

LUCY FRANCES SIMMS



From Slavery to a Lifetime of Public Service

by Dale MacAllister
2015 revision



Lucy Simms is the most respected African American teacher in Harrisonburg history.

She was born a slave on the hillside where Lucy Simms School, named to honor Miss Simms, was built in 1939.

When was Miss Simms Born?

Articles at her death—born 1855.

1870 census—born 1855 or 1856.

Tombstone—born 1856.

Hampton Institute booklet—born 1859.

An Inconsistent Birth Date

- **The spelling of her name—**

Simms, on her tombstone, most modern sources,
and the school building.

Sims, in many earlier sources.

Another Inconsistency

Lucy was born in the 1850s to Jane Simms. Her father is not known.

Both Jane Simms and her daughter Lucy were slaves in the Algernon Gray family of Harrisonburg.

The Gray family lived on "Hilltop," a farm located where Simms School and Ralph Sampson Park are now in northeast Harrisonburg.

Facts of Her Birth



Lucy's half-brother testified that Lucy's birthplace was Rockingham County for Lucy's death certificate.

Facts of Her Birth

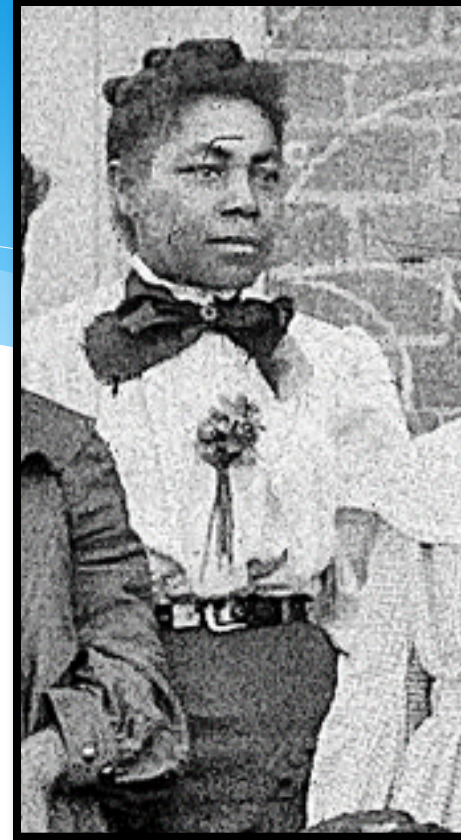


Lucy F. Simms School



Ralph Sampson Park

This photo of Lucy Simms is from a group photograph with her Effinger School students.

