

**“For the People Had a Mind to Work”:
A Century of African American Education in Spotsylvania County**

In 1905, members of black churches in Spotsylvania collected \$1.25 to start the first school for their children. The call came from teacher John J. Wright, who thought the county’s black youth deserved better education. A two-story school building came into being fifteen years later. After it burned down in 1941, a larger and sturdier structure – John J. Wright Consolidated School – replaced it. Today, the building still stands serving students of all races and backgrounds.

In Spotsylvania, like everywhere else, African Americans’ quest for education was not easy. Against prejudice and discrimination, locals fought with persistence and resilience. Their hard-earned nickels and dimes bought land and bricks, paid off bank loans, and helped with teacher salaries. Belief in education’s power to improve lives drove the local African American community to establish the first black secondary school in the county, uphold its subsequent integration in 1968, and since then support education for all youth in Spotsylvania.

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Students at Spotsylvania Training School, 1930

We Shall Overcome

In 1896, in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution granted political but not social equality to black citizens. Thus the justices legitimized the doctrine of “separate but equal,” which relegated blacks to second-class citizenship and emboldened whites to pass further discriminatory laws. In the face of adversity, the African American community found a purpose and a course of action through leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Judgement in *Plessy v. Ferguson*

Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court held racial segregation to be constitutional under the “separate but equal” rule. The case started in Louisiana, when Homer Plessy, a black man, refused to move from a whites-only train car. According to his lawyer, racially segregated cars violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. However, the court ruled that seating for blacks equaled that for whites despite being separate.

Jim Crow Song Sheet

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

After the Civil War, Jim Crow – the name of a minstrel-show character popular with white audiences – became a term of derision depicting African Americans as slow-witted and ungainly. Played by a white entertainer who performed in black face, the character reflected contemporary white ideas of racial difference and social hierarchy. The term became shorthand for the system of laws through which segregation was enforced until the 1960s.

Poll Tax Receipt, 1935

Courtesy of the Division of Political History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

What Colored Men Should Do To Vote

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Beginning in the 1890s, white lawmakers passed legislation to circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment's prohibition of racial discrimination against voters. Tactics restricting black citizens' right to vote included grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and poll taxes. The last of these stratagems could require black men to pay as much as a day's wage to cast a ballot. Instructional pamphlets helped black citizens understand the steps they had to take to exercise their voting rights.

Segregated Cinema Entrance, 1939

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

"Colored Admission" signs directed African Americans to "separate but equal" facilities. In reality, such signage prohibited their access to whites-only beauty parlors, swimming pools, restaurants, stores, hotels, and other public accommodations. If a town or city lacked such resources for blacks, African American residents and strangers had to do without them or travel somewhere else.

The Negro Travelers' Green Book

From The New York Public Library

The Negro Travelers' Green Book promised black travelers an "embarrassment-free" experience at a time when whites-only policies made finding the most basic amenities difficult. This guide provided state-by-state listings of hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, doctors, and other businesses that welcomed black patrons. Updated annually, it was published for almost three decades beginning in 1936.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Booker T. Washington

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

In the late nineteenth century, W.E.B. Du Bois (left) and Booker T. Washington (right) emerged as the main leaders of the African American community. While Du Bois advocated campaigning for equal rights through political action and protests, Washington urged blacks to accept discrimination for the time being and elevate themselves through hard work. Despite their contrasting views, both leaders greatly contributed to black social and economic progress.

The Crisis, Cover of November 1910 Issue

Courtesy of the Library of Congress - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the legal attack against “separate but equal” facilities. Established by white and black activists as a civil rights organization in 1909, the NAACP used its magazine – *The Crisis* – to counter bias against black citizens in the mainstream press. *The Crisis* reported on achievements of African Americans as well as instances of racial discrimination.

Breaking Ground for Education

For decades before the Civil War, Southern states suppressed slaves’ access to education. On the heels of the Civil War, emancipated slaves, convinced that education was linked to freedom and citizenship, established their first schools. In Spotsylvania County, several local churches started schools, and their enrollment increased despite severely inadequate funding. Newly founded secondary-education schools – fourteen of them existed in Virginia in 1870 – responded to the need for qualified black teachers.

Colored Scholars Excluded from Schools, *The American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1839*

From Internet Archive

Anti-slavery almanacs and other abolitionist publications deplored enslaved people’s lack of access to education. Southern slaveholders generally opposed literacy out of concern that educated slaves would plot rebellions and forge travel passes to run away.

The Revised Code of the Laws of Virginia, 1819

From The New York Public Library

The Virginia Code of Laws of 1819 tightened the restrictions on African Americans’ education as lawmakers saw enslaved people’s meetings for schooling purposes as no less than “evil to the community.” Free negroes and mulattoes, who often tutored slaves, counted as accomplices and their mingling became “unlawful assembly.” Delinquents would be arrested, “sent off,” and punished “with up to twenty lashes.”

Faculty and First Class of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, 1886

Courtesy of Virginia State University Special Collections and Archives

As the first fully state-supported, four-year institution of higher education for African Americans in the nation, Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University) in Petersburg graduated its earliest class in 1886. Along with other early historically black colleges, this institute provided outstanding instruction to black youth. Mostly from Virginia, the students who trained here as teachers often returned to their home communities, establishing themselves as local leaders.

