PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for INDIVIDUAL PROPERTIES

DHR No. (to be completed by DHR staff) _______101-5013______________________

Purpose of Evaluation
Please use the following space to explain briefly why you are seeking an evaluation of this property.

This nomination is for a property that continues to hold tremendous importance to the collective memory and social fabric of Big Stone Gap’s African American community. Alumni of the James A. Bland Memorial High School continue to sponsor reunions at the site; they have erected a historical plaque on the property; and some are actively pursuing the designation and/or preservation of other historic resources central to their lives in Southwest Virginia, such as Principal C. H. Shorter’s home and the Oak View Cemetery. The property retains excellent historic integrity due to its ongoing use as a government property. Although contemporary activities fall outside the parameters of this nomination, it is important to note that Bland High School’s contemporary existence as the Town of Big Stone Gap’s municipal center, voting precinct, and Parks and Recreation facility means that it continues to play a vital role in the life of the community.

Additionally, given that many formerly black educational institutions are no longer extant or have not been listed on state or federal registries due to their relatively young age, general neglect, or, regrettably, lingering attitudes among some that they lack historical significance, there is an urgent need to preserve and protect this property. Indeed, it stands as a testament to the strength and tenacity of African Americans in Virginia, the South, and the nation.

Are you interested in applying for State and/or Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits?   Yes ___   No ___

Are you interested in receiving more information about DHR’s easement program?   Yes ___   No ___

1. General Property Information
Property name: __Big Stone Gap Town Hall (formerly James A. Bland Memorial High School; Rexall Carnes High School; Rexall Carnes Middle School)_____  
Property address: __505 E. 5th Street S._____________________________________
City or Town: __Big Stone Gap___
Zip code: __24219_________

Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located: __Big Stone Gap; Wise County__

Category of Property (choose only one of the following):
Building ___ Site _____ Structure _____ Object _____

2. Physical Aspects
Acreage: __Appx. 2.5____________________________

Setting (choose only one of the following):
Urban ____ Suburban ____ Town ___ Village ____ Hamlet ____ Rural_____

Briefly describe the property’s overall setting, including any notable landscape features:
James A. Bland Memorial High School (now Big Stone Gap Town Hall) is located within the municipal boundary of Big Stone Gap, an incorporated community in the southwestern corner of Wise County. The property is located to the southeast of Big Stone Gap’s main thoroughfare, Wood Avenue, and the surrounding commercial district. Although the school was not included in the Big Stone Gap Historic District, (NRHP SG100003482), it lies four blocks south of the District’s southeastern boundary point, which includes the former Greyhound Bus Station, a contributing property.

To create the school, six African American families sold parcels of land to the county’s Board of Education in 1952. These parcels amounted to approximately 2.5 acres.¹ The properties were located in a portion of the town that Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from 1908, 1913, and 1923 suggest contained a considerable concentration of African American residents; they list black schools and churches, as well as an I.O.O.F. hall constructed in 1913 (no longer extant). Therefore the school, while within walking distance of the town’s business district, is more immediately situated within a residential area lying between the town’s commercial center and the South Fork of the Powell River. The river wraps around the southern and eastern boundaries of the property, while modest houses of pre-WWII and more recent construction lie immediately to the north, northwest, and northeast. Due east of the school and across 5th Avenue is a small cinderblock property that served as the Appalachian Girl Scout Center. This property, envisioned by Dr. Miriam Fuller (Bland school graduate) and partially constructed by Bland High School students, was completed in 1967. Shrouded by trees and tinged with green moss due to the moist river air, the building is in poor condition but nonetheless symbolizes African Americans’ deep commitment to providing exceptional educational opportunities and extracurricular activities to Wise County youth. Immediately to the west of the school is the original athletic field, currently owned and maintained for its original use by Wise County’s Board of Education. While the school and field are situated on land that gently slopes down toward the Powell River, properties across the river are steeply sloped, hinting at the stark mountainous terrain that envelops the community. Deciduous and evergreen trees grow along the river and throughout the residential area surrounding the property, creating a lush, green environment that attracts waterfowl and wildlife year round. The Town of Big Stone Gap maintains a popular 3-mile greenbelt that winds around the riverside boundary of the property.

