

Mary E. Branch Heritage Center
Est. 1926

100th
YEARS



ANNIVERSARY

Introduction

What is the Mary E. Branch Heritage Center?

- ▶ A nonprofit community and heritage organization.
- ▶ Located in the historic Mary E. Branch School building.
- ▶ Dedicated to preserving African American educational history.
- ▶ Provides programs that support youth, families, and community development.



Mission

► Core Priorities

- Historic preservation
- Youth development
- Community empowerment
- Cultural heritage education
- Economic and tourism development



The first school built for African Americans in Farmville, VA. It was constructed in 1927

- ❑ In 1923, the Martha E. Foster Council of Women petitioned the Town of Farmville to open a free school to educate African American children.
- ❑ 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.

▶ Department of Historic Resources Preliminary Information Form 3,
11/7/2025 Rev. September 2022



**Cont...The first school built for African Americans in Farmville, VA.
It was constructed in 1927**

- ❑ 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.

Department of Historic Resources Preliminary Information Form 3

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Martha E. Forrester (1863-1951) was an African-American civil rights activist.

She was instrumental in establishing the Farmville Council of Colored Women, a service organization dedicated to advocating for better educational opportunities for Black students in Prince Edward County among other outreach efforts. That organization was later renamed the Martha E. Forrester Council of Women in her honor.

<https://motonmuseum.org/learn/biography-martha-forrester/>



Members Of The Council 1947

First Row, Left to Right — Mesdames Pearl Madden, Martha E. Forrester, Mary White. Second Row — Cammie Foster, Mary Clark, Sarah Pines, Annie M. Randolph, Mary Baker, Emma Wright, Lena Johnson and Mattie Allen. Third Row — Josephine Brown, Bettie Armistead, Laura Austin, Pearl Baker, Connie Rawlins and Daisie Anderson. Absent when the pictures were made of the Council members: Mesdames Bessie Austin, Julia Anderson,

Mattie Branch, Mary Brown, Rebecca Coles, Lucy Cousins, Della Green, Annie M. Griggs, Marian Hankins, Arnetha Holcomb, Hazel Jackson, Eliza Jeffries, Altona Johns, Annie Lancaster, Helen Lee, Ellen Miles, Harriet Morton, Annie H. Mosely, Mary Madison, Nannie Pickett, Mary Pettis, Ethel Price, Georgie Robinson, Lillie Scott, Annie Vaughan, Matilda West, Mary Richardson, and Ann Lewis.



First Row, Left to Right — Mesdames Annie L. Miller, Martha E. Forrester, Nannie Harvey. Second Row — Lizzie Mathews, Annie M. Brown, Ellen Banks, Eva Early, Kate Wiley, Jennie Watson.

Florence Lancaster, Viola Smith, Carrie Brown, and Vera J. Allen. Third Row — Annie Redd, Lena Allen, Hauzie J. Walker, Nellie Richardson, Mary Jackson, Ethel Redd, Ida Brown and Maud Watkins.

<https://motonmuseum.org/learn/biography-martha-forrester/>

Who was Mary E. Branch?

Educational Leadership and Legacy



- ❑ BRANCH, MARY ELIZABETH, college president, was born near Farmville, Virginia, on May 20, 1881, the daughter of Tazewell and Harriett Branch.
- ❑ The Branch children attended Farmville's elementary school. After completing high school studies in the normal school at Virginia State College, Petersburg, VA, Mary Branch became an English teacher in an elementary school in Blackstone, Virginia.
- ❑ She later joined the faculty of her alma mater, where she remained for twenty years.
- ❑ In 1930, the American Missionary Association appointed Mary E. Branch president of Tillotson College in Austin, Texas. While in Austin, Mary Branch became active in the civil-rights movement. She became president of the Austin chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1943.
- ❑ She also served on the State Interracial Commission of Texas. During the Great Depression, she devoted much time to the National Youth Administration.
- ❑ In 1935, Lyndon B. Johnson appointed her to the National Youth Administration Negro Advisory Board for Texas. In 1944, Branch helped to establish the United Negro College Fund. She died in Baltimore, Maryland on July 6, 1944.