Interior of an African American Schoolhouse

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Images of the interiors of early black schools in Spotsylvania do not survive, but photographs of such structures elsewhere inform speculation about their appearance. Built from logs, these schools had bare walls, several old desks, and a stove or fireplace that scorched those too close to it while leaving those too far from it to freeze. Students of all ages shared rooms, taking only elementary-level courses, usually with the same instructor.

One-room schools: Piney Branch; Granite Spring; Summit ; Fork Colored; Good Hope

In Spotsylvania County, “public sentiment was strong against the public school system and particularly against the education of the colored children,” reported the county’s school superintendent in 1872. With no public funds to support their schools, the black community started several private schools, mostly in association with churches. Summit, one of the earliest, opened in 1884 with 127 enrolled students and two teachers. Each pupil paid a monthly tuition of thirty-one cents.

John J. Wright: Community Leader & Educational Trailblazer

African American education in Spotsylvania owes its early growth to John J. Wright. An advocate of the idea that “his race would never be recognized except through the channels of education,” Wright taught students and led the community by personal example. A man of diligence and thrift, according to a tribute pamphlet, he was also “alert and observant and possessed the innate power of managing groups ... in a most successful manner.” These attributes earned him public recognition and support for the school project that he initiated in 1905.

John J. Wright, Portrait by Johnny P. Johnson

John Julius Wright was born on November 18, 1863, on the Rock Spring (Blanton’s) Farm in Massaponax, Virginia, to Louisa Alsop and an unknown father. Recently emancipated and living in an area ravaged by the Civil War, his mother and stepfather knew poverty and hardship too well. While attending a school in his neighborhood, young John revealed an outstanding intellect and motivation to learn.

Normal Collegiate Institute, Petersburg, Virginia

Courtesy of Virginia State University Special Collections and Archives

Notice of John J. Wright’s Teaching Appointment in Spotsylvania County

The Daily Star (September 18, 1897)

Like other young, talented black men and women of his age, John J. Wright saw Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in Petersburg as an opportunity for both personal and community advancement. He completed the course of instruction with honors in 1894 and returned to his home county, ready to serve his community as a teacher. Due to his encouragement, advice, and personal example, African American landownership in Spotsylvania expanded during his lifetime.

Mention of Virginia (Jenny) G. Wright in the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute Catalog

Courtesy of Virginia State University Special Collections and Archives

Notice of Virginia (Jenny) G. Wright's Appointment in Spotsylvania County

The Daily Star (September 30, 1897)

Virginia (Jenny) G. Wright's Obituary

The Daily Star (November 6, 1898)

Virginia (Jenny) G. Wright

Jennie Garnett of Caroline County became John J. Wright's wife on February 12, 1896. They likely met in school at Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, as Jennie also received a teaching certificate from there in 1895. Two years later, she was teaching in her home county. She died after a brief illness in 1898, when she was in her mid-twenties.

Cora L. Jackson Wright

In February 1902, Cora L. Jackson married widower John J. Wright at Beulah Baptist Church in Spotsylvania. A local as well, she was a teacher in the Reedy Church School District in Caroline County. Cora joined in her husband's efforts to promote black education in Spotsylvania. She served as secretary of the Sunday School Union and taught at Spotsylvania Training School.

Dr. Jeanette (Jennie) Shamwell Wright

John J. Wright's only daughter, Jennie, added impressive personal accomplishments to her parents' legacy. After earning a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, she taught at universities in Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland. Her connections to her father's school never faded, and she continued to visit there throughout her life.

John J. Wright's Obituary

The Free Lance-Star (January 3, 1931)

In January 1931, the black community of Spotsylvania mourned the passing of John J. Wright. At Beulah Baptist Church, participants in his funeral commemorated his lifelong commitment to the public good as a teacher, school founder, church clerk, and president of the Sunday School Union. Wright's "interest in colored education progress," as his obituary observed, would be his most enduring legacy.

Sunday School Union

In 1905, twelve African American Baptist churches formed the Spotsylvania Sunday School Union, with the purpose of promoting education past the seventh grade for black youth. With John J. Wright as president, the union initially supported the Normal and Industrial School in nearby Fredericksburg. Four years later, the union decided to use community funds to build a school of their own.

Branch Fork Baptist Church, First New Hope Baptist Church, Mount Olive Baptist Church

Courtesy of Branch Fork Baptist Church Archives

108th Anniversary Booklet, Courtesy of Sylvia Taylor Boone

Courtesy of Terry Miller

These images show several of the church buildings of Sunday School Union member congregations. Erected after the Civil War, they marked the transition of black churches from functioning in private homes, under tents, or under brush arbors to being housed in permanent, dedicated structures. Built by African American carpenters on land owned by the congregation, these churches fostered youth education through their own Sunday Schools.

Lewis Terrell

Courtesy of Anita Terrell Roberson

Charles H. Hulett

Courtesy of Doris Hughlett Barnett

Lewis Terrell and Charles Hulett exemplified the dedication of black church members to the cause of education in Spotsylvania. Born into slavery, Terrell and Hulett came to be recognized as local leaders due to their diligence and faith. As Sunday School Union trustees, through fundraising, donations, and fervent prayers they convinced locals to join the cause of education.

