

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

**1. Name of Property**

historic name Lucy F. Simms School  
other names/site number VDHR # 115-5035

**2. Location**

street & number 620 Simms Avenue not for publication N/A  
city or town Harrisonburg vicinity \_\_\_\_\_  
state Virginia code VA county \_\_\_\_\_ code 660 Zip 22802

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant \_\_\_\_\_ nationally \_\_\_\_\_ statewide X locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official Date  
**Virginia Department of Historic Resources**  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby certify that this property is: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ entered in the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ removed from the National Register  
\_\_\_\_ other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Keeper

U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property** (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property** (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>  1  </u>	<u>      </u>
buildings	buildings
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>
sites	sites
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>
structures	structures
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>
objects	objects
<u>  1  </u>	<u>      </u>
Total	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register   0  

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

  N/A  

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: _____	Sub: _____
<u>  EDUCATION  </u>	<u>  School  </u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

**Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: _____	Sub: _____
<u>  EDUCATION  </u>	<u>  School  </u>
<u>  SOCIAL  </u>	<u>  Civic  </u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

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### 7. Description

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**Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)

   **Other** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation    **CONCRETE** \_\_\_\_\_

roof    **SYNTHETICS: Rubber** \_\_\_\_\_

walls    **BRICK** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

other    **METAL: steel** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description** (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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### 8. Statement of Significance

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**Applicable National Register Criteria** (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- X**    A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- X**    C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

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**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions)

   **ARCHITECTURE** \_\_\_\_\_

   **ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black** \_\_\_\_\_

   **EDUCATION** \_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**    **1939-1954** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Significant Dates 1939 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation N/A \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder Virginia Department of Education \_\_\_\_\_

Nielson Construction Company (builders) \_\_\_\_\_

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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### 9. Major Bibliographical References

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#### Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

#### Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

#### Primary Location of Additional Data

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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### 10. Geographical Data

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Acreage of Property Approximately 7 acres \_\_\_\_\_

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing    Zone Easting Northing

1 17 686878E /4258200N    2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_    4 \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet.

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Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title: Maral S. Kalbian/ Architectural Historian and Margaret T. Peters/Research Historian

Organization: Maral S. Kalbian date August 27, 2003

street & number: 2026 Old Chapel Road telephone 540-837-2081

city or town Boyce state VA zip code 22620

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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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**Property Owner**

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Harrisonburg, Mr. Roger Baker- City Manager

street & number 345 S. Main Street telephone (540) 432-7702

city or town Harrisonburg state VA zip code 22803

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Section   7   Page   1  

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**7. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION:**

The Lucy F. Simms School is located at 620 Simms Avenue in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The two-story brick building was constructed in 1938-1939 as an African-American elementary and high school. Funding for the school came from the City of Harrisonburg, the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, and the Virginia State Literary Fund. The need for an educational facility in Harrisonburg to serve the local African-American community was addressed as early as 1868 with the establishment of a mission school. A brick school was constructed in 1882 along Effinger Street, a few blocks southeast of the Lucy F. Simms School. Known as Effinger School, the building was added onto in 1910 and condemned in 1937. Plans were soon underway to construct the new Lucy F. Simms School, named for a locally prominent African-American educator. The school design was based on plans provided by the Virginia Department of Education and was built by Neilson Construction Company of Harrisonburg. The two-story brick building rests on a partially raised basement and was originally constructed as an asymmetrical building: the right, two-story, four-room portion to the right was left off because of cost overruns and was not built until 1961. The Lucy F. Simms School is a well-preserved example of a typical state design for schools of this era. The interior features U-shaped corridors on both levels with classrooms radiating off both sides, as well as a two-story gymnasium and auditorium off the rear. Much of the interior woodwork, flooring, and wall treatment are still intact. The Lucy F. Simms School closed in 1966 but has been in continuous use by various civic organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, and The OP Shop, as well as some city administrative offices.

