

SUNDAY
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LOCAL NEWS

REMEMBERING WOODVILLE SCHOOL



Photos by Joe Fudge/Daily Press

Woodville School is believed by some to be the last of nine Rosenwald schools that were built in Gloucester County for African-American students in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Some former Woodville students visited Wednesday to walk through the rooms where they once studied. They included Alexander Madison Jr., James Perrin Sr., Lucy Perrin Davis, Eliza Jane Corbin, Lucille Madison, Marguerite Paige and Leola Madison Travis.

A CLASS APART

Landmark status sought for historic Woodville School

By Mathew Paust
Daily Press

GLOUCESTER

Seventy years ago, Alexander Madison Jr. went up the steps of the Woodville School on young, strong legs to start another day of school.

Last week, Madison inched up those same steps slowly, leaning on a cane, his eyes clouded with glaucoma. As he entered the musty room at the top of the stairs, his time-worn face lit up with a youthful smile as he gazed at the high ceilings and out the tall windows.

"My teacher used to have fun with me. She'd put me under the corner over there," he said, explaining that this would happen outside, during recess. The "corner," he explained, was actually a crawl space under the single-story, wood-frame building. It wasn't a punishment. It was just fun.



Former student Marguerite Paige walks by the school during her visit. Woodville, built in 1923, is one of nine Rosenwald schools that once stood in the county. It may be the only one left.

■ More on Rosenwald schools, B2

For Madison and six other former students who visited the school last week, it was a trip that involved more than just coming back to their old school. The Woodville school was one of thousands of "Rosenwald Schools," privately financed school buildings built for African-Americans in the South between 1917 and the 1930s.

The name comes from Julius Rosenwald, a president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., who helped finance them at a time when public school boards run by whites often refused to provide safe, clean places for African-American children to learn.

Gloucester businessman Fred Carter said his grandfather helped bring nine Rosenwald schools to the county. Woodville might be the only one still standing, Carter said.

Built in 1923, Woodville sits abandoned today next to busy Route 17 in Gloucester County's Ordinary community. David Peebles, who owns Lisburne Lane Antiques, bought the building recently to restore it.

By coincidence, the visit of Woodville's alumni came 50 years after the week the U.S. Supreme Court was hearing arguments in a case that would outlaw racial segregation in public schools, known as *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Schools like Woodville gradually melted away in the next 20 to 30 years as the effect of that ruling took hold.

Peebles has applied to have Woodville registered as a national and state historical landmark. Chances are good for this recognition because Woodville is one of a

School

Continued from B1

shrinking number of Rosenwald schools, said Thane H. Harpole, an archaeologist who is studying Gloucester's historical sites.

Efforts to preserve this part of the region's heritage are underway elsewhere. Isle of Wight County hopes to move a former Rosenwald school from a site near Chuckatuck to Smithfield. Plans are to restore the building and use it as an oral history museum.

Peebles isn't sure yet what he wants to do with Woodville.

"I'm very open to ideas," he said. "The main reason I bought it was to make sure it didn't go the way of other historical places. I wanted to preserve it, and I'm looking for a proper use for it."

"I was thinking maybe it could be used as a meeting house for the community. It could be used for a business, but if it's registered as a landmark it would have to keep its architectural integrity."

Architecturally, Rosenwald schools had a distinctive look: Simple buildings with a peaked roof over the entrance and lots of tall windows. The windows were important, according to historical records, to let in as much sunlight as possible in a



Joe Fudge/Daily Press

Owner David Peebles would like to see the Woodville School serve the Gloucester community in some fashion. He bought it, he says, to preserve it. The rain stopped long enough Wednesday to give the group of former students time to look over the exterior of the building.

time when not all public buildings had electricity.

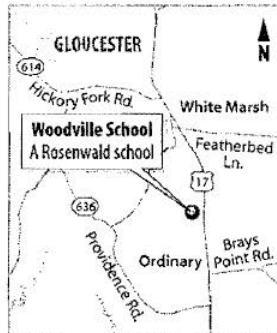
The buildings were situated in a north-south direction and the classrooms were arranged so that the sun would shine through from the left, avoiding shadows from the children's fin-

gers obscuring what they wrote.

After the Gloucester School Board sold Woodville in 1942, it was converted into a house, with partitions installed to create more rooms. When it was a school, it had only four rooms, the former students recalled.

"Four big rooms. We had about 15 students in a classroom," said Lucy Perrin Davis.

Woodville housed only four grades. After that, the students went to Piney Swamp School on Coke road, and then to Gloucester Training School. Piney



Staff/Daily Press

Swamp is long gone, Davis said, and T.C. Walker Elementary now sits on the Training School site.

The seven alumni could remember only one teacher, although they thought there had to have been others. The one they remembered, fondly, was Muriel Dabney, who later taught at Piney Swamp.

James Perrin Sr. remembers riding to school with "Miss Dabney" from the White Marsh community.

"In a car?" one of his former classmates asked.

Perrin laughed. "Of course in a car," he said. "Some people had cars."

Perrin said he walked some days, estimating the trek was about six miles. Others said they'd walked to school, too.

Marguerite Paige, the oldest of the group, started at

Woodville in the 1920s, she said.

"My grandmother would pick me up with a horse and buggy," Paige said. "Yes," said Lucille Madison.

Eliza Jane Corbin won a laugh when she said, "My feet picked me up."

The students remembered doing daily devotions every morning and a session of daily physical exercises. Their readers were the "Dick and Jane" series, although Leola Madison Travis recalled the "Alice and Jerry" readers were used, too.

They all approved of the discipline in those days - rulers across the hands and, sometimes a switch from a tree in the woods behind the school.

Alexander Madison remembers that the school was used for church services for awhile after the First Baptist Church burned down in 1941.

"It brings back memories," he said as he wandered through the old building. He waved a hand at a wall in one of the front rooms.

"That's where they had a little stage. We stood up there for graduation," he said.

Lucy Perrin Davis said she was glad for the opportunity to visit the old school.

"I was hoping one day I could go back there," she said.

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