Because the town was platted along the valley floor, which runs on a northeast to southwest axis, the school reflects a similar orientation. Although the main school structure is an ‘L’ shape, when looking on a map oriented to the north, the school is positioned like an inverted ‘V’. The property’s primary entrance and gymnasium face 5th Avenue, which runs southeast to northwest, and a parking lot for general public use lies between 5th Ave. and the building’s main façade. Fifth Avenue dead-ends at the riverbank just south of the school’s shop and garage, but a combination paved and dirt drive provides access to additional parking and storage bays located on the southern, western, and northern sides of the property. Most of the land immediately surrounding the school is paved or gravel, although small grassy areas are located on the northern and southern ends of the public parking lot as well as on the western sides of the main school building. The athletic field remains covered in grass and is surrounded by trees to the south (riverside) and west, and homes to the north. An additional parking lot is located at the far western end of the athletic field. A small cluster of trees separate the parking lot from the field, supporting a park-like atmosphere.

Several outbuildings surround the main school structure. Immediately to the south of the gymnasium is the industrial arts facility. It includes a garage and workshop, both of which date to the original construction of the school in 1953. They will constitute contributing properties in the National Register nomination. A string of wooden storage bays runs along the southern (riverside) property boundary, the creation date of which remains unclear. Another smaller wooden shed is located on the southwestern corner of the school property, which likewise needs further investigation. There are also four corrugated metal sheds on the western end of the main school building; these are non-contributing. Only the school,
the industrial arts building, the surrounding parking areas, and, pending the Board of Education’s separate approval, the athletic field will be included in the nomination.
3. Architectural Description

Architectural Style(s): Progressive Modernist

If the property was designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here: Charles B. McElroy, primary architect; Beeson & Beeson, 1958 renovations; Dewberry and Davis, 1987 renovations

If the builder is known, please list here: Armstrong Construction (1953); Quesenberry’s, Inc. (1987 renovations)

Date of construction (can be approximate): School and industrial arts building, 1952-1953; renovations 1958; renovations 1987

Narrative Description:

In the space below, briefly describe the general characteristics of the entire property, such as its current use (and historic use if different), as well as the primary building or structure on the property (such as a house, store, mill, factory, depot, bridge, etc.). Include the architectural style, materials and method(s) of construction, physical appearance and condition (exterior and interior), and any additions, remodelings, or other alterations.

The James A. Bland Memorial High School, designed by prominent Wise County architect Charles B. McElroy and built by Kingsport, Tennessee-based Armstrong Construction Company, exemplifies the Progressive Modernist architectural style. At its peak of popularity between the end of WWII and 1960, this style reflected the convergence of several trends: new educational theories about child-centered learning, American architects’ adaptation of European Modernism to domestic needs and aesthetics; and an injection of public funding to support new schools to accommodate the postwar baby boom. Bland, with its multipurpose gymnasium and cafeteria, classrooms with lecture and workspaces, modern library, basement workshops, health clinic, and separate industrial arts facility fully reflected new thinking about the role of environment and experience in a child’s learning. The school retains many of its Modernist characteristics, including its single story, ‘L’-shaped floor plan; flat-pitched roof; heavy, plain cornices and metal coping; recessed entryways; and some of its steel frame multi-pane hopper windows, particularly on the southern end of the school and on the industrial arts building. Although the northern wing of the main school building’s interior has been altered to accommodate public offices, much of the building still retains excellent integrity in terms of its general floor plan, gymnasium, bathrooms, teacher’s lounge, lockers, and basement. In essence, it still conveys the feeling of a school even though it has served as the Town of Big Stone Gap’s municipal office complex since 1987.

