

**THEMATIC EVALUATION
OF COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDINGS IN
SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA**

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PREFACE

The Roanoke Regional Preservation Office of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources has recently prepared state and national register nominations for three schools in southwest Virginia: Castlerun School in Russell County, Tacoma School in Wise County, and the Edgar A. Long Building of the Christiansburg Industrial Institute in Montgomery County. No longer in educational use, all three schools serve or will serve as community centers. Other schools in Montgomery and Craig counties and in Roanoke City now serve in adaptive use as housing for the elderly. Still other schools, like Roland E. Cook Elementary in Vinton, Roanoke County, have been recently vacated. The survival of vacant schools like Roland E. Cook now turns on implementation of viable plans for adaptive reuse.

Most Virginia public schools built between the turn of the twentieth century and World War II were consolidated schools that replaced earlier one-room schools. The pre-World War II consolidated schools in turn became obsolete during the Cold War era when county school systems consolidated again and built new, larger, and more centrally located middle and high schools. Many of the pre-World War II consolidated schools have been demolished. Others stand vacant and await demolition or adaptation for new uses. Many are well-built structures that played important roles in the education and the community life of the families they served. When schools like Tacoma and E.A. Long

are owned by nonprofit alumni groups and receive Virginia Landmarks designation, they become eligible for Virginia General Assembly grants for rehabilitation. If schools like Roland E. Cook are found eligible and listed in the state and national registers, they can apply for state and federal tax credits that can save up to 45 percent of allowable costs for rehabilitation. This report discusses the types and functions of public schools in Virginia built between Reconstruction and World War II in order to establish criteria for historic designation for these significant resources.

The report is based upon a review of Ann McCleary's thematic nomination of public schools in Augusta County, Virginia, and upon a review of Virginia Department of Education photographs and architectural plans for public schools built primarily between 1920 and 1950. Upon examination of McCleary's nomination and the Virginia Department of Education school building photographs and plans, it was discovered that those sources provided information on county schools, but the photographs and plans did not document city schools for the major urban centers of Portsmouth, Norfolk, Hampton, Richmond, Alexandria, and Roanoke. Because of the limited range of available information, this report addresses county schools while offering one brief aside on city schools.

The report presents brief thematic contexts for public education in Virginia between 1870 and 1950, discusses the evolution of school building plans over the period, and addresses the important community service functions served by some of the schools. Because Virginia public schools were segregated during the entire period of this study, the report also makes brief but necessary reference to an ethnic heritage theme for schools built for the education of African American students.

Many people have provided invaluable assistance in this study. The idea for a study of consolidated public schools was first suggested by Leslie Giles while she worked as the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office architectural historian. Former Roland E. Cook Elementary principal Deedie Kagey sought historic designation for that school—denied because of altered windows—and shared her doctoral research on public schools in the Upper Roanoke Valley. Robert Carter pointed out the applicability of Ann McCleary’s excellent study of Augusta County schools. Suzanne Durham informed Virginia Department of Historic Resources employees about the availability of the Virginia Department of Education school building photographs after they were digitized by the Library of Virginia. Selden Richardson of the Library of Virginia made available the remarkable collection of Virginia Department of Education Architectural Drawings and Plans, which he accessioned and inventoried by 1998. Richardson’s finding aid to the original school building drawings is appended to this report. Jack Zehmer shared his concise memories of education and community life at the consolidated Sunnyside-McKenney School in Dinwiddie County, a school he attended for twelve years beginning in 1948. Susan Zorn compiled the comprehensive inventory of county school photographs for the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office service area. The inventory of school photographs is also appended to this report.

INTRODUCTION

This report combines a review of Ann McCleary’s Thematic Nomination of Public Schools in Augusta County, Virginia, with an overview of Virginia Department of Education School Buildings Service Architectural Drawings from the 1920s to the 1940s.

The report then examines the Library of Virginia digitized Virginia Department of Education School Buildings Service Photograph Collection of more than 500 school buildings in southwest Virginia. The study begins with a summation of McCleary's excellent analysis, looks at Virginia Department of Education plans for post-1920 school buildings, examines the school buildings photograph collection, and concludes with observations on National Register Criteria for Evaluation. The report summary presents observations on potential uses of the state school building plans and the digitized public school building photograph collection for architectural and historical research.

