

**James A. Bland High School: Working Toward a National Register of Historic Places
Nomination**

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Introduction

We propose to nominate this property based on Criterion A for its association with education and black ethnic heritage. The period of significance of this property is 1954-1965, the timeframe that the school operated as a segregated high school. This property reflects the efforts of African Americans in southwest Virginia to educate their children despite profound social and economic constraints that systemic racism and discrimination placed upon them. James A. Bland High School is also significant on the local level for the timing of its construction. Given that it was dedicated shortly before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it serves as a poignant symbol of the State of Virginia's, and Wise County's, efforts to resist integration by "equalizing" segregated education and, following the ruling, refusing to place black students in white schools. At no point between 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did the Wise County Board of Education integrate its public school system, placing it within a statewide pattern of resistance. Thus, unlike some counties in southwest Virginia that integrated in the early 1960s, Wise County resisted until finally, in 1967, the first class of integrated students arrived on the property, then re-designated Carnes Middle School.¹

African American Education in Southwest Virginia Prior to 1954

Prior to the American Civil War, North Carolina was the only southern state to maintain a comprehensive public education system. It began in 1840 but was exclusively designed for non-elite whites. While Virginia did not outlaw the education of individual free or enslaved blacks, it banned schools for African Americans. Following the Civil War, public education spread through the South, as free and formerly enslaved African American men entered politics and helped to author new state constitutions required for re-entry into the Union. The Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) played a pivotal role in establishing state public education systems.² A federal agency charged with aiding "displaced Southerners, including newly freed African Americans" in the final year and immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau maintained a variety of responsibilities, most notably education. Its educational mandates included "encouraging black communities to raise money to purchase land for school buildings, providing building material from abandoned military buildings, transporting teachers to their schools, and paying rent on schoolhouses."³

The State of Virginia provided meager funds for the Freedmen's Bureau—forty-four cents per capita allotted for African American students—which limited its ability to educate black youth. This educational program did not last; it ended with the ratification of the new Virginia Constitution in 1869, which established a public education system that was supposed to cater to all Virginia students, regardless of race, beginning in 1870. Limited biracial schools had formed in Petersburg, Norfolk, and Richmond since the Civil War, but state leaders ultimately rejected an amendment proposed by formerly enslaved person Thomas Bayne (rejected by a vote of 56 to 15), which would have prohibited racial segregation. After the re-admittance of Virginia back into the United States, the General Assembly ratified the new Constitution that established a segregated public education system.⁴ The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the constitutionality of "separate but equal" public facilities, reinforced the continuation of segregated public schools throughout the United States for the next half-century.

The creation of the public education system in Virginia was a slow process. Many white Virginians opposed public education, believing school taxes to be too expensive, that they should not pay to educate freed slaves, and that public schools would lack religious instruction. The Superintendent of Public Instruction, William Ruffner, who focused Virginians instead on the moral and economic benefits of public education, deftly navigated those various fears. Nearly thirty years after the creation of the public education system in Virginia, it became invaluable to citizens and spread across the entire state, including the state's southwestern counties.⁵

Prior to 1870, public education in Wise County was incredibly rudimentary, falling far behind the rest of the state with only twenty-five schools. Twenty-two of these were in one-room log cabins. Teachers were often paid in the form of tobacco instead of money as cash was limited. However, following the coal boom of the 1880s and the founding of Stonega Coke and Coal Company (SC&C) in Appalachia, Virginia, the entire area began to transform through railroads and mining. Public education for whites dramatically improved, leading to the creation of the first secondary school in Wise County, Big Stone Gap High School, and the employment of principals on a twelve-month basis at Virginia City School (near St. Paul), the first employment of its kind in the state.⁶

