

HISTORIC HARRISONBURG

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John W. Wayland

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OTHER HISTORICAL WORKS BY JOHN W. WAYLAND

The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia

A History of Rockingham County, Virginia

How to Teach American History

History Stories for Primary Grades

A History of Virginia for Boys

Scenic and Historical Guide to the Shenandoah Valley

Historic Landmarks of the Shenandoah Valley

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Chapters in Church History

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The Pathfinder of the Seas

Historic Homes of Northern Virginia and the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia

Stonewall Jackson's Way

The Bowmans, A Pioneering Northwest Territory

The Washingtons and Their Homes

The Lincolns in Virginia

World History (a textbook), with Carlton J. H. Hayes and Parker T. Moon

BY

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From time to time the old school buildings have been enlarged, new ones have been erected, and improved equipment has been provided. In 1908 a stone building was constructed in front of the brick buildings on South Main Street at a cost of \$23,000. In 1910-11 the Waterman School was built at the northern edge of the city, at an outlay of \$25,000, on grounds donated by the late A. G. Waterman. In 1925 this school was enlarged by a ten-room addition costing \$60,000. In 1928 the new high school building was erected on the old fair grounds at a cost of \$225,000, and in 1934 the building was enlarged by a six-room addition at an expenditure of \$33,000. Within the same period excellent buildings were provided for the Negro schools.

The Lucy F. Simms School

In 1882 a four-room brick building for the Negro school was erected at a cost of \$2000 on a lot facing Effinger Street. With a substantial addition on the west side this building was used until 1938-39 when the Lucy F. Simms School, in a splendid brick building costing, with its equipment, \$100,000, was opened a short distance farther east. This school, very appropriately, was named in honor of Lucy F. Simms, a graduate of Hampton Institute, who, for 55 years, was an efficient teacher in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. The school is located on a part of the Gray estate, within a few hundred yards of the place where Lucy Simms was born a slave in 1855. More details concerning Negro education in Harrisonburg will be found in the narrative by Professor U. G. Wilson. (See PART II.)

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Negro Schools in Harrisonburg

In 1911 when I was collecting materials for a history of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County, which was published in 1912. Professor U. G. Wilson, at my request, wrote a paper on the Negro schools. Parts of this paper were used at that time. In 1942, when this work on Harrisonburg was under way, I requested Professor Wilson to supplement his paper of 1911 with items subsequent. This he did, and both of his contributions are herewith presented.

By reason of circumstances that can not be explained, a complete record of all the early transactions connected with the purchase, sale, and transfer of our Colored Public School property has not been faithfully kept, and we have, therefore, had to depend largely upon the traditions of our oldest living citizens for the information contained in this sketch; and a closer investigation may reveal inaccuracies as to chronology and details, but statements in general may be accepted as positive truth.

When, in 1865, the Negro race in America, after spending nearly 250 years in servitude, was set at liberty and almost simultaneously clothed with citizenship, the necessity for education and fitting it for the responsibilities of the new relation it then sustained to the state and nation was felt and admitted by all. The doctrine of universal education, while advocated by many individuals in every section of our country, seemed to spread more rapidly in the North and West. Men's sympathies went out toward these poor dependent and ignorant creatures until the sentiment crystalized into an organized effort to provide for them the light of knowledge.

To this end such organizations as the Freedmen's Bureau and U. S. Christian Commission were established and were instrumental in sending to various southern localities many cultured, consecrated Christian women and men to labor for the intellectual and moral advancement of the race. Two of these women, Misses Martha Smith and Phoeby Libby of Augusta, Maine, came to

Harrisonburg and organized the first mission school for the instruction of Negro children in 1868. They taught in an upper room in the rear of the old Scanlon Hotel. We are told that to reach the room pupils had to climb, jump, and stoop; but in spite of the many difficulties encountered, boys and girls are said to have crowded to the place daily, so anxious were they to receive instruction at the feet of their fair benefactors.