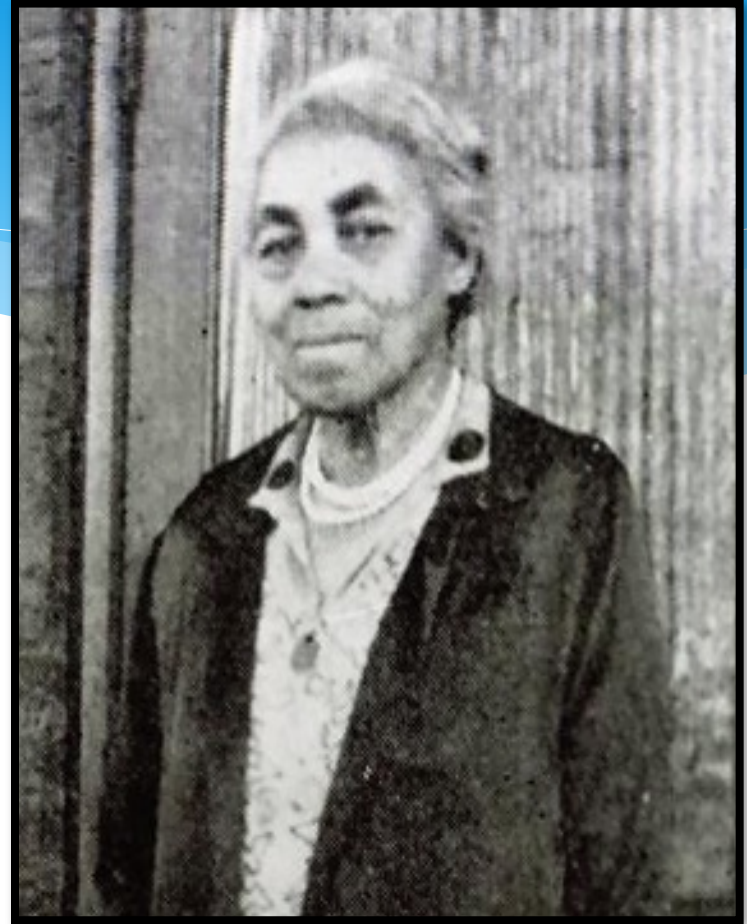


Miss Lucy in Her 40s

In later years

**“Miss Lucy, she was
an angel.”**

—a former student




Lucy Frances Simms

- **Her educational training—**

Her early education is unknown. She was born during a time that providing an education for slaves was against Virginia law.

She was a graduate of Hampton Normal & Agricultural Institute at Hampton, Virginia, attending there 1874-1877. The Gray family, her former owners, helped her gain admission to the college.

Hampton Institute



Booker T. Washington, the famous African American educator, was a classmate.

Hampton Institute

The Academic Hall
where Lucy Simms
took her classes.



Hampton Institute

- **Her first teaching job—**

Her first teaching job, 1877-78, was in what was later known as the Zenda community.

The school was held in Long's Chapel.

Zenda was a mostly African American community northeast of Harrisonburg near Melrose.

Rockingham County called this school for African Americans "Athens Colored School."

Return to Rockingham

Miss Simms obtained room and board in the home of a local African American blacksmith.

Lucy Simms described that first teaching experience—

“I had a very pleasant school, in a very pleasant neighborhood, but not very pleasant pay.”

First Teaching Experience

School for African Americans in the community, then called "Athens," was held in Long's Chapel prior to 1882.



Athens Colored School



Long's Chapel at Zenda

This one-room schoolhouse was built at Zenda four years after Lucy Simms left.



Athens Colored School 1882-1925

* Plans for her second year of teaching—

Following her first year at Zenda, Lucy made plans to move to Maryland.

She had heard teachers were paid more there.

She was offered a teaching job in Harrisonburg.

The school met in the basement of the former Northern Methodist Church that had been bought by African Americans.

A Return to Harrisonburg

* Orra Gray Langhorne-

Granddaughter of Robert Gray who built "Hilltop," the house and farm where Lucy grew up.

Orra Gray spent her early years in Harrisonburg.

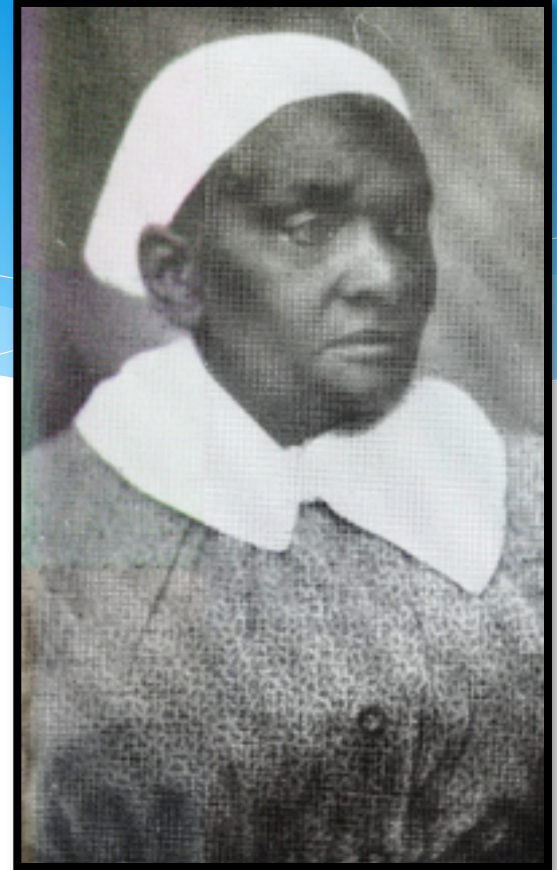
She wrote about Harrisonburg and the local African Americans after the Civil War and emancipation.

She helped the former family slaves receive an education.

Another Perspective

Some have speculated that Aunt Lucy, a “house mammy” for the Grays, may have been Lucy Simms’ grandmother.

The Grays bought Lucy Simms’ grandmother and mother from Abraham Lincoln, the president’s cousin, who had a farm on Linville Creek here in Rockingham County.