**DETAILED DESCRIPTION:**

Lucy F. Simms School sits on an open 7.3-acre site that adjoins the 30-acre city-owned Ralph Sampson Park in southeast Harrisonburg, Virginia. The school building faces west onto Simms Avenue and has a large front lawn with a concrete walk leading to the front entrance (**Photo 1**). A parking area is situated northwest of the building, while a baseball diamond is adjacent to the northeast. Located at the edge of a primarily residential neighborhood, the school is sited fairly close to the south property line that is marked by a sharply rising embankment (**Photo 2**).

Before the construction of Lucy F. Simms School, African-American children attended the Effinger School, a nearby brick building constructed in 1882 and enlarged in 1910. Plans to construct a new school began in 1937 when Federal inspectors deemed Effinger School a “fire

Section   7   Page   2

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

hazard” that was beyond repair.

Forty-five percent of the funding for the Lucy F. Simms School came from the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, while the other 55% came from the City of Harrisonburg and a loan from the Virginia State Literary Fund. The estimated cost of construction was \$100,000.

The plans for the new school were provided by the Virginia Department of Education and after construction bids came in, modifications had to be made to the plan to compensate for cost overruns. It was decided that four rooms (the south wing) were to be left off and maybe added at a later time as needed. Nielson Construction Company of Harrisonburg was awarded the contract. Leftover funds were expended in building the cement walk up to the school and around to the back as well as a roadway to the parking area.<sup>1</sup>

The current building is a two-story, symmetrical, thirteen-bay brick structure on a partially-raised basement. The brick walls are laid in a pattern made up of three rows of stretcher bond brick between a row of alternating headers and stretchers (**Photo 3**). The brickwork on the 1961 addition is similar but has five rows of the stretcher bond between each row of the alternating bond (**Photo 4**). A soldier row of brick is found above the second-story windows and five columns of stacked-bond brick decorate the end bays of the facade. The narrow metal plate on the façade of the 1961 wing was added in the late 1980s to stabilize the walls that were separating from the floor structure and bowing outward. The 16-light steel-frame windows have some fixed and some moveable panes as well as formed concrete sills. The central main entrance of the building is marked by a cast stone parapet etched with the words “Lucy F. Simms School” (**Photo 5**). A single run of concrete stairs with concrete parapet walls rises to the recessed double-leaf entry door topped by a 48-light transom (**Photo 6**).

While the main entrance is raised and on the west side of the building, the school also has other secondary exterior entrances. A ground-level entry on the façade leads to the basement area, currently used by the The OP Shop, a life skills training center for mentally challenged adults. The school also has several entries on the back side: one at each end near the interior staircases and ones off each side of the auditorium area. While the doors themselves are not original, they are protected by original copper hoods or canopies supported by brackets (**Photos 7 and 8**).

Lucy F. Simms School has a flat roof with a short brick parapet, except for the entrance bay

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

which is capped with cast stone. The ballasted membrane roof was installed in the 1990s. The guttering system on the 1939 portion of the school is internal, while the 1961 wing drains to the south edge of the building and down the south side through external rectangular galvanized downspouts.

The floor plan of the school is much as it was when it was first constructed in 1939 and enlarged in 1961. It features an entrance hall that leads into a transverse U-shaped corridor with offices and classrooms off both sides (**Photos 9 and 10**). At both ends of the corridor are a set of steel stairs leading to the second floor and basement levels (**Photo 11**). On the first floor is a two-story gymnasium and auditorium with a raised stage along the back wall (**Photo 12**). Beneath the stage are the former boy's and girl's locker rooms, now used as a police sub-station and electrical room.

The second floor follows the same basic plan of a U-shaped corridor with classrooms off both sides (**Photo 13**). Boy's and girl's bathrooms are located on both levels in the area flanking the entry to the gymnasium. The ground level contains a workshop and what was once the school kitchen. Since the 1970s, these spaces have been somewhat modified for use by the Boys and Girls Club and The OP Shop, but still retain the same basic configuration they originally had.

