

BUILDING A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

In the early 1920s Lunenburg County continued to support and build a system of public education following the resignation of Superintendent Isham T. Wilkerson in the spring of 1919. By the fall, A. B. “Ben” Wilson had been appointed the third school superintendent in the county. He and his family resided in Victoria, Virginia. There is little information about Wilson and his educational background. Superintendent Wilson may be called a ‘visionary’ and ‘catalyst for change’ because he demonstrated noteworthy efforts to change the public education landscape for children although the practice of segregated schools existed. New initiatives in public education would take place such as the implementation of the *County Unit Act*; state funding for school transportation; creation of the “five-point” child health program; increased school terms; and the donation of Rosenwald funding for rural schools and buildings.

In 1922, the General Assembly passed what is known as the *County Unit Act*. Prior to this time, Virginia had operated school boards on a district basis. This act made the county the unit of administration rather than each district operating independently. School buildings in each district became the property of the county under one authority; and the School Board would be comprised of a representative from each magisterial district. The *County Unit Act* also appeared to give impetus to the support of state funding for school transportation.

The first organized school-based health program was also initiated in the early 1920s by George Luther Walker, principal at the Kenbridge High School. Walker created the “five-point” health program for school-age children to target five areas—teeth, weight, vision, hearing, and throat. This program was proven to be one of the best means of preventing and correcting bodily defects. Walker received statewide notoriety for this program and it is believed to have been adopted by the Virginia State Board of Health.

Superintendent Wilson and high school principals—George L. Walker, Kenbridge High; J. M. Tignor, Victoria High; and J.F. Kennedy, Lochleven High—co-edited the *Lunenburg School Life* newsletters with the School Board’s approval. The cost of the newsletter was twenty cents per subscription. Wilson was concerned that eight months of school was not enough time for a proper education. In the newsletter (1922) Wilson wrote, “We must admit, however, that Nottoway, our neighbor, is getting ahead of us in raising standards of schools, and in longer terms. The slogan is ‘nine-months term for every boy and girl, whether in town or country.’ If we care to give all children their due we, too, must give them all nine-months term, and thus standardize our work.” Wilson also urged the school supervisors and teachers to submit school-related articles to be printed. There was a section provided for information about the education of black children under the heading: THIS SPACE RESERVED FOR COLORED SCHOOLS OF LUNENBURG COUNTY.