The next location for the mission school was in the basement of the Southern [Northern] M. E. Church—the same afterward becoming the property of the Catholic congregation, and more recently torn down to give present site for the Snell & Co.'s wholesale grocery building.

The next mission teacher was Mr. George Howard of Washington, D. C., a colored man. It was during his term that the number of pupils increased to such an extent that assistance was sent to him in the person of Mrs. Elizabeth James of New Bedford, Mass. This lady proved to be a most valuable acquisition. She was exceptionally intelligent and had the gift that few teachers possess of inspiring her pupils with laudable ambitions. "I regret so much that my son or daughter did not go a year at least to Mrs. James," is an expression frequently heard from patrons today concerning their younger children, and indicates what great confidence they had in the ability of this pioneer teacher. She taught until 1871. It was during her stay that the public free school system was established in Virginia; and when, according to the requirements of the law, she applied for examination, the division superintendent refused, saying paraphrastically, "I have need to be baptized of thee."

She taught in the first school house built for the colored people of Harrisonburg. The ground was purchased from Mr. Jouett Gray and was the parcel bounded on the south by Rock Street, on the west and north by Black's Run, on the east by the property of Robert Vickers. It was deeded to the colored citizens of Harrisonburg to be used by them for educational purposes. The trustees were Elijah Huffman, William Peters, Gabriel Jackson, Arch Strother, Cary Myers, and Robert Vickers. The house was a one-story frame building about 25 by 40 feet, set upon wooden blocks or pillars about 3½ feet above the ground. The ample space beneath was sometimes used for the packing away of wood, sometimes as a shelter for homeless canines, but more fre-

iently as a temporary retreat for an escaping urchin. Blackboards were painted spaces on the boards with which the school house was ceiled. This would become so slick that crayon would not adhere, and the children would overcome the difficulty by a violent puffing of stale breath against the boards, thus adding more poison to the already unsanitary conditions of the room.

In this house from 1870 to 1882 a generation of Negroes strove for mental development. I might add, just here, that this little wooden structure, like the early New England meeting-house, which was for one purpose a church, for another a town hall, another a court-house, so this house was the rendezvous of the colored citizens for quite a variety of purposes. Here were held the old-time devotion meetings, in which our fathers sang and prayed to the God in whom they trusted. Here were held the weekly sociables and festivals. Here were held the political club meetings where many an ambitious political Moses essayed to lead his sable hosts to the land of promise. Here were held night schools and singing schools. In fact no building has ever been erected in the town of Harrisonburg the name of which recalls so many varied past interests or causes the indulgence of more pleasant reminiscences by the colored people than the "little old school house by the creek."

The teachers during this period were the following: Robert Scott of Charlottesville, succeeding Mrs. James, taught one term. He was regarded as a ripe scholar and a good disciplinarian. He was followed by James Peterson of Boston, who was also a good scholar and much esteemed as a congenial gentleman. These as principals were assisted by Miss Mary Jackson of Staunton, who taught in the basement of the Northern M. E. Church, also in the old colored M. E. Church on Wolf Street. James Peterson was succeeded by G. A. Newman of Winchester, Va., who taught for seven consecutive years, or until 1883. He was a painstaking instructor, a constant student, a valuable churchman, and not a few of our most successful young men along literary lines bless him for the habit of persistent, systematic study acquired under his tutorship. He was assisted at various times by Miss Lucy F. Simms, Reeves Minor, Miss Sarah E. Smoot, J. W. Coles, Miss Shug Haskins, Bob Robinson, all of whom taught the primary classes in the old Wolf Street Church. In 1882 the attendance was so much increased, and the quarters then

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occupied had become so inadequate for the accommodation of the children, that it was evident something had to be done to improve conditions. The matter was brought to the attention of the school board, then consisting of Messrs. James L. Avis, George O. Conrad, and French Compton. The board immediately went into consultation with leading colored citizens of the town, among them James W. Cochran, Elijah Huffman, and others, as to an available and suitable site for a school building. In the meantime a committee waited on Mayor Pent Bryan and the town council in the interest of an appropriation for the building of the same. The council agreed to appropriate \$2000. A site was chosen on Effinger Street, upon which was built a two-story four-room brick building, with stair-case in the center, from the front door to the second floor. This building was heated by stoves and imperfectly ventilated by doors and windows.