Most of the original classrooms in the school are still intact, although some have been partitioned (**Photo 14**). The interior wall and floor finishes are fairly intact. The walls are plastered and the corridor, bathroom, and gymnasium walls have yellow glazed Brictile wainscoting. The floors of the corridor and classrooms are covered in Mastic tile; the gymnasium floor is wooden; and floors in the stairs and bathrooms are covered in quarry tile. Dropped ceilings have been placed in the hallways and in some of the rooms in order to accommodate the distribution of building systems.

The first- and second-floor corridors have banks of built-in metal lockers along the east wall that appear original and many of which are still functional. The original clocks and alarm horns in the hallway are still intact as is the bell clock control system in the office. Many of the classrooms retain the original pendant fixtures with milk glass globes. Modern water coolers have been installed in the corridors. Most of the windows have interior double roller blinds, although many of these are in poor condition, and in some cases have been replaced with modern ones. A bronze plaque in the entrance hall wall reminds the visitor that the school was built using funds of the Federal Works Agency and Public Works Administration under U.S. President Franklin D.

**Section**   7   **Page**   4  

Roosevelt.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

In 1961, the side wing that was left off the original plan was constructed because more room was needed. D'Earcy P. Davis Jr., a local architect-engineer was commissioned to design the addition, which was based on the original building and is also of brick construction. From the front elevation, this wing is almost indistinguishable as an addition as it makes the building symmetrical.

The Lucy F. Simms School closed in 1966 but has been in continuous use for the past 37 years by a variety of organizations including the Boys and Girls Club, some city administrative offices, and The OP Shop, a life-skills training center for mentally-challenged adults. The primary alterations have been limited to the partitioning of some of the classroom spaces, especially on the first floor, into smaller offices as well as the insertion of dropped ceilings in the corridor and some of the classrooms to hide modern utilities. It is remarkable how much of the original fabric is intact, however, including the basic floor plan, flooring, Brictile wainscoting, windows, stairs, gymnasium and stage, doors and hardware, lockers, bathroom partitions, and some lighting fixtures. The building is an excellent example of a pre-World-War II-era school for African-Americans funded in part by the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works using stock plans provided by the Virginia Department of Education.

Plans are currently underway to rehabilitate the building using the State and Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program. A sensitive rear addition is also planned that will allow for the expansion of current community programs offered. The Lucy F. Simms School served black youths in the region for close to twenty-seven years, and it continues to serve the community at large today.

**ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Harrisonburg School Board Minutes, June 29, 1938; April 26, 1939.

<sup>1</sup> Lois A. Craig and the staff of the Federal Architecture Project, The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in U. S. Government Buildings, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978, 347.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

**Section   8   Page   5**

**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:**

The Lucy F. Simms School located in Harrisonburg in the heart of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley is significant under Criterion C as an unusually well preserved example of an African-American school constructed in 1938-39 with funds from the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. It was among the final group of such federally funded projects prior to the dissolution of one of the more successful programs established to combat the ravages of the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> The school was named for Lucy F. Simms, an African-American teacher who was born into slavery in 1855 on the very land where the Lucy F. Simms School now stands and had an uninterrupted career as a teacher in the Lucy F. Simms School's two predecessor schools in Harrisonburg. The Lucy F. Simms School's significance also lies in its service to African-Americans, not only within the boundaries of the City of Harrisonburg, but also to black residents of the surrounding counties of Rockingham, Augusta, Page, and Shenandoah. The Lucy F. Simms School continued to house both elementary grades and high school classes for African-American students until 1965/66, when under court-ordered desegregation directives, all students were assigned to previously all-white Harrisonburg schools. Lucy F. Simms School, in addition to being an important educational institution and providing academic and vocational training to several generations of black students, served as a community focal point for a number of social activities and programs for Harrisonburg's African-American community between 1939 and 1966, thus continuing the unbroken delivery of educational and social services associated with its predecessor schools.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

