

Historic Name: Bennett School

Date or Period: ca. 1908

Original Use: School

Vicinity: Manassas

Source: Prince William County Historical Commission "A Past to Preserve"

In 1908 the Virginia General Assembly authorized the establishment of one public agricultural school in each of the state's ten congressional districts. Manassas received authorization to build the agricultural high school for the eighth district. The two-story brick building was constructed during 1908 on two acres of land donated by Dr. M. C. Bennett. Due to the large elementary school enrollment, Bennett was used for primary instruction and teacher training rather than as an agricultural high school until 1969 when it was converted to offices for the Prince William County government. Later it was used for storage.

The Bennett School

Manassas District School

1909 to present

White

Source: "Yesterday's Schools" by Lucy Walsh Phinney

The Bennett School building, now standing on Lee Avenue in Manassas across from the new courthouse, was built in 1909 to house the first agricultural high school in Virginia. In 1908 the General Assembly provided for an agricultural school for each of the ten congressional districts into which the state was divided. Manassas was chosen as the site for the school for the eighth district and its school, Bennett, was the first to be completed in the state. However, because of a very large elementary school age population, Bennett was never used as a high school, opening instead as an elementary school which it remains (though in a newer building) to this day. The Ruffner School was enlarged to accommodate the agricultural and secondary students; in 1913 it was enlarged again. Teachers training courses were taught in the Bennett School along with the elementary grades.

The Bennett School was built on two acres of land donated by Dr. Maitland C. Bennett, father-in-law of School Trustee George C. Round who had been a driving force behind the agricultural high school. During excavation for the building, graves of unknown Civil War Soldiers were discovered. It was decided by Mr. Round, a Union veteran, and Superintendent of Schools George Tyler, a Confederate veteran, to leave the graves undisturbed and build the schoolhouse over them.

The new two-story schoolhouse cost \$16,000. It was built of brick with a peaked slate shingled roof and contained nine rooms, eight with a seating capacity of forty-five each and one only large enough for twenty-five. There was an auditorium and a gymnasium, as well as a principal's office. All the floors were of double wood board; the interior walls and ceilings were lath and plaster. It was centrally heated by three coal fired boilers, fully electrified, and had running water for toilets and drinking fountains. Children within a nine mile radius attended grades 1-8 there.

A big playground was built alongside the Bennett School. It was hoped that this would become a center of community life for the children of Manassas. It was kept open during the summer to "draw the children away from the railroad and other places of danger. Mrs. Moffett goes on to quote Governor William Hodges Mann of Virginia, who said, on a visit to the school

in 1911. "Of course, everyone knows the Bennett Building is the most beautiful building of its kind in the state. This splendid building is being equipped with reproductions of the old masterpieces, new furniture, kindergarten tables and chairs, a lavatory and a sanitary drinking fountain in each basement, a rest room and reading room; all making it a fine educational institution for the development of character and of social efficiency."

In 1921, the Manassas Good Housekeeper's Club set up a plan to furnish hot soup to the school children beginning at the end of January.

In 1926, the white citizens of Manassas passed a bond issue to provide funds for a new high school. Their children were educated in a seemingly confusing fashion in the old Ruffner School for both elementary and secondary grades. All were overcrowded and Ruffner, at least, was in danger of losing its State accreditation. So a thirteen-room brick high school with an auditorium was built on land next door to the Bennett School and called the Osbourn Building. It served as the high school for the students from western Prince William County until 1953 (when the "new" Osbourn High School was built). At that point the old building became an annex to Bennett Elementary and it served in that capacity until the new Bennett School was built on Stonewall Road (where it still functions) and both the old Bennett and old Osbourn were closed. The old Osbourn building was torn down in 1986 but the old Bennett School still stands sentinel on its site as it has since 1909.

In the early 1930s, Bennett continued to be overcrowded and had to spill over into parts of the Osbourn Building. One section of the first grade was housed in the agricultural building of the Osbourn High School; one section of grade four was held in the library; a section of the sixth grade and all of the seventh met in high school classrooms.

In 1928, the Patrons League (PTA) of the Bennett and Osbourn schools advanced the necessary funds to build a sidewalk connecting the two schoolhouses with the neighboring county courthouse. The monies for half of the first block and all of the second were to be paid back to the League from the 1929 tax levies.

A small kitchen was built in the early 1930s in the basement of Bennett so that hot lunches for undernourished children could be provided. According to Superintendent Haydon's 1934 report on the county schools, the student population of Bennett for the 1933-34 school year was 545. Of that number, 474 were promoted at the year's end, fifty-two failed and nineteen students dropped out. The average daily attendance was 522 (in a school with a seating capacity of 385!), most of whom were bused.

The furnishings of the classrooms varied. First the second graders used tables and chairs; the third grade children had single desks and the fourth grade used chair desks. By the fifth grade, students went back to single desks. Sixth grade classrooms had both single and chair desks; seventh graders were back to single desks. Every teacher had a desk and chair. Each classroom was equipped with a victrola, a globe, maps and books. In addition, the school library was available. Beautification of the school grounds and equipment for the playground were provided by the Patron League.

The teachers during the mid-thirties varied in teaching experience from one to twenty years. Nine of the faculty graduated from a teachers' college; two came from liberal arts colleges; one was a university graduate. The new curriculum provided by the State Department of Education was used in every classroom.

The new Bennett School opened its doors in 1969. In 1977, Manassas gained city status and established its own school system, independent of the Prince William County. As a result, 750 students living in the city of Manassas were withdrawn from the (county) Bennett School

now located within city boundaries. Today, students at Bennett are bused to the schoolhouse from their homes in the county nearby. The old Bennett School, a landmark in Old Town Manassas, is today being used by the Prince William County Police Department for storage.