THEMATIC NOMINATION OF AUGUSTA COUNTY, VIRGINIA, SCHOOLS

McCleary identifies three categories of Virginia public school buildings constructed between 1870 and 1940: *one-room schools* built after the establishment of the free public school system from 1870 to around 1910; *two- and three-room schools* built between around 1880 and 1910; and *four-or-more-room consolidated schools* built from around 1900 to 1940.

One-Room Schools

Following Reconstruction, Virginia's Underwood Constitution required the establishment of public schools that were to open for the 1870-1871 school year. The plan called for schools within walking distance of every student in the state. Rural communities quickly adapted and built simple one-room, rectangular, gable-roofed structures, generally with a gable end entrance. The majority of one-room schools were of log construction during the 1870s; a few were built of brick. From 1880 to 1910 almost all one-room schools

were of frame construction. Decorative elements were generally limited to eave brackets. Light came from sets of six-over-six or nine-over-nine windows on the side walls. Interiors were also plain, with painted blackboards across the gable end opposite the entrance. Heat came from wood or coal stoves vented by stove flues.

One-Story Two- and Three-Room Schools Before 1910

After 1880 and until around 1910, rural communities began to establish graded two- or three-room frame schools, some enlarged with a one-room addition to an original single room, others built initially as two-room schools. One-room additions to one-room schools could be butted to a gable end, forming a long, narrow, rectangular two-room structure. Alternatively, the addition could be placed as an L at right angle to the original room. Schools originally built as two-room structures were usually unornamented frame construction and single pile in plan with a central partition that divided the building into two rooms of equal size. Central or adjoining doors, flanked by paired windows to each side, provided access and light. One stove and stove flues generally heated both rooms. The two-room structures were known as graded schools, with one room for grades one through three and a second room for grades four through seven. When added, the third room was often used for high school instruction.

Two-Story Consolidated Schools of Four or More Rooms Before 1920

Progressive Era concern for modernization of country life accompanied a new period of consolidated school construction. President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission recommended new schools that could serve as centers for community life.

Between 1900 and around 1910 Virginia communities constructed frame I-house, two-story, single-pile, central-passage schools with two rooms on each floor. Between around 1910 and 1920, brick, double-pile, central-entrance, two-story schools provided eight instead of four rooms for instruction.

One-Story Consolidated Schools After 1920

By 1920 Virginia's State Board of Education established a School Building Service that provided local school boards with plans and specifications for a new standard school building that was designed with classrooms placed around a central study hall/assembly room. The assembly room doubled as space for community activities, thus fulfilling community service functions identified as important by the Roosevelt Country Life Commission. At the same time that the Virginia School Buildings Service began to provide standard school building plans during the 1920s, the State Board of Education managed to consolidate small school districts, several per county, into a more unified system of countywide school boards, an arrangement that facilitated implementation of State School Board policies and adoption of standard school building plans.

The new standard plan for consolidated schools discussed by McCleary provided for a one-story design with a central assembly-study hall fronted and often flanked by classrooms. Generally of brick construction, the one-story schools were built above a partial, or sometimes a full, raised basement. In the standard plan provided by the State Board of Education in 1921, a central entrance opened onto a foyer that provided access to the assembly room and to front façade classrooms on each side of the foyer. The assembly room provided direct access to all bordering classrooms, while side exits

opened directly from classrooms onto the school yard. The standard plan called for placement of a heating system and bathrooms in the raised basement. The elimination of outdoor privies and the provision of a central assembly hall embodied changes that made the new consolidated schools centers for progressive advances in rural life.

TWO-STORY CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL PLANS AFTER 1920

Though not recorded by McCleary in Augusta County, many consolidated schools built in southwest Virginia between World War I and World War II featured two-story variants of the one-story brick school building plan with classrooms around a central auditorium. A few plans for two-story consolidated schools in southwest Virginia made no provision for an auditorium, probably because an auditorium was already available in an adjacent school building.

