

Loudoun

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At Carver School, A Past Preserved

Mattie Lassiter Led Effort to Ensure Piece of Town's Black History Lives On

By MICHAEL ALISON CHANDLER
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"This was a region where blacks were once prosperous," said Lassiter, 69, who has spent decades working with the local NAACP and advocating for women's rights and services for senior citizens.

Her most recent campaign was more personal: restoring her elementary school as an important symbol of black history in Purcellville. After five years of lobbying and fundraising, Lassiter took part in a groundbreaking Saturday for the Carver Center, a senior center to be located in George Washington Carver Elementary School, the first modern school built for black children in Loudoun County. *Work*

The crowded display covers three walls in the home she shares with her husband, Nelson, on G Street, the former "color line" separating black and white communities in Purcellville.



Jean Richardson, left, a member of a Purcellville seniors group, joins Mattie Lassiter in front of the Carver School. Lassiter spent five years lobbying and raising money to turn the school into a senior center.

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Preserving the Past at Carver School

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on the center is expected to begin in August and last about 11 months.

The center, which will be operated by the Loudoun County Area Agency on Aging, will be the third senior center in the county but the first to offer adult day care as well as activities and entertainment for active seniors. On evenings and weekends, it will be available for other community uses.

The eight-room school was built in 1948 for \$106,000. It housed 250 students and eight teachers. It was closed in 1968 when the county's schools were integrated. The School Board decided to use the building for storage because white parents did not want to send their children into the formerly all-black neighborhood, Lassiter said.

On her first day of seventh grade, Lassiter was part of the first group of students to attend Carver.

"We were so excited to go to that school," she recalled.

She and a former classmate, Reginald Simms, 70, also of Purcellville, described the building as immaculate, a place where students dressed their best and teachers lavished attention on them.

A year after the school opened, Lassiter and her family moved into their first real home, a few blocks from the school. The white clapboard house meant stability for the family after a year of living as tenants on farms. The new house also meant that her family joined a growing all-black community that was increasingly self-sufficient and middle class.

To pay the mortgage, her stepfather worked on farms, then at a slaughterhouse and later a tire repair shop. Her mother was a domestic worker who ran businesses on the side, including a restaurant in the basement of their house. Lassiter said her mother wanted to have a place where black people in Purcellville could sit down and have a decent meal.

"We could work in [restaurants] and serve food in them, but we couldn't sit down and eat in them," she said.

The black community in Purcellville was small but well known in the region because, until the late 1960s, it was home to an annual celebration of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The festival drew thousands of African Americans, including prominent ministers from Washington and other black leaders who spoke out about civil rights.

"As a child you didn't pay much attention, running from concession stand to concession stand," Lassiter said. But memories of the inspirational speeches came back to her later in life as she pursued her activism.

Lassiter left Purcellville in 1953 after she married and moved to Merrifield near Falls Church. But more than three decades and a divorce later, she reconnected with her childhood sweetheart from Carver School and ended up a few blocks from where she started.

The neighborhood that she returned to in the late 1980s, however, was changing rapidly. Many younger blacks had moved away, and new houses with non-black families were filling empty lots and fields. The drop in population and concentration of blacks in Purcellville mirrored a countywide trend. Blacks made up 20 percent of the county's population in 1940 but only 7 percent in 2000, according to census figures.

"At first, we didn't want to see houses sold out to white families," Lassiter said, "[but] what we have learned to accept is that this is no longer a black community, and it doesn't have to be."

Mattie said she likes her new mix of neighbors, but she wants to make sure that the old black community, and its contributions to Purcellville, are not forgotten.

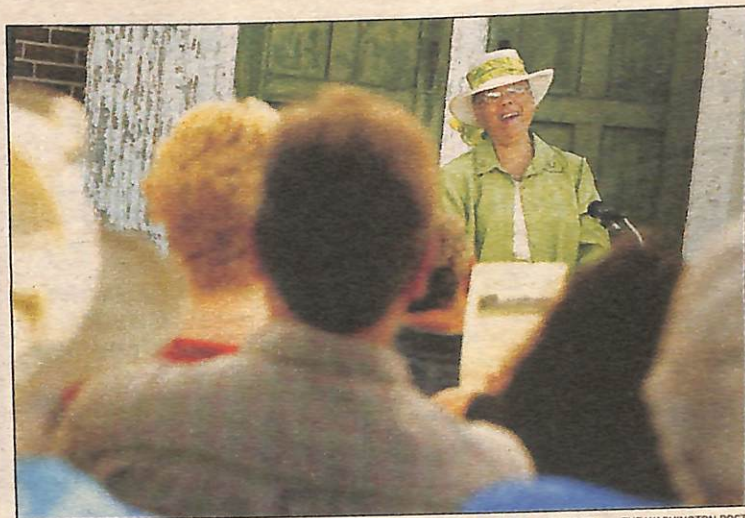
"So much of our history, we were not taught about," she said, because it was black history. "Later we found out that blacks were

making outstanding contributions to history."

For her, learning about such figures as George Washington Carver, who made important innovations in agriculture, and Mary McLeod Bethune, who became a famous educator, helped build a sense of pride in her heritage.

That's why, in addition to preserving black history in her home and her community, Lassiter also teaches it to children at Second Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Hamilton. She wants to pass the knowledge to the next generation.

"If you lose that, you lose a part of who you are," she said.



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Mattie Lassiter, who was one of the first students to attend Carver, speaks to the crowd at Saturday's groundbreaking ceremony for the senior center.

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