The blackboards were of painted slate. This building, while not constructed in strict accordance with the most modern ideas of school architecture, and lacking many conveniences essential to the health and comfort of teachers and pupils, was a decided improvement on the past, and for the next 26 years was the pride of our citizens and the mecca of the aspiring young Negro in this section.

Time and space will not permit me to comment at length upon the personal qualifications of the teachers that taught during this period, but simply to mention them, as follows: From 1883 to 1884, Miss Lucy F. Simms, acting principal, Miss Jennie Hughes and Webster David, assistants; from 1884 to 1885, Miss Lucinda Bragg of Petersburg, principal, Misses Lucy Simms and Lizzie Evans, assistants; from 1885 to 1886, H. H. Suther of Hampton, principal, Misses Lucy Simms and Lizzie Evans, assistants; from 1886 to 1890, G. A. Newman, principal, Misses Lucy Simms, Alice Burns, and Lizzie Evans, assistants; from 1890 to 1891, J. P. Johnson, principal, Misses Lucy Simms and Lizzie Evans, assistants; from 1891 to 1896, G. A. Newman, principal, U. G. Wilson, Misses Lucy Simms and Jennie Settles, and James W. Botts, assistants; from 1896 to 1897, J. P. Johnson, principal, U. G. Wilson, Miss Lucy Simms, and John Terrell, assistants; from 1897 to 1908, G. A. Newman, principal, U. G. Wilson, Misses Lucy Simms and Maggie Newman, Mrs. Hannah Nizer, and Miss Mary Brown, assistants.

During all these years each principal and teacher doubtless labored hard—sometimes against many odds and amid much discouragement—for the intellectual advancement of those committed to his or her charge; much good was accomplished by them, and many have crossed the mystic river to receive their reward for work well done, while many others of them have turned to labor in fields no more honorable, but more compatible with the exigencies of advancing age.

From 1908 to 1911 the presiding genius over the colored educational interests of Harrisonburg was H. A. M. Johns of Hampton, Va., assisted during that time by U. G. Wilson as assistant principal, Misses Nanney Fallon, Lucy Simms, Gertrude Norman, and Mrs. Rosa E. Carter, the last being succeeded by Miss Fallon the second year. The qualifications of this young principal were shown not only in the classroom, but were demonstrated also in the complete change of attitude toward the school by both school authorities and patrons, by the influence he somehow exerted to secure this enthusiastic cooperation. What was accomplished during his incumbency has elicited praise from friends and foes alike and gives him a just right to a place in the galaxy of the race's most successful educators. A detailed account of what was accomplished will not be attempted here, but suffice it to say that, like the celebrated financier, Alexander Hamilton, of whom it was said, "He spoke to the dead corpse of public credit and it sprang upon its feet—he smote the rock of national resources and abundant streams of revenue burst forth," so, it seemed, that some magic voice had spoken in the educational affairs of Harrisonburg. As an outstanding accomplishment of this period, the old four-room structure of 1883 was transformed into a more commodious structure by duplicating the original on the west side, which gave two more classrooms on the first floor and a much needed assembly room above, with an ample hall-way between. Modern heating and ventilating systems were installed, sanitary toilets, electric lights, and other improvements were provided.