The same opportunities did not exist for black students, especially within the realm of secondary education, which had previously been offered by some Freedman's Bureau schools. Additionally, *Plessy v. Ferguson* ultimately forced black southwest Virginians, many of whom lived in segregated coal camps, to find alternate ways to educate their children. For many, this meant establishing schools in black churches. In Derby, owned by SC&C, black mining families sent their children to a two-story community center that doubled as a church and school. In Big Stone Gap, the commercial center for area mining communities, public education began in 1899 with the establishment of an elementary school at Mt. Hermon Presbyterian Church. After the church burned down during the 1909-1910 school year, classes temporarily shifted to the A.M.E. Zion Church until Principal J.H. Byers oversaw the construction of a new "two-room white brick structure with two basements" in 1912. A statewide aid organization, the Negro Organization Society of Virginia, may have contributed \$6,000 to the construction of this facility. The school grew steadily, eventually incorporating "Junior High School courses" in the 1920s and, by 1931, high school courses. As Miriam DeLois Morris (Fuller) recounted in her 1954 history of black education in Big Stone Gap, "overcrowded conditions and overloaded teachers" compelled school officials to drop high school classes. The situation in Appalachia was equally strained. Professor C.H. Shorter, who in the early 1930s oversaw instruction at a "little two-room elementary school," began offering high school classes but faced considerable spatial constraints. Demand grew, and the school eventually accommodated black high school students from across Wise County, minus the city of Norton. Black coalfield residents' determination to educate their children motivated them to pool their resources and to find ways to transport students across rugged mountain terrain. Accommodating most of the county's black student population, however, placed considerable pressure on school administration and facilities.⁷

Even with the restructuring of Wise County's school boards in 1923, which resulted in seven regional boards consolidating into a single county board of education under

Superintendent J. J. Kelly, Jr., African Americans in Wise County were not uniformly able to access secondary schooling opportunities until the opening of Appalachian Training School in 1938. This institution became the first formal secondary education institution for blacks in Wise County. The school served grades eight through twelve in a small, wooden two-room schoolhouse that later included a library. It was conveniently placed north of Appalachia on a road that connected to several key coal towns: Derby, Roda, Osaka, and Stonega.⁸ For transportation, several families in the black community provided their own vehicles until a bus was purchased years later. After several years of operation, Principal Shorter suggested the school change its name from Appalachian Training School to Central High School to more accurately “describe the actual purpose of the school,” according to a report in the *Chicago Defender*. Central High School flourished under capable black teachers and administration, leading students to gain admittance into universities like Shaw and Virginia Union.⁹

These successes multiplied as the black community expanded from the 1930s to 1950s. Indeed, in 1941, Prof. Shorter reported to the *Chicago Defender* that the school anticipated its greatest enrollment to date. Through the 1940s, population pressures on the school became so great that six African American families in the town of Big Stone Gap sold their own parcels of land to Wise County to construct a new secondary school, what would become James A. Bland Memorial High School.¹⁰

Creation of James A. Bland High School

The property sale along the South Fork of the Powell River rode on the heels of a multi-decade effort by the NAACP to pose legal challenges to segregation. The organization initially emphasized “school equalization,” directly challenging *Plessy*’s “separate but equal” doctrine. Following a successful lawsuit against Norfolk city schools in 1940, the NAACP issued “lawsuits against more than a hundred school districts” throughout the state of Virginia, more, according to historian Brian Daugherty, than in any other state. The lawsuits challenged severe discrepancies between black and white teachers’ pay as well as funding for facilities.¹¹

Collectively, equalization lawsuits forced Virginia’s public officials, and politicians across the South, to more adequately fund black schools. Although some resisted, many political leaders reluctantly accepted that they would have to put forth more public funding in order to forestall racial integration itself. Equalization programs thus gained momentum throughout the U.S. South during the 1940s. One of the prime examples of this was South Carolina and the *Briggs v. Elliot* case of 1951, which eventually became part of five lawsuits that composed *Brown v. Board of Education*. Lawyers argued for desegregation but on the grounds of inadequate funding for student transportation. Although the lawsuit was dismissed due to a technicality, it prompted South Carolina to begin its equalization program.¹²

Virginia began its process of racial equalization in public education following a lawsuit filed by African American teacher Melvin O. Alston for salary discrimination in Norfolk County. Alston won his case through the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals that forced the racial equalization of teacher salaries in Norfolk County in 1943.¹³ Initially focused on salaries and facilities, racial equalization programs quickly expanded to encompass bus transportation, the

inequality of educational programs, and textbooks. In 1948, a United States District Court charged Surry County Public School Board and its superintendent with racial discrimination in “providing and maintaining school facilities, including buildings, equipment, bus transportation, libraries, and qualified instructional and janitorial personnel, and [from] paying Negro teachers in Surry County, Virginia, less salaries.” Furthermore, the U.S. District Court demanded that administrators address these issues by the end of 1950. Several counties objected to this forced equalization by discontinuing curriculum in white schools (King George) or simply refusing to comply (Gloucester and Prince George). In both instances, the U.S. District Court issued fines and demanded the end of racial discrimination to be “effective immediately,” foreshadowing vague wording later used in *Brown v. Board II*.¹⁴