Understanding the significance of the Lucy F. Simms School in the history of the African-American community necessarily depends on knowledge of the roots of Black education in Harrisonburg. According to John W. Wayland, renowned historian of Harrisonburg and the Shenandoah Valley, and Mr. U. G. Wilson, an African-American professor who wrote about Black history in the Harrisonburg area in both 1911 and 1942, public education for African-Americans began in Harrisonburg in 1868 with the establishment of a mission school for newly emancipated negroes. The school was operated by Miss Martha Smith and Miss Phoeby Libby of Augusta, Maine, who were among the large number of men and women from northern states who traveled to the South to provide education to African-American freedmen after the Civil War. Such dedicated teachers were usually sponsored by various organizations such as the Freedmen's

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Section   8   Page   6  

Bureau and the U.S. Christian Commission. The two women instructed some of Harrisonburg's Negro children in a room on an upper floor of the old Scanlon Hotel. Later the school was moved to the basement of the Southern Methodist Episcopal Church and finally in 1870, after Virginia enacted a statewide public system of education, a small school house was built to house the black students. This one-story frame building, measuring only about 25' by 40', stood on a small parcel of land deeded to the "colored citizens of Harrisonburg to be used by them for educational purposes."<sup>2</sup> During the years from 1870 to 1882, Negro students were educated in this tiny wooden structure. The building served as a gathering place for devotional meetings, weekly "socials," and political meetings. The community members often referred to it fondly as "the little old school house by the creek."<sup>3</sup>

Among the teachers who taught in this school house on Effinger Street, many of whom came from as far away as Boston, Winchester, Staunton, and Charlottesville, was Lucy F. Simms. Miss Simms had been born into slavery on the property of Robert Gray known as "Hill Top".<sup>4</sup> It is symbolic that it is on part of this estate where the present Lucy F. Simms School stands. Lucy F. Simms was graduated from Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University) in 1877 where she was a classmate of Booker T. Washington. She returned to the Harrisonburg area where she taught at Zenda, an African-American settlement located just north of Harrisonburg. After a year or two, she began to teach at the tiny frame school house where she taught first and second grades.<sup>5</sup> By 1882, the little school house had become so overcrowded that the school board, in consultation with leading African-American citizens of the community, secured \$2000 from the town council, and a site for a new school on Effinger Street was selected. The two-story, four-room brick building was soon completed and served the black community until the construction of the Lucy F. Simms School in 1938-39. Lucy F. Simms served from 1883-1884 as acting principal and served as assistant principal at various times during her long tenure which ended with her sudden death in 1934. The long-time superintendent, W. H. Keister, said that Lucy F. Simms never missed a single day of school during the 55 years she taught in Harrisonburg.<sup>6</sup> Miss Simms's obituary in the Daily News Record on July 11, 1934, entitled "Beloved Colored Teacher Dies," reports that the Harrisonburg City Council chose to honor her by naming the "colored athletic field [then] being constructed by the city" for her. It is this same parcel on which the present Lucy F. Simms School was constructed in 1938-39 with her name being selected for the new school. Members of the Harrisonburg School Board served as honorary pallbearers at her funeral, a measure of her central role in the history of African-American education in Harrisonburg. A school history prepared by Jane Hawkins indicates that Lucy Simms bequeathed a sum of money to build a replacement for the Effinger School. Over

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

**Section   8   Page   7**

her long career, Miss Simms taught over 1,800 students and was known as a strong disciplinarian to the young students in her first- and second-grade classes.<sup>7</sup>