From 1912 to 1915 the principal was Hugh V. Brown of Hampton, Va. He was an aspiring and capable young man—was a conscientious teacher—but apparently was handicapped in the enforcement of discipline by his youth. He was assisted by U. G. Wilson, Misses Lucy Simms, Roberta Morgan, Ethel

Smith, and Rosa Jones. From 1915 to the present, 1942, Prof. W. N. P. Harris of Lexington, Va., has been our efficient school principal. During his incumbency the school has advanced along many and notable lines, chief among which has been the organization and operation of an accredited high school. A beautiful and spacious building, equipped with all modern educational facilities, was erected in the northeast section of the city in 1938, through the benevolence of the Federal Government and the City Council. Departments of musical and industrial arts, under the direction of competent instructors, have been added. The assistants to Professor Harris, from time to time during his administration, have been: John H. Christian, James F. Nicholas, Chas. W. Robinson, I. S. Wayne, James K. McKane, J. W. Wormly, A. T. Edwards, Misses E. Lucile Oliver, Helen Caphas, Alma Wilson, Goldie Morris, Eloise Walker, Edna Wilson, of the high school, industrial, home economics, and musical departments; Mrs. Lena Stephens, Misses Ethel Smith, Eloise Lanier, Maryland Alston, Gwendolyn Ranier, Ruth Hollins, Dorothy Davies, Julia Grigsby, Jean Francis, Elaine Bryant, Marie Snyder, Beatrice Cheatham, Dorothy Royall, Ann Sykes, Estelle Brown, Virginia Brooks, teachers of the grades.

This historical compend of the beginning and progress of the Negro public school of Harrisonburg is submitted with the hope that whatever satisfaction is lost to the reader in his or her search for literary excellence, may be compensated by a realization of pleasure from the contemplation of facts, simply but sincerely and truthfully revealed.

U. G. Wilson.

A fact of interest that should be noted in this connection is that the splendid \$100,000 school building for the Negroes, erected in 1938-39, at the northeastern side of the city, named for Lucy F. Simms, stands on a part of the Gray estate "Hilltop," where she was born a slave in 1855. She was a classmate of Booker T. Washington at Hampton Institute, where she graduated in 1874. For 56 years she taught in Rockingham schools, most of the time in Harrisonburg. Supt. W. H. Keister, who came here in 1894, has stated that she, until the fall of 1933, had not missed a day from her classes because of illness within that period. She died suddenly in Harrisonburg, July 10, 1934.



1933, June 10, fire in Tutwiler Motor Co. building, west side of N. Main, midway between Wolf and Rock Street.

1933, June 20, fire in brick building east side of N. Main, partly over Black's Run, northeast of Gay Street.

1933, July, Stehli Silk Mills increase employment roll from 400 to 500.

1933, Aug. 11, state firemen's convention parade in Harrisonburg.

1933, Aug. 12, President F. D. Roosevelt's first visit to Harrisonburg.

1933, Nov. 4, Weldon Berry recalls that he and other boys played in an arched-over tunnel that used to run from the site of the Presbyterian Church, northeast side of the public square, down to the Big Spring.

1933, Daly Shoe Factory opens northwest of Madison College in old incubator buildings, earlier sash and door factory.

1933-34, the jail, northeast side of Graham Street, remodeled.

1934, January, old log house, brick veneered, west side of Liberty Street opposite the jail lot, torn down; prior to 1854 occupied by William Reherd, blacksmith.

1934, May 24, exercises honoring Supt. Wm. H. Keister—40 years of service in Harrisonburg schools.

1934, June 1, night, Lowell Thomas speaks in Wilson Hall.

1934, June 14, Massanutten Chapter D. A. R. unveils bronze tablet at Smithland.

1934, July 10, death of Lucy F. Sims, Negress, who had taught in county and city schools 56 years.

1934, July 20, death of Thomas Lemen Williamson, 87, formerly of near New Market.

1934, Sept. 2, death of Mrs. Mary L. Pollock, 94.

1934, Sept. 13, new State Theater, east side of S. Main Street, opened.

1934, Sept., Evelyn Norcross Sherrill and Ben Hibbs in the *Country Gentleman*, Philadelphia, write of Joseph Funk and Singers' Glen. Hibbs had visited Harrisonburg and Singers' Glen to collect facts.