Fundraiser Ticket

Hundreds of nickel and dime tickets had to be sold by the Sunday School Union to collect sufficient funds for building the first secondary school for black youth in Spotsylvania. Fundraising events included an annual county fair with athletic contests and an “industrial exhibit of county schools.” The Mother’s Club and the Drama Club contributed proceeds from community gatherings and public performances.

Deed for Land Purchase

Courtesy of Spotsylvania Courthouse

Dated January 3, 1910, the deed in this image brought to fruition the Sunday School Union’s decision to buy land for a new school. John J. Wright and two other trustees represented the union in the purchase of 158½ acres located three miles south from the historic Spotsylvania Court House for \$3/acre. Later, the timber cleared on this property was sold to help pay for the school’s construction.

Alfred (Allie) F. Fairchild

Alfred (Allie) F. Fairchild’s House

After the County Board of Education approved the new school’s plans in 1912, the Sunday School Union entrusted Alfred Fairchild, a master carpenter and contractor, with the completion of the project. As funds were raised gradually, it took Fairchild and his crew ten years (1912-1922) to finish the two-story building. All of Fairchild’s nine children attended the school.

Program of Spotsylvania Training School Dedication, 1927

Twenty-two years passed between John J. Wright's call for secondary education for the county's black youth and the dedication of the school building, which also marked the repayment of all debt incurred in the school's construction. Spectators recalled "persons from far and near ... [attending] ... this grand occasion." Remarks by John J. Wright and Thomas Calhoun Walker, the first black attorney in Virginia, preceded the laying of the cornerstone by Masonic officers from Lewiston and Fredericksburg.

Spotsylvania Training School

Years of planning and campaigning by Sunday School Union fieldworkers and trustees resulted in a new school building that surpassed by far the existing one-room schools. The consolidation of several small schools during the following decade required further expansion of Spotsylvania Training School. Junior high-school grades were added along with new spaces and resources, including two classrooms, a woodworking shop, and a library. A staff of college-trained teachers – including school alumni – mentored students.

Spotsylvania Training School

Courtesy of Thelma Robinson Pryor Estate

At its completion, Spotsylvania Training School featured twelve bedrooms, four classrooms, and four basement rooms "for culinary purposes." Forty-seven students started taking classes as soon as the first room became functional in 1913. By 1921, enrollment had increased to 125 students, including twenty-five boarders. At that time, the faculty consisted of three teachers, including John J. Wright, who also served as principal.

Class Roll and List of Boarding and Day Students, 1928-1929

As these class rolls show, boarding students came from parts of the county at a distance from the school. They lived on-site because only one bus ran from the Courthouse to the school in the 1920s, and walking on poor roads several miles a day was impractical. In 1922, a boarder had to pay either \$10 in cash or furnish food along with a small monthly fee.

Faculty, 1931-1932

As school attendance increased steadily and two high-school grades were added in the late 1920s, more teachers had to be appointed. This image shows the faculty during the 1931-1932 academic year: (l-r) Harriette Hearn, Hazel Combs, Sadie Combs, Ethel J. Statham, Sadie Parker, and William McNeill. While these female teachers held normal professional, elementary, or collegiate certificates, William McNeill (the principal) had an undergraduate degree in math and science as well as a graduate degree in education.

Sadie Coates Combs Johnson

After having studied with John J. Wright at a public school in Spotsylvania, Sadie Coates Combs Johnson embarked on a forty-two-year career in education and public service. A degree earned from Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute recommended her for the first teaching position opened at the new Spotsylvania Training School. A lifelong leader, she also served as the president of the Sunday School Union, the Spotsylvania County Teachers Association, the Parent-Teacher Association, and other organizations.

Christine Braxton

Ms. Burke's Letter to Christine Braxton

Dated December 1938, this letter speaks for the mentorship provided by teachers at Spotsylvania Training School to their students and alumni. A few months after her graduation, Christine Braxton (bottom image) shared her plans to pursue college education with her former teacher. Ms. Burke gave advice on when to apply, what school to choose, and how to prepare for the admission tests.

Class of 1938

Front row (l-r): Baxter Green, Bessie Johnson Beverly, Mary Fairchild Quarles, Marie Weedon Dixon, Bessie Morris Grannison, Lillian Broadus O'Neal, Narcissus Robinson Ford, Helen Lewis Brown, Alice Johnson Powell, Alsie Coleman Levi, Bland Robinson Holly. **Second row (l-r):** Lynwood Waddy, Randolph Johnson, Charlie Lewis, Joseph Despot, Alfred Crump, Charles Buckner. **Third row (l-r):** Ruth Tansimore, Christine Braxton Tyler, Carrie Cook Washington, Maude Burke Murchison, Pauline Taylor, Edith Combs Hunter, Marie Davis Wright

Classes of 1933-1935

Front row (l-r): Elnora Stanard, Myrtle Pryor, Christine Garnett (remaining four are unidentified). **Second row (l-r):** Aurelious Graton Pryor, unidentified, unidentified, Louise Tyler, Thelma Robinson, unidentified. **Third row (l-r):** Raymond Lewis, Milton Williams, Wilfred Lewis, Clifton Tyler, Ruth Eley, Alvin Tyler, Josephine Tyler

Spotsylvania Training School

The growth in enrollment during the Great Depression challenged the school in covering the increased needs of the aging facilities. The dedication of teachers, which resulted in an expanded curriculum and the accreditation of the school by the State Board in 1934, could not compensate for obvious logistical shortcomings. With limited support from the county, the principal relied even more on the African American community. In 1940, perhaps as a reminder of the sacrifices undertaken by the school's founders, the school's name was changed to John J. Wright School.