<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/branch-mary-elizabeth>

Brown vs. Board of Education

- ▶ The students' lawsuit, known as Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, challenged school segregation itself rather than simply seeking improved facilities. This case was one of five cases that the Supreme Court combined into Brown v. Board of Education.
- ▶ 1954, Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs. the Board of Education that separate but equal was unconstitutional, led to the closing of all public schools in Prince Edward County from 1959 to 1964. When schools reopened in 1964, Robert R. Moton was the new high school, Mary E. Branch became Farmville Elementary School and Mary E. Branch No. 1 was retired.
- ▶ The school would be purchased by a group of black women and named the Prince Edward County Recreation Center. The name would later be changed to Prince Edward County Community Center. For the past 38 years the center would provide a facility for youth and adults alike. In 2009, the facility changed its name back to the Mary E. Branch Community Center.

Rosenwald

- ▶ Mary E. Branch School (formerly the 1927 Farmville Rosenwald School, The Farmville Training School): Located on South Main Street in Farmville, VA. This historic building was constructed in 1927 using the Rosenwald Fund. As the student population outgrew the building, it was renamed for Mary E. Branch, a noted educator and Prince Edward County native.



Catalyst of Change

In 1951, students at the all-Black Robert Russa Moton High School in Prince Edward County protested overcrowded and unequal conditions. Led by student Barbara Johns, they organized a strike demanding a better school.

The students' lawsuit, known as *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, challenged school segregation itself rather than simply seeking improved facilities. This case was one of five cases that the Supreme Court combined into *Brown v. Board of Education*.

- ▶ A statue of Barbara Johns was unveiled and dedicated in Emancipation Hall within the U.S. Capitol as the newest addition to the National Statuary Hall Collection,



Member of the Virginia Commission for Historical Statues in the United States Capitol, Delegate Jeion Ward (left), and the author. Photo credit: LaToya Gray-Sparks.

Mary E. Branch Heritage Center

Preserving History, Strengthening Community, Building Opportunity

- ▶ The Mary E. Branch Heritage Center, seeks funding to restore and activate a historic educational landmark in Prince Edward County, Virginia.
- ▶ The project will preserve a significant African American educational site while expanding community programming, cultural heritage tourism, youth development, and economic opportunities.
- ▶ The Center seeks state and local support for restoration efforts, demonstrating public recognition of its importance.

Why This Place Matters

► Historical Significance

- Constructed in 1926 and opened in 1927.
- Served African American students during segregation.
- Represents a critical chapter in Virginia's educational and civil rights history.
- One of the few remaining structures that tells this story through place-based learning.
- Preservation Needed Without continued investment, the building's historic fabric and community value remain at risk.

Community Impact

▶ Expected Outcomes

▶ Education

- Student enrichment programs
- History and cultural learning opportunities
- Workforce readiness initiatives

▶ Community

- Meeting and event space
- Senior engagement programs
- Family-centered activities

▶ Culture

- Heritage exhibits
- Oral history preservation
- Cultural celebrations and public events

Project Description

- ▶ **Restoration and Revitalization Plan**
- ▶ Funding will support:
 - Structural stabilization
 - Building rehabilitation
 - Accessibility improvements
 - Program space development
 - Exhibit and archival preservation
 - Technology and educational infrastructure

Economic Impact

- ▶ **Heritage Tourism**
- ▶ Historic preservation projects often generate:
 - Increased visitation
 - Local spending
 - Community pride
 - Small business support
- ▶ Preserved historic sites can become anchors for broader economic development and tourism initiatives.

Sustainability

- ▶ **Long-Term Sustainability Strategy**
- ▶ Revenue Sources:
 - Facility rentals
 - Cultural programming
 - Fundraising events
 - Memberships
 - Individual donations
 - Corporate sponsorships
 - Public and private grants

Partnerships

- Schools
- Historical organizations
- Community groups
- Local government
- Regional tourism organizations

Vision for the Future

- ▶ **A restored Mary E. Branch Heritage Center will become:**
 - A center for learning
 - A gathering place for community
 - A destination for heritage tourism
 - A steward of African American history
 - A catalyst for future generations

My Husband's Story



Dedication to Dr. Michael K. Herndon

“The memory of the just, is blessed.” — Proverbs 10:7a (KJV)



Virginia Tech, Director of Summer and Winter Sessions

Closing

- ▶ Investing in Preservation.
- ▶ Investing in Community.
- ▶ Investing in the Future.
- ▶ **Contact Information**
Mary E. Branch Heritage Center
PO Box 283
Farmville, Virginia 23901
- ▶ *"When we preserve places of memory, we create places of possibility."*

Thank You's



stromberg
garrigan
associates



Karen Weber, P.G.

Brownfields Coordinator

[Virginia Department of Environmental Quality](#)

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