1934, Oct. 16, new bus terminal, west side of N. Main Street between the Kavanaugh Hotel and the Lutheran Church, opened.

Mr. L. C. Claybrook lives in a home erected on a part of this ground. When this (Ott) house was sold the school was moved across to what was then the Heneberger lot—now Keister Park. Temporary buildings were erected there from time to time until there were nine of them, which the pupils called "chicken-coops," but which were known as the Wm. H. Keister School. Manual training, domestic science, and one or two rooms of the lower grades were housed in the old Heneberger home. This Heneberger lot was purchased by the school board with the intention of erecting a modern and up-to-date high school building there. Plans for the building were drawn and the contract about to be let for the erection of the same when, because of the central and crowded location and from the fact that automobiles were coming into use very fast, no place for parking cars and taking care of the crowds could be had. Agitation was begun for the purchase of the "Fair Grounds" on which to erect the high school building, which, as mentioned above, was completed in 1928.

A few years ago a ten-acre plot of ground was bought by the city council on which to erect a new Negro school. Already there is a splendid athletic field and playground equipment on this ground. This school is to be known as the "Lucy F. Simms School" in honor of one who taught in the school system of Harrisonburg for more than fifty years.

When we came to take charge of the schools in September, 1894, there were many private schools in town. These were well patronized and the majority of the children went to these schools. The Misses Sue and Esther Campbell conducted for many years a splendid school for young ladies in the house on Campbell Street recently remodeled by Dr. Deyerle and now known at "The Colonial Inn." Miss Martha Davis had in her home on the southwest corner of South High and Water Streets a school for girls which was very popular and well patronized. Miss Mollie McQuaide conducted a school for the Catholic children in the house now adjoining the southern boundary of the present Main Street School grounds. Rev. Mr. Yonce, the Lutheran minister here at that time, had a school for grown boys at his home on the south side of East Market Street, now the residence of B. Frank Garber. Miss Hortense Devier had in her home, which stood on the northwest corner of North High and West Market Streets,

now the Conrad Flats, a school for children, both boys and girls. This school was very popular and largely attended. For a time Miss Jennie Davis had a school for smaller children on the first floor of the house on Court Square now occupied by Dr. J. M. Biedler. Miss Mary I. Bell conducted a school in the second story in the rear of the present Warren Hotel. Miss Bell had from twenty to twenty-five pupils in attendance. In the old Offutt building, or the "Bee Gum," on the southeast corner of North Main and Effinger Streets, there was a school for larger boys in charge of Mr. Legg. There was also a school for both young men and young women in the old Collicello house on North Liberty Street conducted by Mr. Phipps Miller. In later years Miss Nettie Waugh had a school for small children at her home on the north side of Franklin Street, where Tom Herring now resides. Mrs. Jacob Liggett also had a school for small children in her home on South Liberty Street.

There was among many of the people a strong prejudice against sending their children to what they called the "free school." It was with a good deal of hesitation that they were willing to send them to any but private schools. In a year or two, however, the children attending the private schools gradually began coming to the public schools and it was necessary for the private schools to discontinue. One by one these schools closed and all the children in the city were enrolled in the public schools. There is not now, and has not been for many years, any child in Harrisonburg attending a private school in the city.

It was our policy from the very first to endeavor to make the Harrisonburg schools the best possible and to insist on thorough work in order to give the schools a high rank, not only in the state, but in the nation. We have reason to believe that our efforts along this line met with success and with the approval of the parents and citizens of this splendid and loyal city.

The following items were added by Mr. Keister at a later date, in or about 1939.

In 1938-39 the Lucy F. Simms (Negro) School, located in the northeastern section of the city on ten acres of ground, formerly belonging to the old Gray estate, was erected and equipped at a cost of \$100,000, the city paying 55% and the United States Government 45% of the cost. This is a class B building and is