Daily Attendance Record, 1923-1924

Attendance and grade records give insights into teachers' workload as well as changes in the school's curriculum. In general, classes began at 9:00 a.m., with a devotional, and continued until 3:30 p.m., with a thirty-minute noon recess. Over time, the school term extended from six to eight months. In the 1930s, Latin was replaced with French as a foreign-language choice, while music and athletics became more prominent as both instructional and extracurricular activities.

Ninth-Grade Report Card

In 1930, Harry Tyler, one of the five sons of Frederick and Bessie Fairchild Tyler, graduated from Spotsylvania Training School. After finishing the ninth grade, like other classmates, he pursued secondary education at the Mayfield School in Fredericksburg. This report card proved completion of required courses in English, Algebra, History, Biology, and Writing.

Class of 1941

Front row (l-r): Julia Pryor, Edith Ellis, Vernell Davis, Margaret Despot. **Second row (l-r):** Eunice Bumbrey, Roberta Allen, Naomi Robinson, Helen Lewis, Rosie Lewis. **Third row (l-r):** James Jackson, Lorraine Wortham, Beatrice Ware, Callie Wortham, Emerson Robinson, Jacob Ware. **Fourth row (l-r):** Walter B. Tynes (teacher), Chestine Willis, Joseph Lewis, John Despot, Roger Braxton, Alexander L. Scott (principal)

Commencement Program, 1941

In June 1941, Beulah Baptist Church hosted the commencement ceremonies for the graduating class at Spotsylvania Training School. A senior pageant, an official presentation of diplomas, and a commencement address likely instilled great pride in attendees. Sadness and nostalgia marked the day as well as the graduates bemoaned the loss of their old school building to a devastating fire a few months earlier.

Locals took great pride in their school building, faculty, and curriculum while also acknowledging that more could be done if more resources were available. In 1935, inspectors of the Slater Fund – an endowment supporting the education of blacks – identified several of the school’s main deficiencies. “There is no central heating plant ... no electricity; no running water; and a single outside toilet serves the entire school. The grounds and building quite obviously need renovating. ... There were too few seats for the pupils, and very few textbooks and supplies seemed to be available for student use.”

Times of Transition

Arguably, the 1940s was the most challenging decade in the history of John J. Wright School. After its main building literally disappeared overnight in 1941 as a casualty of fire, the school community had to devise ways to survive. Much harder than creating makeshift classrooms to continue instruction would be deciding to build a brand new school and garnering support for it. Once again, persistent school leaders managed to overcome all obstacles.

Newspaper Reports on the School Fire

In February 1941, local newspapers reported extensively on the fire that destroyed John J. Wright School. Started by an overheated stove, the disaster spared the school’s auditorium, which was later partitioned to function as classroom space for elementary-school students. In the fall of 1942, high-school courses began taking place in a temporary structure known as “the tar paper school.”

Alexander L. Scott

A native of North Carolina and a graduate of Hampton Institute and Cornell University, Alexander L. Scott dedicated most of his career to Spotsylvania Training School. As its principal between 1936 and 1959, he managed the school through all adversities caused by the fire destruction, the subsequent fundraising efforts for a new building, and the beginning of the new consolidated school. He also held numerous public service positions.

Charles Melvin Snow

Appointed as Superintendent of Spotsylvania schools in 1945, Charles Melvin Snow provided instrumental support to the black community's efforts to build a new school. The urgency of the project strengthened his persistence in advancing negotiations among the Virginia Department of Education, the Spotsylvania County Board of Schools, the Sunday School Union, and local civic groups. The cornerstone placed on the building in 1958 acknowledged Snow's work.

Teacher Contract 1949

Wage discrimination against black teachers, who were paid less than white ones, came to an end during Charles Melvin Snow's tenure as superintendent. In the 1940s, as the NAACP was attacking in court racially based salary schedules in other school districts in Virginia, Snow managed to provide equalization. As a result, all black teachers, including school principal Alexander L. Scott (whose contract is shown here) began receiving the same pay as their equally qualified white counterparts.

Newspaper Article on Loan Approval

Nine years passed between the old-school fire and the newspaper article announcing the approval of funding for the new school. Delays were caused by the insurance settlement, the lengthy negotiations on the school size, the contract bidding, and the completion of plans. In the end, the Literary Fund of Virginia – a state-supported program that provided low-interest loans for school construction – provided most of the necessary funds.

Groundbreaking Ceremony

Courtesy of The Free Lance-Star

(l-r) Ethel J. Dandridge, Supervisor of Colored Schools; John Alrich, School Board member; C. Melvin Snow, Superintendent of Spotsylvania Public Schools; B. O. Carr, Vice-Chairman of Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors; Alexander L. Scott, Principal of John J. Wright Consolidated School

On October 16, 1950, school and county officials broke ground on the John J. Wright Consolidated School. The laying of the cornerstone followed less than a year later. The new school advanced the countywide plan to eliminate all one-room schools. At the opening of the new school in 1953, the old Diggs, Summit, Rosenwald/ Massaponax, Granite Spring, and Stubbs schools closed.