“Aunt Lucy”
One of the Gray Family Slaves

Orra wrote the following, presumably about Lucy Simms:

“One of my pleasures in a visit “home,” is in seeing the old family servants, and in talking over with them affairs of mutual interest, present and future.

. . .

In her present location . . . [one colored teacher] tells me, she obtains comfortable board with a private room for \$6.00 per month in the family of a Negro blacksmith. . .

Orra Gray Langhorne

The young school teacher, who is a nice looking . . . girl with lady-like manners, tells me that she finds the white people in the rural districts where her work lies, kindly disposed—sometimes visiting her school with curious interest in the new methods of teaching. Occasionally they ask her to their houses . . . but never invite her to take a meal or spend the night.”

Lucy Simms' Education

Hampton Institute Principal S. C. Armstrong was often quoted as saying that former slaves should be taught
“an education that encompassed the head, the heart, and the hands.”

The Hampton-style of education included:
“cultural uplift, with moral and manual training.”

Since Hampton Institute was a *“normal school,”* its goal was training African Americans to be teachers who would go forth and educate the masses using the Hampton philosophy.

**“The new methods of
teaching”**

General Samuel C. Armstrong

Head of the Freedmen's Bureau
in Virginia in 1866.

He opened Hampton Normal and
Agricultural School in April 1868.

*“To train selected Negro youth who
should go out and teach and lead their
people first by example, . . . to teach
respect for labor, to replace stupid
drudgery with skilled hands, and in this
way to build up an industrial system for
the sake not only of self-support and
intelligent labor, but also for the sake of
character.”*



- Her early years teaching in Harrisonburg—

Lucy's first years teaching in Harrisonburg were in the basement of the African American Church.

She also taught a "spring school" west of Mt. Clinton in "the Peak" section near Little North Mountain.

She then moved to the new Effinger Street Colored School when it opened in 1882.

Teaching in Harrisonburg

Lucy Simms
taught in this
school from the
time it opened in
1882 until her
death.



Effinger Street School

A four-room school for African Americans built in 1882 in Harrisonburg's Effinger Addition of Newtown.

Located near where Rose's Department Store is now.

Lucy Simms spent the remainder of her teaching career in this school, 1882 to 1934.

Effinger Street School





She taught 24 years with her half-brother Ulysses Grant Wilson in the Effinger Street School.

Many of those years they taught in adjoining rooms.

Effinger Street School

For a brief period, Lucy Simms served as interim principal of the school.

She was active in the local Negro education association and frequently presented methods of effective instruction to fellow "colored" teachers in county-wide meetings.

Effinger Street School

Lucy's younger, half-brother .

The family called him "Ulys."

Buried in Newtown Cemetery, Harrisonburg.