The John Battle Construction Fund, named after its key sponsor, Virginia’s 56th Governor John Battle, allotted \$45 million over the 1950-1952 biennium to “assist the counties and cities in the construction of needed school buildings and to meet the emergency existing because of the inadequacy of public school facilities.” The postwar baby boom had created a new urgency for upgrading the state’s educational facilities. Although not stated explicitly in the legislation, Battle funds also provided monies for racial equalization programs due to forced court orders. (Lawsuits did not always succeed; Battle money, for instance, was already available upon the filing of the *Davis, et. al. v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* case. The Prince Edward County school board had refused to build a new African American High School. This case eventually became part of the collection of lawsuits that constituted *Brown v. Board of Education*). This fund continued until 1960 and spent over \$75,000,000 in Virginia’s revenue to build (or repair) African American schools—and actively halt racial integration.¹⁵

Wise County Public School Boards similarly responded to mounting pressures from the county’s black citizens by using the Battle Fund to build the new high school. In 1952, the county board of education received \$150,000 from the fund to construct James A. Bland High School. This sum ended up providing roughly fifty percent of the school’s total cost.¹⁶ While significant, this sum paled in comparison to funding provided at the same time for the construction of two new white schools in the county. In 1954, the proposed J.J. Kelly High School received \$408,460 and Pound High School received \$200,000 in direct state aid.¹⁷

Construction on Bland High School began in the fall of 1952 and was completed a year later, at the end of 1953. Wise County architect Charles B. McElroy designed the school in the style of Progressive Pedagogical Modernism, a style he replicated in other county educational facilities, including St. Paul High School (1974).¹⁸ Kingsport, Tennessee-based firm Armstrong Construction built the one-story modern structure. The architectural style, apparent in the building’s horizontal brick structure, tiered windows, and spacious classroom design that emphasized hands-on learning, signed the influence of progressive pedagogical theorist John Dewey on new school construction.¹⁹ Bland High School was “modern throughout,” as the *Bristol Herald Courier* reported upon the school’s opening in 1954. The high school had “a reception room, principal’s office, library, science laboratory, six classrooms, including home economics and commercial, combination auditorium and gymnasium, and cafeteria. A separate building . . . accommodate[d] the shops and classroom for industrial arts.”²⁰ This was indeed a

massive improvement from the basic two-room schoolhouse and limited donated library of Central High School. In total, the project cost between \$285,000 and \$325,000 USD (\$2,898,386 to \$3,305,178 USD in 2021), according to the *Coalfield Progress*. On the surface, the building reflected state leaders' efforts to equalize public-school facilities in Wise County. Several heralded it as such, stating, "Virginia . . . has spent vast sums of money, to provide 'equal opportunities,' the new Negro school at Big Stone Gap, for example." However, commentary in the *Coalfield Progress* following the *Brown v. Board* decision demonstrates that many white Virginians had expected improved facilities like Bland High School to forestall integration. The "value" of schools like Bland, the paper's editor speculated, "could be largely discounted, if integration is enforced."²¹

Discrimination and Backlash to *Brown v. Board of Education*

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States stood against the multiple injustices of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its detrimental effect on African American children with its landmark ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In this decision, the Supreme Court declared that "separate-but-equal" violated the Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, thus it demanded racial integration of public schools. Southern politicians immediately voiced their opposition to the decision, although it took a couple of years for them to forge cohesive strategies to resist the ruling. In 1956, several top southern officials, including Virginia's Senator Harry Byrd, responded with the Southern Manifesto, decrying what they perceived as a "clear abuse of judicial power." Byrd's response emboldened counties to actively stall integration across the state, including Wise County.²² It triggered an immediate backlash at the local level. As the *Coalfield Progress* noted, "Many southerners, in Washington public life, men in the upper brackets, were openly resentful. And others in the South expressed defiance." This defiance materialized through legal and public avenues, such as the creation of a Pupil Placement Board and a surge of white supremacist attitudes in newspapers. Further opposition came from public officials and journalists who cast doubt over the Supreme Court's authority to rule on questions of public education, which they contended fell under the purview of states and counties.²³