The Court Decides, The State Defies

Although racially segregated, John J. Wright Consolidated School offered black students a facility equal to that of their white peers. However, at the time it opened in 1953, the NAACP lawyers were already fighting in court for school integration. Just a year later, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared school segregation unconstitutional. Schools had to integrate "with all deliberate speed," but the vagueness of this phrase gave opponents of desegregation grounds for disobedience. The state of Virginia adopted a massive resistance strategy that perpetuated school segregation for almost a decade.

NAACP Poster

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

The end of World War II energized the NAACP's efforts to end segregation. As black soldiers returned home to find that their service did not earn them racial equality, they joined the NAACP in large numbers. The desegregation of the armed forces in 1948 helped set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement. Period NAACP posters called on black citizens to unite and "finish the fight" for equal rights.

Charles H. Houston

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Charles H. Houston was the architect of the Civil Rights Movement. A professor at Howard Law School, he mentored a new generation of lawyers, whose efforts in turn undermined the legal principles of segregation. Houston believed that lawyers could be "social engineers," who understood the Constitution and knew "how to explore its uses in the solving of problems of local communities and in bettering conditions of the underprivileged citizens."

***Brown v. Board of Education* Decision**

Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

The Warren Court, 1953

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

In 1952, the Supreme Court began hearings on several cases on school desegregation in Kansas, Virginia, Delaware, South Carolina, and the District of Columbia. Consolidated under the name *Brown v. Board of Education*, these cases gave the NAACP lawyers the foundation for the final attack on segregation. Their legal, historical, and psychological evidence led to a favorable judgment on behalf of the plaintiffs. At the end of the deliberations, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Map of the South Showing the Effects of Massive Resistance in 1958

Library of Virginia

As this map shows, four years after *Brown v. Board of Education* concluded, schools in seven southern states (depicted in green) remained segregated. These states' congressmen had signed the "Southern Manifesto" in defiance of the Supreme Court decision. One of the signers, U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr. of Virginia also called for a campaign of massive resistance across the South, which resulted in legislation meant to allow schools to close rather than integrate.

***Massive Resistance*, Political Cartoon by Fred Seibel**

Courtesy of the Richmond Times-Dispatch

This cartoon depicts massive resistance as a Civil War-inspired confrontation between the government of Virginia and the federal courts. As the latter found the closing of schools in defiance of integration unconstitutional, the former devised new strategies for circumventing the law. Pupil Placement Boards, the repeal of the compulsory attendance law, and the "freedom of choice" given to black parents slowed down school integration.

Local Reports on Massive Resistance

In 1954, newspapers reported extensively on local opposition to school integration. As of May 20, state officials had no clear deadline for implementing integration. When pressed for action by the NAACP, they blamed delays on administrative turnover. By May 28, the State Board of Education had rejected African American leaders' proposal to set September as the deadline for integration. Nine more years had to pass until schools desegregated in Spotsylvania.

John J. Wright Consolidated School - Faculty

The inauguration of John J. Wright Consolidated School on April 26, 1953, brought a sense of hope and empowerment to the black community of Spotsylvania. A brand-new building equipped with the latest conveniences (earliest alumni still remember the school's showers and intercom system) along with highly qualified teaching staff held the promise of a brighter future for local black youth. Teachers' and principals' exemplary presence, conduct, and dedication rendered them role models and trusted mentors for many generations of students.

School Dedication Program

Pittman C. Rock

Mr. Rock started teaching at John J. Wright Consolidated School in 1949, after graduating from Virginia State College with a degree in agricultural education and guidance. He had pursued college education as a World War II Navy veteran. At the school, he served as a guidance counselor before moving up through the ranks to vice-principal and later principal (the last one before the integration of schools in Spotsylvania in 1968).

"Many things are learned through the experience of self-education. But most learning comes as a result of being taught."

Pitman C. Rock

Charles L. Conyers

A native of Georgia and a graduate of Georgia State College, Mr. Conyers also held an advanced degree in education from Virginia State University. He served as the principal of John J. Wright Consolidated School between 1963 and 1967. With the assistance of the Parent-Teacher Association, Mr. Conyers reorganized the curriculum and gave English and the sports program more prominent roles.

Ethel Stathem-Dandridge

A native of Campbell County, Virginia, Mrs. Dandridge came to Spotsylvania in 1929 as the appointed Anna Jeanes Foundation Supervisor of Colored Schools. The position rewarded her outstanding work as a graduate student at Columbia University in New York. Like other Jeanes supervisors across the South, Mrs. Dandridge advised schools and also visited homes of students to connect their parents with their teachers. Later, she served as vice-principal of John J. Wright Consolidated School and president of the Virginia Teachers Association.

Sadie Coates Combs Johnson

Mrs. Combs was one of the longest-tenured and most respected faculty members at John J. Wright Consolidated School. Born in 1893 to locals Rev. John Coates and his wife Elsie Harris, she earned her first degree from Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute at the age of 19. After teaching for thirty-two years, she returned to Virginia State College for a second degree that allowed her to transition to library work for another decade.