Ulysses Grant Wilson

**Lucy Simms
about 1900**

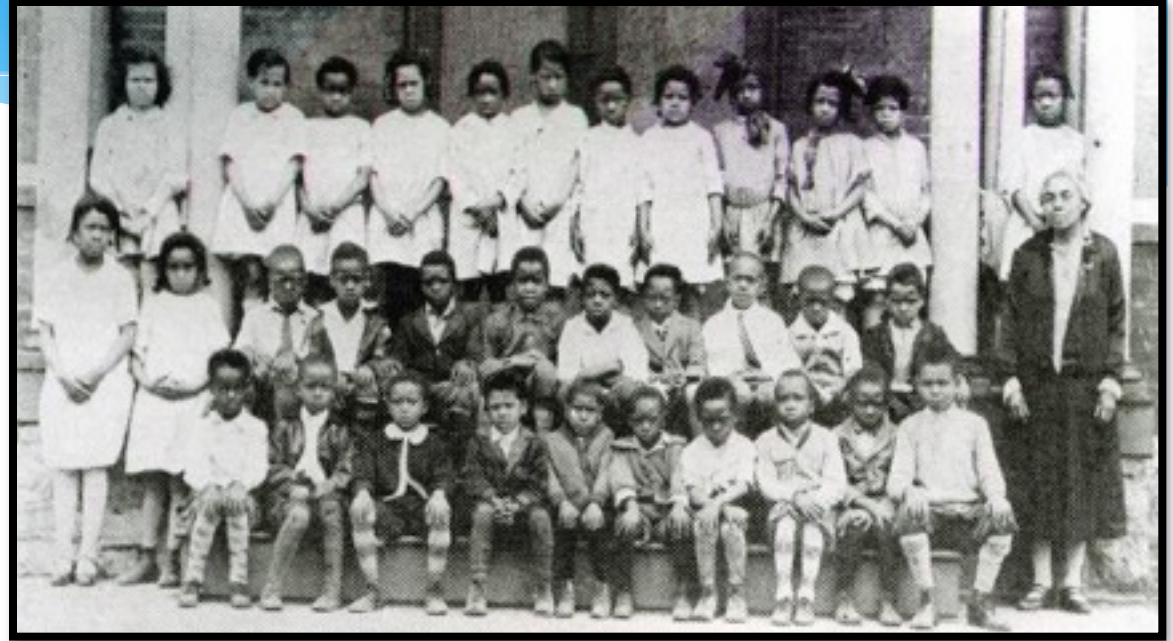


**Miss Lucy with her
Effinger students**



A few years later
Effinger Street School

**“Miss Lucy” with
her first and
second grade
students later in
her career.**



Effinger Street School

Character traits—

She had strong moral character.

She could not tolerate dishonesty.

She was strict but fair to her students.

She was “quick to use the yardstick” on students who needed correction.



Lucy Simms, the Person

Lucy, the person—

She always dressed well.

She loved roses and enjoyed working in her garden during the summer.

She grew and sold celery for extra income.

Lucy was once engaged to be married.



Lucy Simms, the Person

Lucy the patriotic citizen—

During WWI, blacks in Harrisonburg organized for the “United War Work Campaign.”

Lucy Simms was a member of the committee.



Lucy Simms, the Person

She taught Sunday school and sang alto in the choir of John Wesley Methodist Church on North Liberty Street.



Lucy Simms, the Person

**Lucy Simms' home on
East Johnson Street.**

**It had formerly been
her mother's place.**



The Lucy Simms House

**Tombstone of Jane Simms
Wilson (ca.1839-1908),
mother of Lucy Simms, in
Newtown Cemetery,
Harrisonburg.**



Jane Simms Wilson

Three generations—

Miss Lucy with three generations of her students.

Left to right:

Roberta Wells, Helen Irving Wells, Roberta Irving, and Miss Lucy.



Lucy Simms, the Person

* Her death—

Lucy Simms died July 10, 1934.

The report of her funeral—

“This was the most largely attended colored funeral ever held in Harrisonburg.”

“The body lay in state in her [class]room at the Effinger Street School for six hours . . .”

Buried in Newtown Cemetery beside her mother.

Death of Lucy Simms



Lucy Simms' tombstone in
Newtown Cemetery,
Harrisonburg.



Lucy Simms, the Person

**Miss Lucy's tombstone bears
the following inscription:**

**"She was loved and honored for a life of unselfish
service to the community and her race. She taught in
the Public Schools of the City for 56 consecutive
years not losing a day.**

She rests from her labors."

Lucy Simms, the Person

• Posthumous honors—

Harrisonburg first honored Lucy Simms by naming a large lot between East Washington and Kelley streets the “Lucy F. Simms Athletic Field.”

1938-1939, a new \$100,000 schoolhouse for African Americans was built in Harrisonburg's Newtown neighborhood.

It was named in honor of Lucy Frances Simms.

The Lucy Simms Legacy

Simms School as a
community Continuing
Education Center today



The Lucy Simms Legacy

A portrait—

In 1980 Mrs. Lester McCall, Mary Awkard Fairfax, and Lester McCall hold a treasured portrait of Miss Lucy Simms.

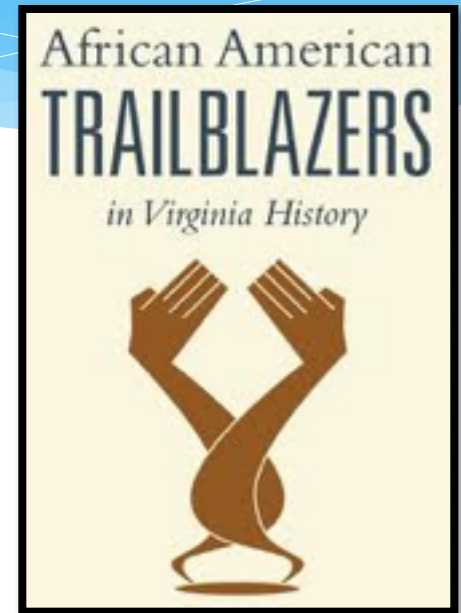


The Lucy Simms Legacy

* February 24, 2011, the Library of Virginia honored Lucy Simms as an "African American Trailblazer" in Virginia.