The main school building has an L-shaped footprint, oriented such that the property’s northeast corner points almost due north. The building, constructed on land sloping gently towards the river, is one story but includes basement space on both wings. The property’s southern flank included a multipurpose space that served as the gymnasium, auditorium, and cafeteria. The school kitchen was located adjacent to the multipurpose room on the western side of the building. There is an addition on the western side of the building’s southern flank that dates to 1958. The basement beneath the multipurpose room included a furnace room, coal room, and storage space. The building’s northern flank included the main entrance and offices, classrooms, the library, a laboratory, teachers’ lounge, and student bathrooms, all of which were linked by a corridor running the full length of the wing.

The school and industrial arts buildings are constructed of concrete block set upon a poured concrete foundation. Both properties retain their original common-bond brick veneers, which feature one header course for five courses of stretchers, although the brickwork on the main building’s entryway was covered in stucco as part of the 1987 renovations. Both buildings retain many of their original Modernist...
features. Heavy cornice bands with metal coping cap the exterior walls on all sides of the buildings, unifying each wing. Large window bays sit upon heavy concrete sills, and windows on the northern wing of the main school building are unified by a belt course running the entire span of the northern façade. No belt course exists on the western or southern facades although the sills are replicated throughout. Notably absent are lintels; the window bays fully extend to the cornice to maximize light, one of the defining characteristics of Pedagogical Modernism. Many of the windows and doorways have, however, been altered. Window bays on the eastern, northern, and western facades have been filled in and the hoppers replaced with single or double-hung windows. Only the industrial arts facility and southern end of the multipurpose auditorium retain their original windows. Likewise, entryways on the eastern, western, and southern ends of the main school building have been covered or filled in. Many of the original double doors, sidelights, and transoms have been replaced with single doors, filled with brick or cinderblock (southern façade of the industrial arts building), or covered with corrugated metal or vinyl siding (western and southern ends). The rear entrance to the auditorium and main entrance to the industrial arts building retain excellent integrity, however, with original doors and transoms.

After the Civil Rights Act of 1965 compelled Virginia state leaders to fully integrate, the school became Carnes Middle School, named after revered educator and coach Rexall H. Carnes. It continued operation as the town’s middle school until the mid-1980s, when the county deemed it “inadequate in terms of space and facilities.” Wise County’s Board of Supervisors voted to transfer ownership to the Town of Big Stone Gap on April 10, 1986. That year marked the end of the facility functioning as a school; the county opened a new middle school, Powell Valley, to replace Carnes. Upon acquisition of the property, the Town of Big Stone Gap commissioned renovations that were carried out in 1987. The most significant renovations occurred on the building’s northern flank, the section containing classrooms and offices. Major alterations included partitioning of classrooms and the central corridor. The school’s main offices on the east end became the Water Collection office (formerly the school receptionist’s office), the Bookkeeper’s office (formerly the principal’s office), and vault spaces for the Town. The school library was transformed into the Town Council Chamber, and classrooms became office spaces for town management. The western half of the corridor accommodates the Police Department. Contractors inserted a dispatch room into the center of the corridor, narrowing the original hallway. They also inserted additional partitions to create an office for the Chief of Police and police officers; space for booking, interrogation, and holding cells; an evidence room; and a conference room, located at the western end of the building. The Town additionally renovated the former kitchen space and bathrooms that abutted the gymnasium; they upgraded bathroom fixtures and expanded stalls to fulfill ADA mandates. A portion of the former kitchen was converted into an office for the Town’s Parks and Recreation division, although the renovations retained key architectural elements from the original design, like the retractable food service window. An office to the east of the stage appears to remain unaltered. The gymnasium continues to serve its original function by providing recreation space for the Town of Big Stone Gap’s Parks and Recreation division.

