelow, former Lucy F. Simms School student

"What's so unique about this particular building . . . is that this is still an educational center . . . it is still providing for people going out into the world."
–Larry Rogers, former Mayor and City Councilman of Harrisonburg

"[It] brings such joy to my heart that the history of Simms is being shown to the community. What we want everyone to know is that Simms was more than a school. It was our community center. . . . It was like a big family. That's what I love about Simms."
–Debbie Abernathy, former Lucy F. Simms School student

"I had never heard [some of this] history before. It is really interesting for me to be able to dig into where we really started from. . . . There's so much rich history here. . . . It's important that [everyone] comes to see that [Simms] was more than just a school."
–Karen Thomas, President of Northeast Neighborhood Association

"[This project] creates energy. . . . Now we can continue to peel the onion back and have projects where we can get the oral history, try to record it, and document that for other generations to come . . . because all that history we had is being lost."
–Carlton Banks, former Lucy F. Simms Student

CELEBRATING SIMMS Life at the Lucy F. Simms School

This booklet is a companion to the exhibit commemorating the contributions of the Lucy F. Simms School and the Northeast neighborhood to the city of Harrisonburg, Virginia. The exhibit was produced by James Madison University students and their professors, Dr. Mollie Godfrey and Dr. Seán McCarthy, working in close collaboration with countless community members and the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project in association with Billo Harper. The exhibit opened on April 25, 2016, and is permanently housed in the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center and online at https://omeka.jmu.edu/simms.

This booklet was edited by Brett Seekford and Hannah Jones and designed by Alexa Senio. Cover design by Paige Evans.

FOREWORD

From the 1940s-1960s, so many Americans took their education for granted. New textbooks, pressed band uniforms, gymnasiums, and cafeterias were all a part of going to school. But that was not the case for African Americans. School books were used and marked up by previous students and band uniforms were “hand me downs” from the white schools.

What was lacking in materials was made up by the dedication, strength of character, and compassion of their teachers. One need look no further than the Lucy F. Simms School to see the important role black educators played in segregated schools. They incorporated music and poetry into their work while building school pride through their roles as coaches on sports teams, helping students proudly represent their community. When the schools integrated there was no more driving across county lines to get to school. It also meant that many of these beloved teachers would work no more.

Instead of keeping open the black schools, they were often either torn down or converted into assisted living facilities. Harrisonburg has not continued this tradition, as we are fortunate to have the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center remain an important part of the city. Now, thanks to a group of James Madison University students and two very dedicated professors, there is a wonderful exhibition celebrating the Lucy F. Simms School and its namesake. This exhibition is one of the largest permanent displays about AfricanAmerican history in the Shenandoah Valley to date. In 2014, Dr. Mollie Godfrey, Assistant Professor of English at JMU, offered to help the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project. Using her expertise in archival research, she helped us advance our research projects, bridging the divide between the community and academia. What started as an idea for a small, temporary photo exhibition about the Lucy F. School and its students turned into a year-long project involving 17 JMU students, two professors and the recovery of new parts of the Northeast neighborhood’s history. With the

help of community members, these students and faculty have created the most amazing gift for the community: a permanent exhibition memorializing this great school.

The photos and materials that make up this exhibit came from the community and other historic societies. Few records about this school were retained by the school system after it closed. Without the help of these students and this community, this history would be lost. We hope you enjoy this booklet and the exhibition as much as we enjoyed working together to bring it to life.

Robin Lyttle
Founder, Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project

From Basements to One-Room Schoolhouses

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 and activism. With the abolition of slavery, Harrisonburg received aid from the government-sponsored Freedmen's Bureau, which established the first schools for African Americans in Harrisonburg in hotel rooms and church basements. After Virginia instituted a statewide system of public education in 1870, AfricanAmerican education moved from these informal spaces to dedicated one-room schoolhouses. Sixteen schools for African Americans operated at various times in Rockingham County.

Harrisonburg was more welcoming to African Americans than many of the neighboring towns in Rockingham County, making it safer for AfricanAmerican families to settle down and build a community. The Newmans were early trailblazers in the community. George A. Newman came to Harrisonburg in 1875 as principal of the "colored school" and worked in education for almost 30 years. In 1882, the Effinger Street School opened in Harrisonburg, becoming 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.

Lucy F. Simms: Educator, Activist, Leader

At Effinger Street School, educator Lucy F. Simms established a reputation as one of the most influential leaders in the history of African-American education in Harrisonburg. Miss Simms was born into slavery in 1856 to the Algernon Gray family. While debate continues over the location of her birth, Miss Simms was living in Harrisonburg at the time of the Emancipation Proclamation. Following her own education at Hampton Institute, where she attended classes with Booker T. Washington, Miss Simms returned to educate the Harrisonburg community.