In southwest Virginia, local newspapers largely written by and for whites reveal a negative response to the ruling, with few articles urging calm as it would take a "generation of litigation."²⁴ This negativity continued through 1954 and into 1955, sometimes exposing considerable white supremacist ideology in the area. It was evident in statements like, "If integration ever becomes a reality, and a success, it must mean those of the Negro race must have made the greater effort."²⁵ This author explicitly denied injustice in the public education system amongst African Americans and whites with his stress on it being an "individual issue rather than a racial issue." He further expanded on this concept of individualism by saying African Americans needed to "justify" their individual advancement and that this would require generations of litigations by the Supreme Court of the United States to secure. Yet, other articles in *The Coalfield Progress* expressed doubt in the Supreme Court's authority over state and local school boards or their ability to make such a "far-reaching" decision. Several Wise County officials argued that due to ratification of the Virginia Constitution in 1869, which mandated a segregated education system following the failure of Bayne's Amendment, the Supreme Court's

decision did not apply.²⁶ This argument surfaced several times in the *Coalfield Progress*, and its chief proponent was Wise County's Superintendent J.J. Kelly, Jr., who had served in that position since January 1917. He spoke at a Norton Kiwanis Club meeting where he delivered this argument against the Supreme Court's decision and his plan for halting integration. He contended that Virginia's state constitution had decreed segregation even before the formal creation of its public school system in 1870, and the 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution relegated responsibility of education to the states. Thus, the responsibility of enforcing this federal decision ultimately lay within the hands of the state.²⁷

Local officials' efforts to halt integration only strengthened under Virginia's wider policy of "Massive Resistance." In Virginia, the General Assembly adopted a unique legislative strategy to strangle integration through a plan proposed by Governor Stanley. Stanley, who immediately following the *Brown* decision urged Virginians to thoughtfully and calmly proceed with desegregation, switched positions abruptly after Senator Byrd, who controlled the state Democratic Party, compelled him and other top officials to resist. The "Stanley Plan" followed the recommendations of the Gray Commission Report, which studied the effects of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in Virginia, by introducing fifteen new bills to resist desegregation. Major points included the Pupil Placement Act, requirement of appeals to be sent through the Governor to State Courts then to Federal Courts, closure of integrated schools, removal of state funds from integrated schools, and approval of tuition grants for those schools that continued segregation.²⁸ These state bills then transferred over to local bills and structures, such as the creation of the Wise County Pupil Placement Board in 1957. Evidence is unclear as to whether Wise County's Pupil Placement Board began operation in 1957 or just began receiving 3200 blank Pupil Placement forms from the Suproco Company, based in Nashville, Tennessee.²⁹ Additionally, this evidence is ambiguous due to the earliest Wise County Pupil Placement applications starting in September 1960. Beyond the uncertainty of its beginning, its impact was incredibly harsh as well as discriminatory to African American families and students. Wise County education officials granted no special placements, meaning not a single African American student was admitted to a white school from 1957-1965.³⁰ Furthermore, in over six folders, not a single application from Wise County's Pupil Placement Board admitted a white student to James A. Bland High School or South Coeburn, another African American high school in the county. Even African American students in lower grades could not escape county scrutiny as J.J. Kelly announced another piece of halting legislation, stair-step integration, which started with first graders in 1954-55. Each year, another class of incoming first graders would be integrated. In general, halted racial integration existed on every public education level, whether elementary or secondary, which denied opportunities for African American students in Wise County until 1965.³¹

Conclusion

The Coalfield Progress reported on May 20, 1965, that Bland High School was set to graduate its last class of students. Although it offered no explanation, county residents would have understood that the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 had effectively put an end to Virginia's and other southern states' efforts to resist integration. Among other strategies, the law

empowered the federal government to withhold funds from noncompliant school districts. Although the Wise County Board of Education would ultimately reopen the school as an integrated middle school in 1967, at the time of the report the county superintendent, W.C. Richmond, appeared resolved to simply shut the school down. The paper noted that the “practically new school” was hardly a decade old.³²

NOTES

¹ For a broad view of massive resistance and Virginia's place within it, see James T. Patterson, *Brown V. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96-101.

² Butchart, "Freedmen's Education in Virginia, 1861-1870"; Marianne Julienne and Brent Tarter. "Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, September 29, 2021, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/public-school-system-in-virginia-establishment-of-the/>.

³ "Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866," United States Senate, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/FreedmensBureau.htm>; Ronald E. Butchart, "Freedmen's Education in Virginia, 1861-1870," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/freedmens-education-in-virginia-1861-1870/>.