John J. Wright Consolidated School Faculty, 1958

First row (l-r): Mary A. King (Mathematics), Edith P. Scott (6^h grade), Harestina Woodard (1st grade), Rosa Jones (English), Alexander L. Scott (Principal), Dorothy Williams (2nd grade), Ophelia A. Trice (3rd grade), Edith Ingram (5th grade), Rosetta Washington (4th grade). **Second row (l-r):** Carolyn Cashwell (3rd grade), Judy Loving (Science), Ruby Comfort (4th grade), E.W. Lewis (7th grade), Pearl Flippo (3rd grade), Courtney Sample (Physical Education), Alida Tignor (6th grade), Hazel Craft (History), Evelyn Boyd (1st grade). **Third row (l-r):** Martha Frye (5th grade), Sadie C. Johnson (librarian), Jaunita Sample (7th grade), Frances Lucas (5th grade), Ethel Dandridge White (Assistant Principal), Mamie Hester (2nd grade), Thelma Pryor (ungraded group), E. A. Ragland (Agriculture). **Fourth row (l-r):** Doris J. Darden (Home Economics), Sara Chambers (Typing), P. C. Rock (shop), Lucy T. Lewis (1st grade), Chelsea Tipton (band), Maurice Norbrey (Physical Education), B. W. Fisher (4th grade), Jeanne Ellis (7th grade)

John J. Wright Consolidated School Faculty, 1952

First row (l-r): Edith Pelham Scott (6th grade), Adele Gerturde Bumbrey (Business), Vivian Beatrice Bryant (Mathematics), Alexander L. Scott (Principal), Grace Vernell Norbrey (Science and Physical Education), Margaretta Smith Pettie (3rd grade), Hazel Combs Craft (7th grade). **Second row (l-r):** Evelyn Boyd (1st grade), Anna Elaine Lightfoot (4th grade), Helen Minor Timmons (7th grade), Sadie Coates Combs (librarian), Edward A. Ragland (Agriculture), Ersell Clark Jenkins (1st grade). **Third row (l-r):** Maurice Douglas Norbrey (History and Physical Education), Annis, H. Barrett (2nd grade), Phillip Henry Bates (English and Music), Frenchye Dunan Green (5th grade), Pitman C. Rock (Veteran Instructor), Carlene Erthroda Bumbrey (Home Economics)

John J. Wright Consolidated School - Students

Between 1953 and 1960, John J. Wright Consolidated School graduated students with an eleventh-grade diploma, preparing them for success in college, military service, and varied professions. While alumni acknowledge the opportunities created by their accredited diplomas, they praise most of all the school's role in forming their values. The entire community supported teachers in their mission of shaping students' belief that the "separate but equal" era's adversities were the best way to build character. As one alumnus said, "I was always encouraged to think ... I was better than I thought."

James (Jimmy) S. Dyson, Esquire

The son of the first black educator certified to teach high school in Spotsylvania, James Dyson enrolled at John J. Wright Consolidated School in 1948. He later graduated from Saint Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia, and earned a Juris Doctor degree from Howard University School of Law in 1973. James Dyson's outstanding professional accomplishments include numerous appointments to boards and committees at the state and national levels.

Constance (Connie) E. Braxton

Connie Braxton is a graduate of John J. Wright Consolidated School (class of 1958) and Virginia State College, the latter with a degree in history. She also holds a graduate degree in education from the University of Virginia. After teaching at the high-school and elementary levels, she transitioned to administrative work. Connie Braxton was the first African American woman to serve as a school principal in Spotsylvania County, a position she held for over two decades. She retired in 2000 after thirty-six years as an educator.

Alma Mater Lyrics

Graduating class, 1959

Graduating class, 1962

Graduating class, 1952

Graduating class, 1954

First grade, 1968

Fifth grade, 1959

Eighth grade, 1958

Third grade, 1967

Sixth grade, 1959

Sophomore class, 1958

John J. Wright Consolidated School – Extra-curricular activities

Extracurricular activities fostered students' interests and brought the community closer to the school. Yearbooks from the 1950s show the Dramatics Club, the New Farmers of America, and the New Homemakers of America as the earliest school organizations. In the 1960s, the Commercial Club, the Literary Club, and the French Club spoke for changing times and passions. However, nothing reinforced the school's spirit more than the sports programs, which rallied the entire community. In a former coach's words, locals came to football games "like it was the Super Bowl."

Willie James Conyers's Portrait

Yearbook Page Showing Football Team Members

Football Players

Born in Decatur County, Georgia, Coach Conyers earned an undergraduate degree in health and physical education from Georgia State College (now Savannah State College) in 1951. After a deployment to Korea and a few years of teaching in Georgia, he joined the staff at John J. Wright Consolidated School in 1963. He is credited with starting the school's football team and leading it to the district championship. He also coached basketball and baseball.

**Courtney Barbara Sample's Portrait and Diploma
Majorettes
Dance Club**

Mrs. Sample – or “Drill Sergeant” as students affectionately called her – was born to Dock and Martha Sample, a local couple well-known for having raised their thirteen children in the spirit of diligence and service. A degree earned at Virginia State College recommended Mrs. Sample for a teaching position at John J. Wright Consolidated School, which she held for thirty-seven years. She built a reputation for choreographing the school's cheerleaders and majorettes.