The Effinger Street School, like its immediate predecessor, served as an important gathering place for the African-American residents of Harrisonburg. It did not, however, have any sort of a large room suitable for large occasions such as graduations. In 1884, the Effinger School administrators sought to gain permission to use the Town Hall for graduation exercises. Their request was denied by the Town Council, a measure of the discrimination suffered by African-Americans at that time.<sup>8</sup> By 1908, it became evident that there was a serious need for more space to accommodate the large number of students. Two more classrooms and an assembly hall were added, essentially doubling the size of the Effinger School. Work on the addition and remodeling was completed by 1910.<sup>9</sup> The curriculum was a strong academic one, with vocational courses offered as well. During this time period, on a national level there was a strong impetus for inclusion of vocational instruction in the curriculum. During the period 1905-1910, there was a movement to provide more education in the "trades," as a result of the rise of industrialization and the need for skilled labor. This would have been consonant with Booker T. Washington's call for vocational education for African-American students on a national level. In 1917, a federal law was enacted providing specific aid to support expanded vocational education in all schools.<sup>10</sup> Under the leadership of Professor W. N. P. Harris in 1915, Effinger was accredited as a high school, and additional departments were added, including music, home economics, and industrial arts.<sup>11</sup> But Effinger continued its academic subjects, including history, government, English, and mathematics.

Among some of the more interesting documents associated with the Effinger School was a student publication known as "The Chatterbox." A letter to the editor in a 1935 issue points out that "the junior class in American History is taking an eight-week course in Negro history." This course led to the creation by the students of a "Who's Who" that recognized African-American achievement in the arts and sciences, sports, education, music, and literature. This publication was presented to Luther P. Jackson, chairman of the history department at Virginia State College for Negroes in Petersburg.<sup>12</sup> Letters to the editor called for more music in the curriculum as well as more physical education. In the same issue is a report on a presentation about local government made by the mayor of the City of Harrisonburg to the senior class in which he "concluded his speech with an earnest appeal to the students to become familiar with the local form of government and the methods of voting. This, he said, is the duty of every prospective citizen."<sup>13</sup> This is particularly significant in light of the Commonwealth of Virginia's not-so-

**Section   8   Page   8**

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

subtle efforts based on its 1902 Constitution to discourage both poor whites and African-Americans from exercising their right to vote.

By early 1937, the Effinger Street School was in very bad condition and considered a fire hazard. The Harrisonburg School Board approved a resolution on January 7, 1937, to file an "application to the federal government [sic] through the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works for a grant to aid in financing the construction of a new Negro Elementary and High School and designating Superintendent W. H. Keister to furnish such information as the government may request." At the regular February meeting of the school board a letter from "Raymond V. Long, Supervisor of School Buildings for the State Board of Education, who is preparing plans and specifications for the contemplated new Negro School in Harrisonburg was read," indicating that outside help might be needed to help in the preparation of the plans. By the school board's April meeting, the superintendent was reporting that all forms requesting a grant from the Public Works Administration equaling 45% of the cost of the new school were in order and had been approved both in Washington and by the State Board of Education. He reported that all were heartily in favor of the project but were doubtful that funds would be forthcoming because of reductions in federal spending. He pointed out, however, that since the old building was considered a "fire hazard," it had been put on the approved list of the federal government with hopes it would be budgeted for by the current Congress. Apparently, Congress did enact the Public Works Administration Extension Act of 1937 which provided no new funding except for projects already authorized. Evidently, Harrisonburg submitted its proposal before the deadline of September, 1938, and, therefore, was among the last such projects that could receive such support from the federal government.<sup>14</sup> At the December 1937 school board meeting, the superintendent reported that there "seemed to be little chance of receiving a \$45,000 grant from the PWA funds to be used in erecting a Negro school on the Lucy F. Simms Athletic Field," the first official indication that was to be the site for the new school. In February of 1938, the school board, obviously aware of the fire danger in the old school, discussed acquiring a fire escape from the Rockingham Memorial Hospital. But by May, the outlook for the new school changed dramatically. The superintendent reported that on April 23, 1938, the federal government made an outright grant to the city school board to "aid in building and furnishing a new Negro Elementary and High School...at a total cost of \$100,000." The city had secured a loan of \$50,000 from the State Literary Fund and \$5,000 was to come from the city. The Board then debated whether it wished to ask city council for the \$5,000 and ultimately decided to present the matter to the city council. The chairman of the school board, Mr. Lineweaver, explained to council about the grant and indicated that the school board "did not feel like recommending the