She was one of eight African Americans honored who "had a significant impact on Virginia."

Among those sharing the 2011 honor with Lucy Simms was Henry "Box" Brown, the famous Richmond slave who in 1849 shipped himself in a wooden box to Philadelphia and freedom.



The Lucy Simms Legacy

A panel like this will be placed at a mural on the Elizabeth Street Parking Deck in downtown Harrisonburg.


Lucy Frances Simms

Lucy Frances Simms, a prominent and devoted African American educator, was born approximately one mile from this location in 1855. She, her mother, and her grandmother were slaves at "Hilltop," the Angerton Gray family estate.


Simms graduated from Hampton Institute in 1877 and began teaching school at Zenda, northeast of Harrisonburg. The following year she returned to the city and taught school in the basement of a church. She moved to Ellinger Street School when

it opened in 1882 and taught there until her death in 1934. During her 57 year career she taught 1,800 students and only missed one half-day to illness.


Simms is buried near her birthplace in Newtown Cemetery. The Simms School building, an African American school during segregation, was named in her honor. Both the Harrisonburg City and Rockingham County Schools recognize an outstanding teacher with the Lucy F. Simms Educator of the Year Awards.




Lucy Simms caption here.



Historical photograph of the Ellinger Street School in 1889.




This 1932 Sanborn map of Harrisonburg shows the location of the Ellinger Street School where Lucy Simms taught for 52 years.



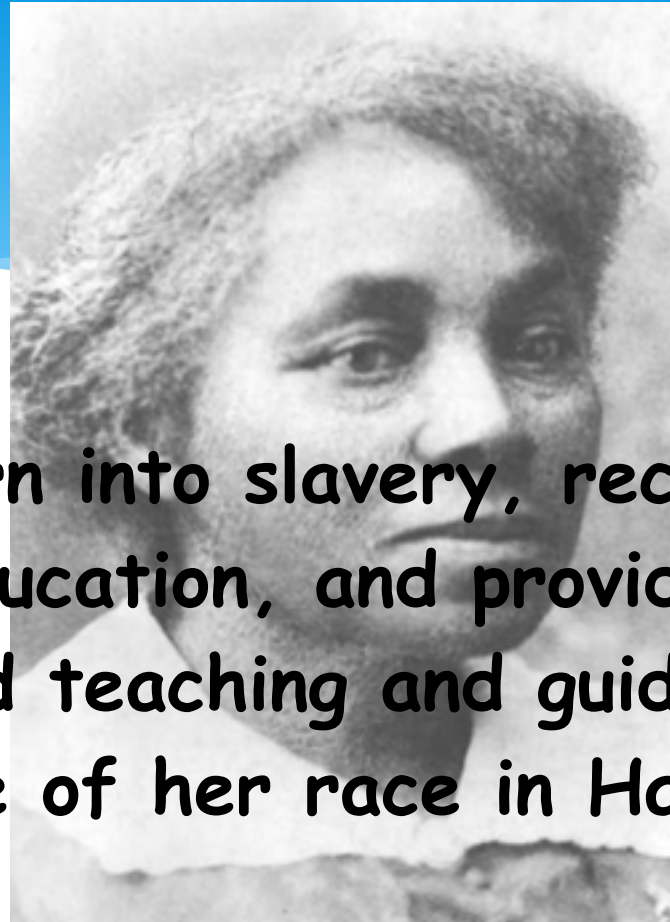
Miss Lucy Simms and her students.

The Elizabeth Street Parking Deck mural project was a collaborative initiative between Harrisonburg Downtown Businesses, the Arts Council of the Valley, and the City of Harrisonburg. The winning artist team was selected through a mural contest, with input from public online voting.

Andie Shuck, a Harrisonburg native now living in Richmond, has been involved in multiple mural and public art projects in Virginia and elsewhere. Harrisonburg residents Paul Simms partnered with the mural conceptualization and installation. Thousands of Paint & Decorating Center and Bepko's Mason donated the paint and supplies.



The Lucy Simms Legacy



She was born into slavery, received an excellent education, and provided long years of dedicated teaching and guidance to the young people of her race in Harrisonburg.

The Lucy Simms Legacy



-and the legacy endures!