The following sample of two-story consolidated schools in southwest Virginia is drawn from Virginia Department of Education School Buildings Service Architectural Plans that have been conserved and inventoried by Selden Richardson at the Library of Virginia. Haysi School in Dickenson County, built in 1928, Narrows High School in Giles County, built in 1930, and Meadows of Dan School in Patrick County, built in 1936—all had two-story plans with classrooms arranged around a central auditorium. Chatham School in Pittsylvania County, built in 1938, also had a two-story plan with classrooms arranged in a U plan, but without the central auditorium. Fieldale High School in Henry County, built on a sloping lot in 1941, had an atypical one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half-story plan with two rows of classrooms aligned along a central hallway and no auditorium. All of brick construction, these schools ranged in exterior detailing

from Art Deco for Haysi, to Gothic Revival for Narrows High School, to Georgian Revival for Meadows of Dan and Chatham, to Colonial Revival for Fieldale High School. Most of these schools also featured specialized classroom space utilized for libraries or science laboratories. Thus for the period between 1920 and 1950, in addition to the one-story brick consolidated schools in Augusta County discussed by McCleary, which had classrooms placed around a central assembly space, rural southwest Virginia also featured two-story schools of similar plan, as well as other two-story plans without assembly halls.*

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SCHOOL BUILDINGS SERVICE PHOTOGRAPHS, 1920s – 1950

In the 1920s the Virginia State Board of Education began to assemble photographs of public schools in Virginia to record the work of the new School Buildings Service program that sought to reform plans for the design and construction of consolidated schools throughout the state. A total of 3,100 public school photographs have been accessioned by the Library of Virginia. The collection has been digitized and arranged alphabetically by unit of government. Each photograph is numbered, the photograph is titled by the name of the school, and the dates of photographs are provided when known.

*An account of school building plans should note that schools built in Virginia cities featured more elaborate two- and three-story plans with classrooms arranged along both sides of central corridors, and with additional design provisions for large balconied auditoriums and shops for vocational instruction. Such architectural plans are summarized in the Multiple Property Listing for Public Schools of Richmond, Virginia, 1869-1930, and are evidenced in the design of Roanoke City's Jefferson High School, a building completed in 1924 and currently undergoing substantial state and federal tax credit rehabilitation.

This report has examined every photograph of schools within the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office service area and has used this information to create an inventory of the school photographs. The inventory is arranged by unit of government, school name, and photograph number. Each photographed school is then listed in the inventory by number of rooms, type of construction (log, frame, and brick), number of stories, and date of photograph (when known).

Review of the inventory of school photographs for southwest Virginia quickly prompted cautionary observations about the comprehensiveness of the photographic record. Temporally, some of the photographs are dated and some are not; date of photograph does not indicate date of construction (unless the photograph is dated and shows construction under progress); and a dated photograph provides no evidence of whether the photographed school is still standing. Spatially, coverage of photographed schools is highly erratic. The inventory includes photographs of 219 schools in Pittsylvania County, 43 percent of all the schools photographed in the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office service area. Less than 10 schools are photographed in each of nine counties in southwest Virginia, and none are recorded in the counties of Giles, Russell, and Smyth. Moreover, a total of 42 schools are recorded in the cities of Bristol, Buena Vista, Danville, Martinsville, and Radford, but none are recorded for the city of Roanoke, by far the most populous city in the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office service area. Thematically, school names identify 9, or less than 2 percent, of the photographed schools as buildings for the instruction of black students, certainly a figure that substantially under represents the percentage of black schools in southwest Virginia.

Having noted the serious temporal, spatial, and thematic shortcomings of the school building photograph collection, this report now presents a cautionary summary of the fragmentary findings that can be drawn from the inventory of school photographs in southwest Virginia. Review of the inventory of school photographs provided the following counts for more than 500 schools recorded in the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office service area. The collection contained photographs of 84 one-room schools in southwest Virginia; 10 were of log construction, and 74 were of frame construction. The collection contained photographs of 118 one-story, two- and three-room schools; 17 were of brick construction, and 101 were of frame construction. The collection contained photographs of 73 one-story schools of four or more rooms; 55 were of brick construction, and 18 were of frame construction. Presumably most of the 55 brick schools in this one-story, four-or-more-room category are representative of the post-1920, one-story consolidated schools with central assembly halls. The collection contained photographs of 239 two-or-more-story schools of four or more rooms; 174 were of brick construction, and 65 were of frame construction. Presumably many of the 174 two-or-more-story brick schools are representative of the post-1920 multistory plans provided by the Virginia Board of Education School Building Service.