**Chelsea Tipton
Band, 1959**

Mr. Tipton started the school band in 1958 and, with parents' enthusiastic support, he equipped it with high-quality instruments and uniforms. Alumni remember Mr. Tipton as a strict teacher but acknowledge his decisive contribution to turning the band into the town's pride. The band competed at the state level and frequently marched in local and national parades.

**Campus Echo Staff, 1959
Student Council, 1959
Clinic Workers, 1958
Yearbook Staff, 1959**

John J. Wright Consolidated School - Staff

The opening of the school in a consolidated format in 1953 came with administrative challenges raised by the large student body, staff, and facilities. Returning to the school as staff members, a handful of former students provided vital support. They had a good understanding of both the school culture and the larger community to which they belonged as long-time residents. Their loyal service is still remembered today.

**William H. Poindexter
Athletics Field Sign
Newspaper Article on the Athletic Field Dedication**

John J. Wright Consolidated School occupied a central place in William Poindexter's life. He not only attended the school but also served as its head custodian for forty-two years. Alumni and staff members still remember his big smile, starched green uniform, and the banquet that he planned every summer in the home economics room. The school's athletic field was dedicated to him in 1997.

Lillian D. Hart Brooks

In 2004, the school's auditorium was dedicated to Lillian Brooks. She graduated from John J. Wright Consolidated School in 1959 as co-valedictorian of her class and pursued further education at Virginia State College. In 1965, after returning to Spotsylvania, she became the secretary and bookkeeper of her alma mater. Until her retirement in 2003, she took on more administrative responsibilities and collaborated successfully with all eight principals who managed the school over time.

“I cannot think of anyone more professional than Lillian ... Mrs. Brooks was as loyal to the institution of John J. Wright School as anyone could be.”

Walter McWhirt, Principal, 1976-1988

“Her positive and everlasting impact on all the teachers, students, parents, administrators, custodians, cafeteria workers, and paraeducators who have worked at John J. Wright School is her legacy.”

Ronald Burch, Principal, 1998-2000

Cafeteria Workers

No former student reminisces about the school without acknowledging the mouthwatering cafeteria food and the smell of freshly baked bread in the hallways. Every day, Laura Lewis, Louise Lewis, Evelena Wigglesworth, Dorothy Sueder, and Peggy Wright (l-r in top image) and their coworkers planned meals and cooked from scratch for over 250 students and faculty. For some students the low cost of food made lunch the main meal of the day.

Custodial Staff and Bus Drivers

Staffed by part-time drivers, a small fleet of buses transported students to the school from remote areas of the county. The top image shows the school drivers in 1958: (l-r) Martha Lawson, James Brooks, Reginald Woolfolk, Walter Banks, David Coleman, Ernest Moss, Wendell Anderson, Charles Smith, Curtis Price, Emmit Wright, Paul Pendleton. In 1958, the school’s custodial staff – Willie Mae Crump, Robert Jackson, and William Poindexter (l-r in bottom image) – kept the school’s classrooms, hallways, offices, cafeteria, auditorium, and grounds in good shape.

Still We Rise

In 1963, for the first time in the history of the county, black and white students started sharing real equal education. At that time, the parents of seven students who previously attended John J. Wright Consolidated School decided to transfer them to local white schools. All the students were girls, ages 9 to 15, and, decades later, they remembered the isolation and stress of those days. The full desegregation of schools in Spotsylvania County ended in 1968.

Newspaper Articles

The Free Lance-Star of Fredericksburg reported twice on the beginning of school integration in Spotsylvania. The articles informed readers that “fine Negro children” requested transfers to local white schools. From their application paperwork, journalists learned that the students’ parents “did not want their children to attend racially segregated schools.” At the end of their first day in their new schools, the superintendent declared that the introduction of black students into white schools was “very quiet and orderly.”

Charlene Pendleton

Charlene Pendleton was one of the three students who enrolled in Spotsylvania High School in 1963. Two years later, the graduation yearbook included her portrait along with a note that she was a member of the Student Council Association.

Elizabeth Anne Taylor

Elizabeth Anne Taylor transferred to Spotsylvania High School in 1963 and graduated two years later. At her new school, Elizabeth joined the varsity basketball team and the Latin Club in addition to working as a library assistant.

Sharon Taylor

At the age of nine, Sharon Taylor enrolled in Robert E. Lee Elementary School. Over the following years she built an impressive record of academic and extracurricular work. Sharon was a member of the National Honor Society, the secretary of her senior class, a member of the Math and Spanish Clubs as well as a majorette. She earned an undergraduate degree from Old Dominion University.

Rita Pendleton

Rita Pendleton entered Spotsylvania High School as an eighth grader. She was a member of the junior varsity basketball team, which won the district championship. The degrees she earned from Virginia State University and Southeastern University launched her career in finance.

Karen Williams

In 1963, Karen Williams joined the white fourth graders at Robert E. Lee Elementary School. Nine years later, she graduated from Spotsylvania High School as the president of her class. Karen earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia (UVA) as one of the school's first black female students. She returned to UVA to pursue a graduate degree from the School of Law.

Mozelle Taylor

Mozelle Taylor started attending Robert E. Lee Elementary School along with four other black students. A graduate of Virginia Intermont College, Medical College of Virginia, and Virginia Commonwealth University, she worked for the City of Richmond for thirty years.