⁴ Marianne Julienne and Brent Tarter. "Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, September 29, 2021, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/public-school-system-in-virginia-establishment-of-the/>.

⁵ Julienne and Tarter, "Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia."

⁶ Lonesome Pine Office on Youth, *Looking Back: Wise County in the Early Years* (self-pub., 2004), 222-223.

⁷ Gibson Worsham, "Derby Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), p. 8; Miriam DeLois Morris, "Negro Education Started in 1899," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, January 28, 1954, p. 1, 9-10; "Negro Organization Marks 40th Anniversary: Society Blazes Trail in Old Dominion Progress," *New Journal and Guide*, November 8, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Black Newspaper Collection, p. 15.

⁸ Tom Costa, "Education of African Americans in Wise County (Central HS to Bland HS): From Brown v. Board to integration of public schools in Wise County," unpublished notes, July 26, 2020.

⁹ Costa, "Education of African Americans"; "Appalachia," *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1941, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Black Newspaper Collection, p. 11.

¹⁰ "Appalachia," p. 11; Matthew Bright, "Historical Information About Big Stone Gap Town Hall Building, 505 E. 5th Street South," copy of unpublished notes in author's possession.

¹¹ Brian J. Daugherty, *Keep On Keeping On: The NAACP and the Implementation of Brown v. Board of Education in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 16.

¹² Rebekah Dobrasko, "Equalization Schools" and "Briggs v. Elliott," *South Carolina's Equalization Schools 1951-1960*, accessed January 9, 2022, <http://www.scequalizationschools.org/>.

¹³ Doxey A. Wilkerson, "The Negro School Movement in Virginia: From 'Equalization' to 'Integration'," *The Journal of Negro Education* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1960): 17-29.

¹⁴ Wilkerson, "The Negro School Movement in Virginia," p. 20.

¹⁵ Paul Saunier, Jr., "It Happened in the Legislature," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, February 16, 1950, p. 1; Foney G. Mullins, "A History of the Literary Fund as a Funding Source for Free Public Education in the Commonwealth of Virginia," (PhD diss., University of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2001), 58.

¹⁶ "Rev. Cain Speaks at Dedication New Colored School," *Coalfield Progress*, February 4, 1954.

¹⁷ "Governor Stanley's Address at High School Dedication," *Coalfield Progress*, May 13, 1954.

¹⁸ “Alonzo Monday Addresses Audience at Dedication,” *Clinch Valley Times*, April 25, 1974, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://clinchvalleytimes.net/2019/06/21/remembering-the-1973-74-school-year-at-st-paul-high-school-part-2/>.

¹⁹ Hugh Ward, “Architecture of Academic Innovation: Progressive Pedagogy, Modernist Design, and Perkins and Will’s Heathcote Elementary in Post-War America,” MS Thesis (Columbia University, May 2015), 6-10.

²⁰ “New \$300,000 School for Negro Students Named for Composer Opens Monday,” *Bristol Herald Courier*, January 24, 1954, p. 14; “Rev. Cain Speaks at Dedication New Colored School.”

²¹ “Will We Ever Solve It?,” *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954.

²² Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 98.

²³ “Will We Ever Solve It?,” *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954.

²⁴ “All to Gain—Nothing to Lose,” *The Coalfield Progress*, May 27, 1954.

²⁵ “Will We Ever Solve It?,” *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954.

²⁶ “Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia.”

²⁷ “Kelly Outlines Plan for Public School Integration,” *The Coalfield Progress*, June 24, 1954. See also, “All to Gain—Nothing to Lose”; “Will We Ever Solve It?”; and A. Willis Robertson, “Washington As Viewed By Your Senator, A. Willis Robertson,” *The Coalfield Progress*, May 27, 1954, p. 1.

²⁸ Thomas Martin, “Legislature Passes Segregation Plan After Bitter Struggle: Stanley Plan Will Completely Bar Integration Everywhere In Virginia,” *The Cavalier Daily*, September 25, 1956. On Governor Stanley and the Gray Commission, see Daugherty, 22-25, 38-43.

²⁹ Library of Virginia, Records of the Virginia Pupil Placement Board, 1957-1966, Box 5 – Folder 8.

³⁰ Library of Virginia, Records of the Virginia Pupil Placement Board, 1957-1966, Box 5 – Folder 4.

³¹ “Kelly Outlines Plan for Public School Integration.”

³² “Bland High School—1965 Graduates,” *Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1965; Daugherty, *Keep On Keeping On*, 106.