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

expenditure of this amount (\$5,000) for the number of Negro children in the city,” but that the decision was up to council. One of the councilmen stated that the present school building had been condemned. He also explained that the \$45,000 grant from the government had been secured “with the aid of Senator Harry F. Byrd and Congressman Willis A. Robertson,” who had cooperated in every way to secure this grant, and he recommended that the council approve the local funding commitment. Finally when the vote was taken, only one councilman voted against accepting the grant and the city’s commitment. A called meeting of the school board resulted in a resolution accepting the “offer of the United States to the School Board of the City of Harrisonburg, Virginia, to aid by way of a grant in financing the construction of a new Negro Elementary and High School...”<sup>15</sup> Attached to the minutes of the school board was the letter acknowledging the acceptance of the terms and call for the completion of the school no later than June 30, 1939.

Over the next two months, the school board ascertained the hourly rate for all those who would work on the project and accepted bids from various contractors to carry out the work. The Rockingham National Bank was selected to receive all the funds for the project. After making some deductions in the scope of the project, a low bid of \$92,700 (excluding equipping and furnishing the school) was accepted from the Neilson Construction Company of Harrisonburg. Work began on July 9, 1938, and the contract called for completion of the new school building in 200 consecutive days. It was agreed that the school would not be ready for any portion of the 1938-39 school year and was planned for opening in September of 1939. The minutes state: “This is the only school that will offer high school work to Negroes in this section; it is probable that pupils will want to take advantage of the high school and vocational work. If they do, it will be necessary to require a tuition fee to be paid by the pupils, the county or some arrangement made through the State Board of Education.” It is presumed that this fee would only apply to students from outside the City of Harrisonburg. Finally at the school board meeting of February 6, 1939, the superintendent reported that the Lucy F. Simms Negro School was expected to be completed by March 1, 1939.<sup>16</sup> At the April meeting, it was agreed that funds derived from the sale of the old Effinger School would be used to build sidewalks and to landscape the new Lucy F. Simms School. Awards were made to various contractors to furnish the lockers, desks, chairs, window shades, and other furnishings as well as equipment for the home economic and woodworking shops.

Among the most interesting reports attached to the school board’s minutes relates to the salaries for administrative personnel and teachers in the Harrisonburg schools. The principal of the

**Section   8   Page  10**

Simms Elementary and High School in 1939 was paid one-half of what was paid to the

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

Harrisonburg (white) high school and \$150 less than the principal of the white elementary school. It did appear, however, that the teachers at Lucy F. Simms were paid on a par with many of the white teachers. It is very likely that this discrepancy in pay was repeated throughout the state.<sup>17</sup>

The new elementary and high school opened for students in September of 1939. A front page article in the Daily Record of September 12, 1939, reported that School Superintendent William H. Keister announced the opening of the new Lucy F. Simms School; in his comment he stressed the vocational training curriculum for the new school, but he went on to announce that Lucy F. Simms School would “also continue a department for students who wish to continue in institutions of higher learning.”<sup>18</sup> This public statement by the school superintendent to provide academic and college preparatory courses for African-American students in the Harrisonburg area reflects the continuation of the strong tradition of concerted commitment to diversity of classes and programs that had been demonstrated in the Effinger School that preceded Lucy F. Simms School.

A measure of the loyalty of Lucy F. Simms’s graduates are the ongoing reunions held to remember the school. One graduate is quoted in a newspaper article as saying that she and other Simms alumni “have fond memories of a school that was a part of the community and where black people – though excluded from better schools and jobs – had something to call their own.” The new school served about 300 students each year, from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. It provided space for a number of activities, including basketball games, the only sport offered to the students, and musical stage shows.<sup>19</sup> The Lucy F. Simms School was considered one of the best African-American schools in the Shenandoah Valley. A measure of its excellent reputation is reflected in the areas that sent students long distances to attend the school: Elkton and Bridgewater in Rockingham County; Mount Jackson and New Market in Shenandoah County; and Luray in Page County. Some of the students from outside the city came by bus on a daily basis; others boarded with friends or relatives in Harrisonburg. Many of the schools in the outlying areas did not have grades beyond ninth grade, forcing their African-American residents to attend Lucy F. Simms, the only centrally located consolidated school for their race. Lucy F. Simms School was fully accredited by the State Board of Education and offered essentially the same courses offered in the white high schools. Many of Simms’s graduates went on to attend and graduate from primarily African-American colleges throughout the mid Atlantic.<sup>20</sup>