Perhaps a more useful analysis can be made for Pittsylvania County, where the photographic record of public schools appears to be most comprehensive. The school photograph collection recorded images of 219 schools in Pittsylvania County, with most photograph dates ranging from the 1920s through the 1940s. (In 1938 the Virginia State Planning Board produced a Pittsylvania County study that enumerated 140 schools in use in the county at that date; this figure may roughly represent the 219 total of photographed

schools, less the 82 one room schools no longer in use by 1938.) Of the 219 schools photographed in Pittsylvania County, 82 (38 percent) were one-story, one-room schools; 10 of the one-room schools were of log construction, and 72 were of frame construction. Of the 219 schools photographed in Pittsylvania County, 66 (30 percent) were one-story, two- or three-room schools; 62 of the one-story, two- or three-room schools were of frame construction, and the remaining 4 were of brick construction. Of the 219 photographed schools in Pittsylvania County, 19 (9 percent) were one-story schools with four or more rooms; 12 of the one-story schools with four or more rooms were of brick construction, and the remaining 7 were of frame construction. Of the 219 photographed schools in Pittsylvania County, 52 (24 percent) were two-or-more-story schools of four or more rooms; 34 of the multistory schools were of brick construction, and the remaining 18 were of frame construction. Thus in Pittsylvania County, where school photography records between 1920 and 1950 are far more comprehensive than for other units of government in the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office service area, about two-fifths of the schools recorded were one-room buildings presumably built before 1910; about three-tenths were one-story schools of two or three rooms, presumably built between 1880 and 1910; about one-tenth were one-story schools of four or more rooms, presumably built after 1920 with classrooms arranged around a central assembly hall; and about one-quarter were two-or-more-story schools of four or more rooms, mostly built after 1920.

NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS

The National Register Bulletin *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* states that “for a property to qualify for the National Register it must meet one of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation by: Being associated with an important historic context, and Retaining historic integrity of those features necessary to convey its significance.”

Public school buildings in Virginia are potentially eligible for historic designation under Criterion A as representative of a pattern of events that made a significant contribution to the development of education in the state from 1870 to 1950. The historic context for education for county public schools in Virginia begins in 1870 with the establishment of a public school system, a system initially served by one-room schools. Beginning in the 1880s, graded schools of two or three rooms provided education for students grouped by class and age. After 1920 standard plans for consolidated schools with classrooms around a central auditorium implemented Progressive Era concerns for school reform. Social history becomes a relevant historic context for Virginia schools when consolidated school auditoriums and other assembly rooms provided space that served as community centers for rural life. Ethnic heritage becomes a significant context when the segregated public school system provided school buildings for the education of Virginia’s African American students.

Public school buildings in Virginia may also be eligible for historic designation under Criterion C as architecturally significant examples of Virginia Board of Education standard school building designs. These designs are well documented in the Library of

Virginia collection of Virginia Department of Education School Buildings Service
Architectural Drawings.

Integrity of potentially eligible school buildings must be evaluated in terms of location, setting, and architectural design. Eligible schools should retain their historic character of setting, access, and school grounds. Design considerations are also important. Eligible schools should retain original massing, floor plans, surface materials, and ornamental detailing; retention of original fenestration is particularly important.

McCleary evaluated architectural significance under Criterion C in terms of the group of educational resources surveyed in Augusta County. One-room schools were evaluated in terms of integrity of essential features of design and function. Interior alterations were judged to be less important than exterior alterations. Two- and three-room schools had a relatively low survival rate and were evaluated in terms of integrity of interior design and exterior fenestration, materials, and workmanship. One-story consolidated schools of four or more rooms were more plentiful and were evaluated more rigorously in terms of integrity, workmanship, and materials. McCleary also gave more weight to considerations of historic context under Criterion A to determine eligibility of the one-story consolidated school because of the higher rate of survival of buildings of that plan.

Jack Zehmer, who attended the Sunnyside-McKenney School in Dinwiddie County, a consolidated one-story school with classrooms around a central auditorium, argues that all such schools that survive with reasonable architectural integrity should be considered eligible for historic designation because of the significant roles those schools played as centers of rural community life. Zehmer's account of Sunnyside-McKenney