Despite significant interior alterations, the school generally retains excellent architectural integrity. There have been no significant alterations to the building’s footprint since 1958, and relatively little has been done to rooms in the basement or to the industrial arts building. Additionally, the contractors who conducted renovations in the 1980s ultimately left many of the distinctive features, like lockers, the cafeteria service window, and the stage, that continue to convey the feeling of a school.

Briefly describe any outbuildings or secondary resources (such as barns, sheds, dam and mill pond, storage tanks, scales, railroad spurs, etc.), including their condition and their estimated construction dates.
The contributing structure maintaining the greatest architectural integrity is, in fact, the Industrial Arts Building, located to the southeast of the main school building. It is original to the property, having been built in 1953. Currently being used as a warehouse for the Town of Big Stone Gap, it has experienced comparatively few alterations. It retains most of its original hopper windows, metal coping, the original main double-door entryway with transom window, and garage bays on the western end. Alterations include a few window pane replacements; one central window bay on the southern façade replaced with a single door and cinder block infill; a small external shed added to the western end of the southern façade; and a transom removed from a doorway on the northwestern corner of the building.

Just past the western corridor, the Town of Big Stone Gap has erected four storage sheds, two enclosed and two open, “carport” style sheds. Aerial photographs indicate that one enclosed and one open shed predate November 2012. The other two were erected sometime after March 2017. Just beyond the proposed boundary line are additional small wooden storage bays with corrugated metal roofing. Facing these sheds are five cement block storage bays that contain gravel, sand, and other materials for town maintenance crews. A string of wooden storage bays runs along the southern (riverside) edge, although these too appear to be outside of the property boundary. The creation date of the bays remains unclear, but all are present in aerial photographs from November 2012.

We are not including the athletic field in this proposal, a resource that is still extant and being used for its original purpose. It is located to the immediate southwest of the school in a floodplain along the Powell River. It was unquestionably a significant part of the school’s history. It is owned, however, by a separate entity (Wise County Board of Education) and would therefore require additional signatures in order to receive permission for its inclusion. Pending approval of the PIF for the school, we may consider pursuing the athletic field’s inclusion at the advisement of the SHPO.
4. Property’s History and Significance

In the space below, briefly describe the history of the property, such as significant events, persons, and/or families associated with the property. Please list all sources of information used to research the history of the property. (It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or family genealogies to this form.)

If the property is important for its architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, or other aspects of design, please include a brief explanation of this aspect.

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. 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.6

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.7 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 Freedmen’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.”8

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.9 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.10

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.11

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.12

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.13 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.14
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.15

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 Daugherity, than in any other state. The lawsuits challenged severe discrepancies between black and white teachers’ pay as well as funding for facilities.16

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.17

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 1943.18 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.19

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.20
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. 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.

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). 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. 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.” 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.

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. 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.

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.” 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.” 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. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

*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.

Transition to social / community history:
The May 20th article on Bland’s closure mentioned the names of the graduating class’s valedictorian, Carey Shorter, and salutatorian, Cherrie Bell. Ms. Bell, the daughter of Cherrie Reasor, served as her class secretary, was a member of the Bland cheerleading squad, and played piano for the junior choir at Macedonia Baptist Church. The young woman taught Sunday school, and her service to her community earned her a DAR service award in 1965. The son of Principal C.H. Shorter, Carey, too, was a model young citizen. He won the VFW Citizenship Award in 1965. He boasted a 3.67 gpa and had amassed an impressive school record as captain of the basketball team, a member of the football team, an active participant in music and theater programs, and an emerging leader within his church, Davidson Chapel Methodist Church. After graduation he attended Hampton Institute anticipating a major in electrical engineering. What is remarkable is that many of Ms. Bell’s and Mr. Shorter’s classmates, like the graduates who preceded them, boasted equally impressive records. Although white segregationists went to great lengths to limit black educational achievement and economic advancement, African American coalfield residents consistently challenged those structural barriers, particularly through their devotion to educating their youth.  