**Section   8   Page   11**

Following the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that marked the beginning of desegregation throughout the South in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* [347, U.S. 483]

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

(1954) and which reversed Plessy v. Ferguson [163 U.S. 537] (1896) which had said that “segregation did not constitute discrimination and the Negro was not deprived of equal protection of the laws under the Fourteenth Amendment”<sup>21</sup> – the so-called “separate but equal” doctrine -- Virginia launched a decade-long effort to resist integration of its public schools. However, when all political and legal efforts were exhausted, Harrisonburg, like most other Virginia school districts complied with the desegregation orders. High school students from Simms were transferred to the all white Harrisonburg High School in 1965 and the elementary school students were transferred the following years to other previously all white elementary schools. According to teachers and students who were interviewed by students in a 1993 history of Harrisonburg schools, there was little or no animosity or problems with integration, and none of the teachers interviewed could recall any altercations at all. An examination of the local Daily News Record for September of 1965 reveals no problems with what was referred to as the “merger [of Simms] with Harrisonburg High School.” The paper reported that 70 students from Simms transferred to Harrisonburg High for a total enrollment of 925 students, with the balance of its high school students returning to the regular county high schools in their localities. Although Virginia’s public schools were assigned students on a “freedom of choice” basis at that time, there is no indication that the African-American high school students from Simms went anywhere except to the previously all white Harrisonburg High School.<sup>22</sup> The peaceful integration of the Simms students may have been due to the fact that the Harrisonburg community, with such a long history of commitment to providing education for all its students-- black and white-- as exemplified by the critical vote in 1938 to accept the financial obligation in order to accept federal funds to construct the Lucy F. Simms School, was better prepared to comply with the new law of the land. Or, perhaps it can be attributed to a strong African-American community in the city that never lost sight of the importance of education for its children.

The Lucy F. Simms School continued to provide various services to the community such as housing the Boys and Girls Club of Harrisonburg, The OP Shop, and providing space for some city offices. It stands today as an important symbol of Harrisonburg’s African-American community and its commitment to educational excellence and community service. Currently plans call for its rehabilitation as well as expansion to meet the continued needs of its present occupants.

**Section   8   Page   12**

**ENDNOTES**

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

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<sup>1</sup> Lois A. Craig and the staff of the Federal Architecture Project, The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in U. S. Government Buildings, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978, 347.

<sup>2</sup> U. G. Wilson, "Negro Schools in Harrisonburg," in John W. Wayland, Historic Harrisonburg, Harrisonburg: C. J. Carrier Company, 1973 (reprinted from 1942 and revised from 1911), 345-346.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>4</sup> John W. Wayland, Historic Harrisonburg, 350.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Shenk, "The Women Behind the Lucy Simms School Controversy," Daily News Record, July 15, 2001, 16.

<sup>6</sup> U. G. Wilson, "Negro Schools in Harrisonburg," 350.

<sup>7</sup> Daily News Record, July 11, 1934, 1.

<sup>8</sup> John Cale, "The History of African-American Schools in Harrisonburg, 1868-1939," unpublished manuscript which is a part of "A Look Back at 100 Years of Harrisonburg City Schools" prepared by honors students of Mary Strickler's Honors English 10 (1993)..

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ellwood Patterson Cubberley, The Historic of Educational Practices and Progress, considered as a phase of the development and spread of Western Civilization, Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1948, 809-811.