School, which he attended from 1948 to 1960, provides valuable insight into the combined architectural and historical significance of such rural consolidated schools. Sunnyside-McKenney was built in the early 1930s with subsequent additions in the late 1930s and the 1950s. The school was built with School Building Service plans as a modification of the early 1920s one-story plan with classrooms around a central assembly hall. At Sunnyside-McKenney an interior hall ran between the classrooms and the central auditorium. The hall butted on the front of the auditorium but the sides of the auditorium were free-standing. This plan provided open space and light for side hall and auditorium side windows, and the entire building was configured as a W. A well-equipped cafeteria was housed in the raised basement. After its series of additions, the school had perhaps a dozen classrooms with special rooms for a library, a science laboratory, and business education. The school provided education for grades one through twelve with separate front corner entrances for the grade school and the high school. School dances were held in the cafeteria, which was also used by the community for Ruritan meetings, for annual meetings of the local bank, and for other fund-raising events and community meetings. The central auditorium had 325 fixed seats and a complete stage with a grand piano, stage lights, and curtains, all in use by the 1950s. Community civic performances were held in the auditorium, including pageants and community Christmas programs. Dinwiddie County consolidated all three white high schools in the mid-1960s, and Sunnyside-McKenney became an elementary school. The school was demolished around 1980 when a new, smaller elementary school was built on its site, because “the flat roof of the old school leaked.” Because the new school lacked meeting space adequate to house civic activities, the new school building ceased to function as a center for rural

community life. Rural consolidated schools fulfilled important roles in the education and civic life of rural communities in Virginia for at least two generations of students who attended and for their families whose community life centered there. Though Sunnyside-McKenney no longer survives, Zehmer's account of student and community life there presents solid testimony for the educational and social significance of such rural consolidated schools built in the 1920s and 1930s. Because of their important educational and social contexts, those county consolidated schools constructed between World War I and World War II that survive today with reasonable integrity should receive strong consideration as valuable resources eligible for nomination to the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

SUMMARY

This report briefly documents the progression of plans for public school buildings in Virginia counties from 1870 to 1950. One-room schools were built between 1870 and 1910: most one-room schools of log construction were built from 1870 to 1880; most one-room schools of frame construction were built from 1880 to 1910. One-story two- and three-room frame graded schools were built from after 1880 to around 1910. From around 1900 to around 1910, two-story four-room frame schools were built using an I-house plan. Two-story, brick, double-pile, central-entrance, eight-room schools were built from around 1910 to 1920. One-story consolidated schools with four or more classrooms placed around a central auditorium were built after 1920 using State Board of Education standard plans. The post-1920 one-story consolidated school plan was refined

in the 1930s for larger schools with an interior hall that provided access to classrooms and with lighting space between the side halls and the auditorium. Two-story consolidated schools with classrooms around a central auditorium were built in the late 1920s and the 1930s.

The fragmentary nature of the Virginia Department of Education School Buildings Service photographs belies efforts at rigorous quantification. But examination of the more comprehensive record of school photographs for Pittsylvania County suggests that relatively few one-room school buildings are likely to survive, particularly those of log construction. Two-story frame school buildings never constituted more than 12 percent of the school buildings reviewed for this report, and their survival rate is likely to be very low. For such scarce resources, consideration of exterior architectural integrity should be sufficient to determine eligibility for historic designation when the buildings are also evaluated in terms of their significant association with public school education in Virginia.

One- and two-story consolidated schools with central auditoriums should be evaluated for historic designation in terms of their architectural integrity as examples of Virginia Department of Education school building plans. Consolidated schools with central auditoriums should also be evaluated for designation in terms of their educational significance because they embody State School Board efforts to standardize and reform instruction for Virginia students between World War I and World War II. Consolidated schools with central auditoriums should also be considered for historic designation because of the significant role they played in the implementation of Progressive Era

reforms that sought to make county public schools significant centers for the enhancement of rural community life.

In closing, this report notes the importance of the Library of Virginia collections of public school architectural plans and photographs for architects and architectural historians who seek to document and rehabilitate historic schools. The architectural plans present measured drawings, elevations, plans, and details for all of the buildings listed in the finding aid prepared by Selden Richardson and appended to this report. Where designed buildings survive, these architectural plans can be used for documentation and review of plans for tax credit applications for certified rehabilitation. Likewise, the school photograph collection inventory appended to this report can be used to provide documentation for buildings that no longer stand, such as the old plantation house at the Christiansburg Industrial Institute. School photographs of buildings that do survive can be used to document architectural ornamentation, such as door surrounds and gable treatments, which can be used to return rehabilitated schools to their original appearance. Architects and architectural historians are well advised to consult these plans and photographs whenever they study or readapt documented public school buildings in Virginia.

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