



**PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for INDIVIDUAL PROPERTIES**

*Note: PIFs are prepared by applicants and evaluated by DHR staff and the State Review Board based on information known at the time of preparation. Recommendations concerning PIFs are subject to change if new information becomes available.*

**DHR No. (to be completed by DHR staff)** 144-5006

**1. General Property Information**

Property name: Mary E. Branch School

Property address: 608 South Main Street

City or Town: Farmville

Zip code: 23901

Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located: Prince Edward County

Category of Property (choose only one of the following):

Building X Site \_\_\_\_\_ Structure \_\_\_\_\_ Object \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Physical Aspects**

Acreage: 1.48

Setting (choose only one of the following):

Urban \_\_\_\_\_ Suburban \_\_\_\_\_ Town X Village \_\_\_\_\_ Hamlet \_\_\_\_\_ Rural \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the property's overall location and setting, including any notable landscape features:

1.48-acre cleared site within the center of the Town of Farmville. The property is located on the east side of South Main Street near the intersection with Ridge Street. Front Street, which parallels Main Street, runs behind the school property. The building is set back approximately 250 feet and faces west. There are no identified secondary resources associated with this property.

### 3. Architectural Description

Architectural Style(s): \_\_\_\_\_

If the property was designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here: Rosenwald Fund

If the builder is known, please list here: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of construction (can be approximate): 1927

#### **Narrative Description (Please do not exceed one page in describing the property):**

Briefly describe the property's general characteristics, 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 materials and method(s) of construction, physical appearance and condition (exterior and interior), and any additions or other major alterations.

The resource was the first school built for African Americans in Farmville, constructed in 1927, across from the 1939 Moton School (144-0053; VLR/NRHP/NHL). It is a 2-story brick building with a flat roof and dropped cornice. Its original banks of windows have been infilled and small replacements installed, though the framing for the original windows exists. The interior floor plan, tin ceilings, most wall plaster, blackboards, and closets survive.

#### *Exterior*

The former school building is two-stories in height and generally rectangular in form. It has a flat roof, brick exterior, and sits on a high concrete foundation. The facade is seventeen bays wide with a projecting middle section. The projecting section has centered wood doors flanked by three windows on either side. The outer bays have five window openings on both stories. The original windows are no longer extant, instead the window openings are either filled with smaller, two-over-two horizontally divided windows or are boarded up.

#### *Interior*

Consists of high tin embossed ceilings and slate chalk boards. Early 20th century plastering and wood finishings remain intact and uncovered, albeit in poor condition.

#### *Integrity*

The building retains most of its integrity, however, the condition is poor to fair. Due to structural failure of the foundation and what appears to be moisture damage at the first-floor ceiling, there are sections where the floor and ceilings have caved in. The fallen framing members have not been removed.

In a bullet list, include any outbuildings or secondary resources or major landscape features (such as barns, sheds, dam and mill pond, storage tanks, scales, railroad spurs, etc.), including their condition and their estimated construction dates.

- N/A

#### 4. Property's History and Significance (Please do not exceed one page)

Briefly explain the property's historic importance, such as significant events, persons, and/or families associated with the property.

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

In 1923, the Martha E. Foster Council of Women led the petitioning of the Town of Farmville to open a free school to educate African American children. After much persistence and raising \$1000.00, the Council achieved its goal, and in 1927, the Robert R Moton School was built. The 1927-28 school was built as an eleven-teacher, west-facing Rosenwald school. The total cost for the school was \$39,145 with \$3,500 from the African American community, \$2,100 from the Rosenwald Fund, and \$33,545 from public funds.

The first floor of the school housed elementary school students and the second floor, high school students. Originally intended for African American students of Farmville, it was not long before children of Prince Edward County began attending the school. As the school population grew, it became necessary to create a separate high school, and in 1939, after petitioning Prince Edward County, a new high school was built (South Main Street and Griffin Blvd.). The new facility would be named Robert R Moton High School and the existing school would be renamed for Mary E. Branch. A native of Prince Edward County, Mary E. Branch was the daughter of Reconstruction legislator Tazewell Branch. She became an esteemed educator and the first female president of Tillotson College (now Hutson-Tillotson University) in Austin, Texas, and only the second female Black college president in the United States, after Mary McLeod Bethune.

The 1951 student walkout in protest of the overcrowded and inferior conditions of the Robert R. Moton High School led to the *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* case, which resulted in the construction of the new modern Robert R. Moton High School in 1953. The existing Moton high school was refurbished and renamed Branch II.

The *Davis* case was bundled together with cases from four other communities into the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown* that segregation in public education was unconstitutional. In 1955, in what is commonly referred to as the *Brown II* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that school desegregation should occur "with all deliberate speed" and remanded the five cases to the federal district courts to work out the timing and process for school desegregation. In 1959, under federal court order to desegregate, the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors chose to defund public schools in the county, effectively closing them. Public schools remained closed for five years, until the US Supreme Court ordered their reopening in its decision in *Griffin v. School Board of Prince Edward County* in 1964. The desegregation of public schools in Prince Edward occurred slowly over subsequent years, and the modern Robert R Moton High School was later renamed Prince Edward County High School.

In 1995, after the construction of a combined county elementary school, the Mary E. Branch School (which since had been renamed Farmville Elementary) was retired from service in the school system. The school would be purchased by a group of Black women and named Prince Edward County Recreation Center. For the next twenty plus years, the center would provide a facility for youth and adults alike.

It would not be until 2009 when the center would change its name back to its matriarch of Mary E. Branch Community Center. This renaming resulted due to the center's belief in the youth of the

community. Mary Elizabeth Branch was born in 1881 to formerly enslaved parents in Prince Edward County and a prominent educator and academic administrator.

The former Farmville County Training School, currently vacant, appears to meet the criteria for listing on the registers for its association with the Rosenwald School in VA MPD (012-5041). The building is currently vacant and appears to be slightly altered with a change in fenestration patterns and replacement windows. In December 2009, the State Review Board recommended the building proceed to listing under Criteria A (Education, Ethnic Heritage) and C (Architecture), and perhaps Criterion B for its association with Mary Branch. The board also recommended that the period of significance be 1927-1963. The building retains its integrity and is recommended as still eligible for listing on the state and national registers.

Since that evaluation, the building has suffered structural failure and is in a state of severe disrepair with collapsed ceilings, framing, and cracked/sinking floors and foundation. The materials, design, workmanship, form, feeling, and circulation patterns remain evident, but in poor condition. Rehabilitation is possible but needs to occur in the near future.



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## PIF BOUNDARY MAP

Mary E. Branch School  
Farmville, Prince Edward County, VA  
DHR ID# 144-5006

 Proposed Boundary


0 100  
Feet





# PIF AERIAL-VICINITY MAP

Mary E. Branch School  
Farmville, Prince Edward County, VA  
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 Proposed Boundary

0 800  
Feet





























































































































































