<sup>11</sup> Cale, unpublished manuscript

<sup>12</sup> The Chatterbox, Effinger School. February, 1935,( vol. 1, no. 2), 5.

<sup>13</sup> The Chatterbox, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Fein Isakoff, "The Public Works Administration," Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, Volume XXIII, no. 3, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1938, 151-152.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the School Board of the City of Harrisonburg January 7, 1937; February 1, 1937; April 5, 1937; December 6, 1937; February 7, 1938; May 2, 1938; May 4, 1938. Minutes of the City Council of the City of Harrisonburg, May 2, 1938.

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of the School Board of the City of Harrisonburg, February 6, 1939; March 6, 1939.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. July 10, 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Daily News Record, September 12, 1939, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Shenk, "Simms Alumni Remember Beautiful School," Daily News Record, June 15, 2001, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Kristin Webb and Katherine Gearing, "Simms School 1936-1947, The Black Harrisonburg High School," unpublished manuscript which is a part of "A Look Back at 100 Years of Harrisonburg City Schools, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Richard B. Morris, Editor, Encyclopedia of American History. New York: Harper and Row, 1961, 494, 500.

<sup>22</sup> Daily News Record, August 30, 1965, 1; September 1, 1965, 1.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Section   9   Page  13 

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Section  9 and 10  Page  14

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:**

The nominated boundaries include all the land currently associated with the Lucy F. Simms School as shown on the City of Harrisonburg Tax Map 33 plot E-9.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:**

The nominated property includes the entire acreage historically associated with the Lucy F. Simms School tract.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

### PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are of:

**LUCY F. SIMMS SCHOOL**

Location: Harrisonburg, Virginia

VDHR File Number: 115-5035

Date of photograph: April 2003

Photographer: Maral S. Kalbian

All negatives are stored at the Department of Historic Resources Archives unless noted.

SUBJECT: View of school and setting

VIEW: Facing northeast

NEG. NO.: 20483

PHOTO 1 of 14

SUBJECT: View of rear of school and setting

VIEW: Facing southwest

NEG. NO.: 20482

PHOTO 2 of 14

SUBJECT: View of front of school

VIEW: Facing east

NEG. NO.: 20481

PHOTO 3 of 14

SUBJECT: View of front and side wing of school

VIEW: Facing northeast

NEG. NO.: 20481

PHOTO 4 of 14

SUBJECT: Detail of parapet above entrance

VIEW: Facing east

NEG. NO.: 20482

PHOTO 5 of 14

Section \_\_Photos\_\_ Page \_\_16\_\_

SUBJECT: Detail of main entrance

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

VIEW: Facing east  
NEG. NO.: 20481  
PHOTO 6 of 14

SUBJECT: Rear view  
VIEW: Facing northwest  
NEG. NO.: 20481  
PHOTO 7 of 14

SUBJECT: Rear view  
VIEW: Facing southwest  
NEG. NO.: 20481  
PHOTO 8 of 14

SUBJECT: Entrance hall  
VIEW: Facing west toward entrance doors  
NEG. NO.: 20483  
PHOTO 9 of 14

SUBJECT: First-floor corridor  
VIEW: Facing south  
NEG. NO.: 20482  
PHOTO 10 of 14

SUBJECT: Stair at south end of school  
VIEW: Facing northeast  
NEG. NO.: 20482  
PHOTO 11 of 14

SUBJECT: Gymnasium/auditorium, looking toward stage  
VIEW: Facing east  
NEG. NO.: 20481  
PHOTO 12 of 14

**Section \_\_Photos\_\_ Page \_\_17\_\_**

SUBJECT: Second-floor corridor  
VIEW: Facing south

NPS Form 10-900-a  
(8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Lucy F. Simms School  
Harrisonburg, Virginia**

NEG. NO.: 20482  
PHOTO 13 of 14

SUBJECT: Typical classroom (2<sup>nd</sup> floor, west side of corridor)  
VIEW: Facing northwest  
NEG. NO.: 20482  
PHOTO 14 of 14