Bland High’s graduates are impressive by any standard. Among them include ministers, scientists, engineers, recipients of the Army Commendation and Purple Heart medals, government officials, scholars, educators, bankers, and authors. Collectively, these individuals stand as a testament to the strength and determination of African Americans in Wise County to secure brighter futures for their children. Adults placed high expectations upon their youth, and many went well above and beyond the duty of regular parenting to mentor all of the children in their community. Black business owners, church and civic leaders, property owners, and educators invested their time, energy, and money into the children’s educations. They maintained high expectations. As Reverend Sandra Jones explained at a talk on life in Big Stone Gap, she maintained constant contact with teachers, particularly at church. The community “expected” children “to learn.” Given the robust community support and tight social networks, she believes Bland High School students received a “top notch education.” Such high expectations were common among African American coalfield residents. Sociologist William Turner, having himself grown up in a coal community across the state line in Kentucky, affirms Reverend Jones’s recollection. The segregated “schools . . . were, for the most part, first class,” he writes. “That is, as far as what was meant by the contradictory and incongruous proclamation ‘separate but equal.'” Turner likewise notes the ubiquity of teachers in students’ lives. They lived on the same streets as their students, so “home visits” were a frequent occurrence. Teachers were highly educated and very well connected to larger networks of Black professionals throughout the United States. They “exerted great and lasting influence over the entire Black community.”

Bland High School stands as a monument to the dedication and perseverance of Wise County’s African American residents. Although its purpose has now expanded to serve the entire Big Stone Gap community as a municipal complex, it remains central to the collective memory of the people who built it, staffed it, and attended it during the 1950s and 1960s.
5. Property Ownership  (Check as many categories as apply):

Private: _____ Public\Local  x  Public\State _____ Public\Federal _____

Current Legal Owner(s) of the Property (If the property has more than one owner, please list each below or on an additional sheet.)

name/title:  Town of Big Stone Gap, VA
organization:  
street & number:  505 E. 5th Street South

city or town:  Big Stone Gap     state:  VA     zip code:  24219

e-mail:  slawson@bigstonegap.org

telephone:  (276) 523-0115 EXT. 102

Legal Owner's Signature:  

Date:  5-11-22

Signature required for processing all applications. * *

In the event of corporate ownership you must provide the name and title of the appropriate contact person.

Contact person:  

Daytime Telephone: 

Applicant Information (Individual completing form if other than legal owner of property)

name/title:  Dr. Jinny Turman; Mr. Math Rowe
organization:  UVA-Wise
street & number:  215 Zehmer Hall, One College Ave

city or town:  Wise       state:  VA     zip code:  24293

e-mail:  jt8zn@uważise.edu; mbr3k@uwarzise.edu

telephone:  308-440-5848

6. Notification

In some circumstances, it may be necessary for DHR to confer with or notify local officials of proposed listings of properties within their jurisdiction. In the following space, please provide the contact information for the local County Administrator, City Manager, and/or Town Manager.

name/title:  Mr. Stephen Lawson, Town Manager
locality:  Big Stone Gap Town Hall
street & number:  505 E 5th Street South

city or town:  Big Stone Gap       state:  VA     zip code:  24219

telephone:  (276) 523-0115 EXT. 102


“Appalachia,” p. 11; Bright, “Historical Information About Big Stone Gap Town Hall Building, 505 E. 5th Street South.”


“Governor Stanley’s Address at High School Dedication,” *Coalfield Progress*, May 13, 1954.


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

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


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

“Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia.”


“Kelly Outlines Plan for Public School Integration.”


Bland High School (Big Stone Gap Administrative Offices)
Wise County, Big Stone Gap Quad
DHR ID: 101-5013

Created By: D. Bascone 5/8/2022
Sources: VDHR 2020, ESRI 2020, VDOT 2020, VGIN 2020
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Bland High School (Big Stone Gap Administrative Offices)
101-5013

Listed Resources

101-5013