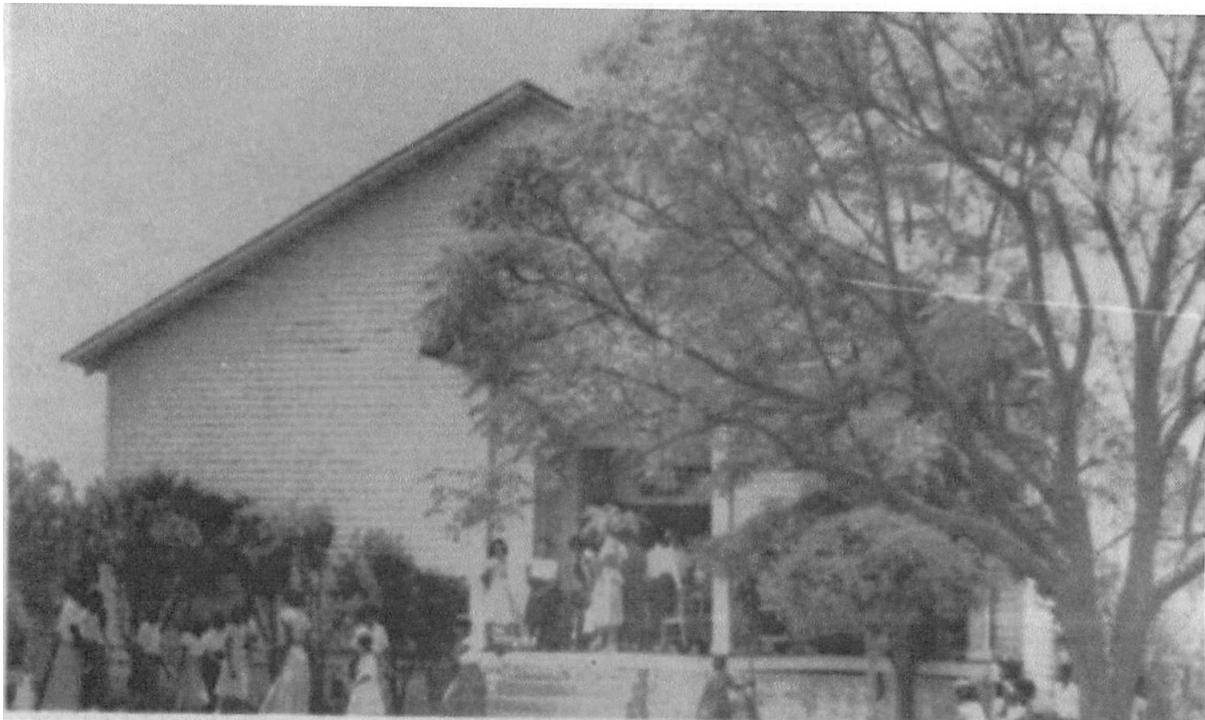
In 1923, the second newsletter was printed. Lucy H. Morrison provided a written report of the status of Negro schools. She wrote, “Our league work has been splendid this year, the patrons have rallied right along especially in Kenbridge, where they have raised \$45 each month for the teachers’ salaries, and other leagues are doing similar work.



← The West End School, constructed in the in the early 1920s, was recognized as a Rosenwald School because of the generous monies donated to assist with its construction. “This is a splendid building! I wish every person in the county could see it,” Morrison said.

The teachers at the West End School included Estella Reavis, Gertrude B. Carrington, Catheryn Tisdale, B. L. Turner, Irene B. Ashburne, A. A. Kent, Jeanette Whitehead and Betty Bryant. West End closed in the early 1950s.

The third newsletter was printed in 1924 with Superintendent Wilson and three high school principals—George L. Walker, Kenbridge; Hal J. Meredith, Victoria; and C. L. Parker, a representative from Lochleven as co-editors.



In the space reserved for colored schools of Lunenburg County, the article—Bird’s Eye View of the Victoria Colored School was included. It was written by Pearl M. Bagley and E. Pearl Evans—two teachers from the Lunenburg Training School. An excerpt follows: “During the last few years the children have been struggling through many disadvantages from the standpoint of school buildings. In the last one or two years, providence opened its arms of fortune unto us

and enabled the people to erect a nice, two-room building near town (Victoria, Virginia). Fortune is smiling upon us and is now at the verge of giving to us and the future generation, the advantages of having a County Training School—something for which the entire county of Lunenburg has been suffering.” Lucille C. Overby, principal at the Kenbridge Graded School, submitted an article—*“Early American Orators”*—that was also printed in reserved section.

The *Lunenburg School Life* newsletters were the second major school publications available county-wide. A copy of each newsletter is archived at the Ripberger Public Library in Kenbridge, Virginia.

Selected sources: *A History of Public Education in Virginia*, (Richmond: 2003), Virginia Department of Education; *Lunenburg School Life* Newsletters (October-November 1922, March 1923, February 1924), archived at the Ripberger Public Library in Kenbridge, Virginia; Oscar Wood. *Development of Education for Negroes in Lunenburg County, Virginia 1870-1952*, Virginia State College, Petersburg, Virginia, 1953; 1935 photo of West End School courtesy of Johnston Memorial Library, Special Collections and University Archives-Archie G. Richardson Papers, Virginia State University; 1924 photo of Lunenburg County Training High School courtesy of Mildred H. Jenkins; Virginia Daily Attendance Register and Monthly Grade Record (1921-1950).