Cassandra (Sandy) Johnson Terrell

Sandy Johnson Terrell became a student at Robert E. Lee Elementary School at the age of nine. In 1975 she graduated from Marshall University and returned to Spotsylvania as the first African American to hold a full-time position with the Spotsylvania Department of Social Services.

The Spotsylvania School Integrators, 2018

The seven students who started school integration in Spotsylvania in 1963 (l-r): Charlene Pendleton Chew, Elizabeth Taylor White, Rita Pendleton Davis, Cassandra Johnson Terrell, Mozelle Taylor, Sharon Taylor McGlone, and Karen Williams Woodward) continue to share their experiences at public events. In 2018, with support from the National Park Service, the exhibition *The Walls Come Down* at John J. Wright Educational and Cultural Center and Museum honored their legacy.

John J. Wright Intermediate and Middle School

The implementation of school integration in Spotsylvania in 1968 marked the beginning of John J. Wright Intermediate School, which served black and white students in grades six and seven. In 1981, the building underwent a one-year extensive renovation that required the faculty, students, and staff to relocate to what is now the Marshall Center. The addition of eighth grade in 1988 established John J. Wright Middle School, which continued to operate until 2006.

John D. Neely

As Superintendent of Spotsylvania County Public Schools, Mr. Neely headed the school district during the integration years. His leadership built on the academic degrees he had earned from Emory & Henry College and the University of Virginia as well as his extensive experience as a teacher and principal. In support of the school changes in Spotsylvania, he relocated his office and those of his staff to the building of John J. Wright School. He is also credited with reassigning the best African American teachers to newly integrated schools in the district so that their talent benefited white students as well.

John Bruce Midkiff

Mr. Midkiff became the principal of John J. Wright Intermediate School during its first year of existence, in 1968. He held an undergraduate degree in sociology from Berea College in Kentucky and a master's degree in secondary administration from the University of Virginia. The new school format came with challenges, but Mr. Midkiff had the full support of students and parents.

Dr. Jerry W. Hill

Dr. Hill managed Spotsylvania County Public Schools as its superintendent between 2001 and 2011. A graduate of the University of New Mexico and Oklahoma State University, he advocated for and led the transition of John J. Wright Middle School to the current John J. Wright Educational and Cultural Center Museum.

#16 The Continuing Mission

In 2006, John J. Wright Middle School's building was vacated due to its incapacity to meet the growing needs of students and faculty. In the subsequent public talks about its renovation and future use, the representatives of the African American community requested that the new facility kept John J. Wright's name and included a museum dedicated to the history of black education in Spotsylvania. Repairs funded by bond money from the 2006 referendum prepared the building for functioning as an educational and community center as well as a museum.

Inauguration

On September 9, 2010, over 400 people attended the opening of the John J. Wright Educational and Cultural Center Museum in the building of the former consolidated school. This image shows the participants in the ribbon-cutting ceremony: (l-r) Gil Seaux – School Board Chairman, Cleopatra Kay Coleman (class of 1949), Dr. Jerry Hill – Superintendent, Christine Garnett Chapman (class of 1935), Courtney Barbara Sample (class of 1949), Garry Skinner – Board of Supervisors Chairman, Julia Pryor Fauntleroy (class of 1941), Roger Braxton Jr. (class of 1962) – Chairman of the Museum Board of Directors, Edward Houck – State Senator, Bertha Pratt Fairchild (class of 1945), Dr. Brenda Seals – Assistant Superintendent

Board Members, 2019

First row (l-r): Patricia McCoy, Rosemary McKinney (class of 1962), Yvette Blake, Denise Benedetto, Renee Beverly. **Second row (l-r):** Clarissa Sanders, Constance Braxton (class of 1958), Roger Braxton (class of 1962). **Third row (l-r):** Rev. Gilbert Garcia (class of 1968), Luigi Benedetto

Exhibitions and Public Programs

Located in the former library space of John J. Wright Consolidated School, the museum honors the history of Spotsylvania education, with emphasis on its African American roots. In addition, the museum's small collection of artifacts as well as materials provided by community members have supported numerous temporary exhibitions on topics as diverse as school alumni, ethnic food, fashion, and Civil-War history. Lectures, concerts, Christmas parties, graduation ceremonies, and other public programs complement the exhibitions.

African American Heritage Trail

John J. Wright Educational and Cultural Center Museum is one of the 11 sites along the African American Heritage Trail of Spotsylvania County. A project launched in 2015, this driving trail includes locations related to African American events, people, and places of regional and national historical significance.

“Our Mission is to celebrate Spotsylvania by collaborating with like-minded individuals and organizations to collect, archive, share and facilitate learning about the interactive history of education, cultures and civic life of the county's African American citizens. In doing so, we demonstrate how those interactions within the wider population contributed to the richness of Spotsylvania County's development.”

The School Today

After its renovation, the building of the former John J. Wright Consolidated School has continued to serve the education of the entire student population in Spotsylvania County. Today, Alternative Education, Courthouse Academy, Early Childhood Special Education, and Gateway Academy programs enroll over 200 students of all ages. The school's public spaces (auditorium, gymnasium, and cafeteria) also accommodate the needs of the John J. Wright Museum.