Lucy F. Simms brought 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. Eventually the growing number of students in Harrisonburg prompted the construction of Effinger Street School, where Miss Simms taught for the next 52 years. She is often described as being maternal with her students at Effinger, treating them with kindness, high expectations, and respect.

When Lucy F. Simms passed away in 1934, her funeral was the most widely attended in the history of AfricanAmerican funerals in Harrisonburg. 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.

Learning After Miss Simms

In 1938, the Lucy F. Simms School was built on the site of the Gray family's former Hilltop estate, drawing students from all over the Shenandoah Valley, with some traveling as many as 50 miles per day. The sense of community and academic rigor that Miss Simms 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. For many years, the school did not have the resources to offer all grades, but by the mid-1950s, students were able to achieve a full high school education. Students not only took classical liberal arts courses such as reading, writing, mathematics, and the arts, but they also completed industrial arts and home economics training to prepare them for some of the available employment after graduation. 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. Mary Awkard Fairfax, Barbara Blakey, and W. N. P. Harris are just a few of the many educators who positively influenced the lives of their students, teaching skills that extended beyond the classroom. As a result, 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.

Learning Beyond the Bell

In an effort to create an atmosphere that was as much communal as it was academic, the Lucy F. Simms School sponsored many thriving after-school programs for both students and the Northeast neighborhood as a whole. Athletics, music, and theater represented an important point of contact between formal education and community life in Newtown. The basketball and football teams at Simms won numerous championship games and were a point of school pride,

and groups such as the Bundy's Boys Band and the school choir were beloved by everyone. Operettas were also 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."

May Day was celebrated at the Lucy F. Simms School 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, the performance of song, dance, and poetry, and the crowning of the King and Queen. It was an important day of celebration and ceremony for the whole community.

Memories of Newtown

The Lucy F. Simms School was at the heart of Newtown, a majority African-American neighborhood with a lively mixture of homes and businesses. Current residents remember it as a place abundant with fruit trees and gardens, bursting with flowers, though missing sidewalks. If you took a stroll around Newtown, you would find an ice cream parlor, grocery stores, barber shops, restaurants like the Chicken Shack, and the famous Colonnade, where there was a pool hall, a dance hall, and an arcade. 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.

The local churches were also an integral part of community life. Ladies, gentlemen, and young children all arrived in their Sunday best, walking from all over town to attend services. For many African American residents, Sunday was an important day for the community.

Reflecting on her time in Harrisonburg and the Northeast neighborhood, Ruth M. Toliver says her "fondest memories of growing up" are "memories of Harrisonburg. . . . It was just one of those communities where you felt safe."

Legacy of the Lucy F. Simms School

At the end of the 1965 school year, Lucy F. Simms School closed as a part of national school integration. 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. 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.

The school building was left officially vacant for many years after its closing, but 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. These efforts began the process of reuniting past friends and neighbors.

The Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center was founded in 2005 after extensive renovations and community encouragement. It now supports afterschool and community organizations that use its gymnasium, computer labs, and conference rooms. 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.

"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

"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

"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 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

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Please visit the companion website (https://omeka.jmu.edu/simms) for more information about the artifacts on display, or to add your voice to this story

The Creators of Celebrating Simms

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AFTERWORD

The Lucy F. Simms School is my alma mater. When the segregated school closed in 1966, I was in the sixth grade. The mentorship that I received from my teachers was the foundation for my success. My mother, Doris H. Allen, was also my cornerstone. She raised my sister, brother and I as a single parent. We lived in Harrisonburg's Northeast Neighborhood, known as "Newtown," and our backyard was connected to the front yard of the Lucy F. Simms School. The Simms School was my playground and also my learning laboratory.

Simms was full of teachers who had high expectations and provided "tough love." In 2005, I decided to tell our story about the educational excellence of Simms. I produced a documentary film entitled: The Legacy of Lucy F. Simms School: Education During Segregated Times in Virginia. The film aired on PBS and was distributed locally.

Elements of the film are highlighted within the Celebrating Simms exhibit (see https://omeka.jmu/simms). James Madison University makes it possible for students to participate in place-based engaged learning experiences. The collaboration between JMU

students and the Northeast community resulted in this permanent exhibition of local AfricanAmerican history. There are many significant stories that remain to be told by residents. Let's continue to share our Lucy F. Simms School memorabilia and memories in order to tell the story of American history in the Shenandoah Valley.

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Billo Harper

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