

The Purcell School
White 1880s to 1933

Source: "Yesterday's Schools by Lucy Walsh Phinney

The Purcell School was located on Purcell Road in the small community of Purcell, all of which were named for a prominent family of the area. The School Board purchased a piece of property on the south side of Purcell Road about a quarter of a mile from where that road and Spriggs Road used to intersect. The Board then contracted to have a one-room schoolhouse built for the community's children. No deed was recorded by the School Board however, so an exact date for the opening of the school is lost to history. One of the students at that first school was Delly Cornwell who was born in 1881 and so probably began attending school in 1885 or 1886. Mr. Cornwell's wife later taught at the new Purcell School and his children Zella and James attended there and still live in the Purcell community.

The small frame building continued to serve the community until 1906 when the School Board decided to build a new schoolhouse for the Purcell community. The old school became the property of Mr. Fair who already owned the land on that side of Purcell Road. Mr. Fair moved the building closer to the road where it served as a community store for many years. After the store closed, Mr. Fair's house on the other side of the road burned down and he used the old schoolhouse/store as a temporary dwelling while his new house, which still stands today, was being built. Today, the old building stands in ruins, covered in honeysuckle vines, beside the road, a silent reminder of its days as a schoolhouse a hundred years ago.

Called 'Public School Building #2, the new schoolhouse was built across the road from the old one on land purchased from the same John Fair. As recorded in the Prince William County Deed Books, the property was located on the northwest corner of the intersection of Purcell Road and old Spriggs Ford Road. Bids for construction of the one-room building were called for on July 21, 1906. It must have been completed quickly because it was ready for opening at the beginning of the 1906-07 school year. For the exact specifications of the new Purcell School, see Appendix D. Children from within a two mile radius of the community were educated there for the next twenty-seven years.

The Purcell school looked unlike any other in Prince William County in that its frame walls were covered with brick-simulated metal siding and with a metal covered gable roof. It was entered through a small 5' by 10' vestibule. On the left side of the vestibule was a marble topped water cooler kept filled with drinking water from a nearby spring. On the right were hooks on which the students hung their coats. An inside door led to the one classroom, which measured 18' by 30'. The walls of the classroom were covered with tongue and groove paneling, painted brown on the lower part and tan on the upper.

The school housed twenty-five or thirty students in grades 1-7. Recollections of former students bring the old classroom to life. The pupils sat in two rows of double desks with attached folding seats facing the teacher's desk which was on a raised platform at the front of the room. A large wood burning stove stood in the center of the room with a stove pipe running along the ceiling to a flue at the rear. Since there was no electricity, kerosene lamps, with silver colored reflectors, were hung on the side walls between the windows. Chalkboards lined the walls and an organ was

prominently displayed. The only other furnishings were the teacher's chair, a rack for maps and a bookcase with glass doors. By 1925 there were 124 books in the school library. Two outhouses were located behind the schoolhouse.

The first teacher in the new Purcell School was Emma Weber (Carter), a Prince William County resident who, after two years at Purcell, continued to teach in the county for many years. One of her students was Carrie Fair (Cornwell) whose education had begun in the old schoolhouse. Carrie, now aged ninety-seven years, still lives in the Purcell community and still remembers that though she looked forward to summer, she felt sad that she wouldn't be seeing "Miss Emma" every day!