

Historic Black schoolhouse added to Virginia Landmarks Register

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Jul 13, 2022

The historic Ryan Hall Elementary School, formerly known as Shipman Colored School, recently was added to the Virginia Landmarks Register (VLR) in recognition of its significance in the history of African American education in Nelson County.

Ryan Hall is one of 12 historic Virginia sites the commonwealth's Board of Historic Resources approved for VLR listing June 16, according to a Virginia Department of Historic Resources news release.

Located on what is now Braddock Lane in Shipman, Ryan Hall Elementary was built around 1919 and served Black schoolchildren in kindergarten through seventh grade until around 1961. According to the nomination form prepared by architectural historian Kristen Kirchen, Nelson County business tycoon and philanthropist Thomas Fortune Ryan and his second wife, Mary Ryan, were instrumental in the construction of the Shipman Colored School, renamed Ryan Hall after Thomas Ryan's death.

The architectural study included in the nomination indicates the Shipman Colored School was originally a two-room school with brick chimneys on each end of its gabled roof. In September 1924, Thomas Ryan donated \$1,000 towards the school's operation, which Kirchen wrote likely funded the construction of a one-room addition with a basement to the north end. A second school building was later constructed on the property between 1925 and 1938 and both buildings are included in the Virginia Landmarks Register distinction.

Kirchen interviewed former student Rennie Scott, who attended the school from first through seventh grade starting at about 1944 and remembered a total of five classrooms spread between the two buildings. One teacher taught two grades per classroom and Scott recalled the school being very crowded and having up to 50 students in his grade.

The school had no indoor plumbing or running water at the time and included a spring, a pump and two outhouses in the rear. Wood stoves and then coal stoves provided heat in winter.

Ryan Hall Elementary School closed at about 1960 with the opening of Nelson Memorial High School, now the Nelson Heritage Center. According to Kirchen, all two- and three-room Black schools were consolidated at the former Nelson County Training School, which had been the first public high school for Black students in the county constructed in 1941. Nelson County Training School was renamed Ryan Elementary School and about 17 years ago was converted to apartments.

Retired University of Lynchburg professor Woody Greenberg wrote his doctoral dissertation on the history of the Nelson County School Board while he was a graduate student at Columbia University. In a recent interview, he said the topic interested him after he'd attended many school board meetings as a Nelson County Times reporter.

According to Greenberg, in 1913 Nelson had 28 black schools and 103 white schools in the county. Data on per capita spending follows the same trend — in 1929 the education spending in the county averaged \$25.17 per white student and \$8.52 per Black student. In the early 1900s, the school year was on average 152 days for white students and 140 days for Black students.

Greenberg interviewed the late Harry Harris, a Ryan Hall Elementary and Nelson County Training School graduate and the county's first Black member of both the school board and the board of supervisors. Harris' successes in local government and as an engineer at nuclear-services company Babcock & Wilcox were achieved despite limiting factors. Greenberg explained it was called Nelson County Training School, and not named a high school, because the "underlying assumption" guiding the curriculum was that Black students would become some kind of laborers.

"They were limited to a vocational education — there was no expectation that there would be any college in their future or anything like that," Greenberg said. "So those low expectations have a ripple effect."

Greenberg said Black teachers were likely not as well educated as their white counterparts because they too had been "shut out" of white schools. Black students also would have been the second- or third-generation descendants of enslaved people.

"It was illegal to teach slaves how to read and write, so there was a lot of illiteracy in the Black community, and that illiteracy leads to kids growing up without the foundation that you or I maybe take for granted," Greenberg said.

Edith Napier and current owner of the property JoeAnn Mitchell attended the school in the mid-to-late 1950s, according to Kirchen.

In a recent interview, Napier shared Scott's memory of multiple grades learning in the same classroom. She said her teachers were "exceptional" and fondly remembered the schools' May Day celebration.

Napier never had to walk to school from her home in Arrington but remembers her parents and aunt did, while white children were riding buses. Her mother attended school until the seventh grade and her father until the third or fourth grade. Of her nine siblings, an older sister also attended Ryan Hall Elementary.

Napier attended Ryan Hall Elementary, Ryan Elementary (the former Nelson County Training School), Nelson Memorial High School and then Nelson County High School following integration. She went on to study human services and sociology at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, the nation's first degree-granting historically Black college. She moved to Washington, D.C. after college and worked for President Gerald Ford's administration in the training office. She then worked as an investigator in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and as a special agent in the U.S. Information Agency.

Napier returned to Nelson County after the birth of her daughter.

"I wanted her to get a quality education. My parents always believed in education, and believed education could open doors for you," she said.

She served on the Nelson County School Board for 12 years, inspired by her father's belief that "you don't complain about anything you're not willing to work to make better."

Nelson County Public Schools were fully integrated in 1969, 15 years after the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruled school segregation unconstitutional. Napier said Nelson County did everything it could to fight integration. She was among the first Black students to attend Nelson County High School, and said she has mixed feelings about the impacts of integration.

"The white population thought they were giving the Black population something by allowing them to integrate," Napier said.

But by trading what she described as intentionally inferior schools for the same facilities as white students, "we lost the sense of being with teachers who demanded that you learn, and expected each one of you to go out and be successful."

Napier said following integration, Black students were not expected to succeed in white schools: "You were tolerated instead of accepted."

While her experience at NCHS was not positive, she said white students were more open to integration than faculty and staff.

"Some of them were ugly, did ugly things, but basically most were pretty civil. You got along, you developed friendships," she said.

Napier said she's been to the original Ryan Hall many times since returning to the county, and described its condition as "pitiful." Mitchell and Lovington-based historical restoration company Ramsey Restoration have made recent strides in improving the schools' structural integrity.

Napier said she would love to see the buildings restored.