

The Thornton (Florence) School
Source: Yesterday's Schools by Lucy Walsh Phinney

Dumfries School District
White 1890s-1930

The fact that there were two Thornton Schools in the early days of Prince William County seems to have confused some of the first chroniclers of the county's education. Even the compilation of School Board minutes done in 1983 for the Supervisor of Real Property for the County Schools interchanges the two schoolhouses. Actually, they were quite different. The earlier of the two was established in 1877 for the black children of the Catharpin area in the Gainesville District. Since the Superintendent of Schools at that time was William W. Thornton, it is probably safe to assume that the school's name was chosen to honor him.

The Thornton School in the Dumfries District opened sometime at the end of the nineteenth century to serve the white children in the area which now is part of Prince William Forest Park. The Superintendent of Schools then was Mr. J. B. T. Thornton and it is likely that his name was given to that school. There are no early records for the Thornton School in the Dumfries District but it does appear on the 1901 Brown map of the county on what is now the northwest intersection of the Mawavi Fire Road and Taylor Farm Road/Burma Road/Spriggs Lane Fire Road. In 1901, that was the intersection of Thornton's Road, the Ridge Road and Gallows Hill Road, an area known as Thornton's Crossroads.

For reasons not known (old age of building or higher enrollment figures were the usual reasons), the School Board decided in October of 1923 to build a new Thornton schoolhouse. J. B. Thornton, Mary Florence and Fannie Florence sold to the members of the School Board of Prince William one acre of land for \$10. The land is described as "Lying on the East Side of the Ridge Road and adjoining the lands [of the Florence's]". The family also agreed to give for public travel" a thirty foot wide road lying on land adjoining to the east; all in all, they donated one acre. The land was very near the location of the first schoolhouse and today is also part of the Prince William Forest Park. The school's location next to the Florence family farm and near the Florence Store and Florence Mill occasionally caused it to be referred to as the Florence School, but most long time residents do not remember or use that name.

The one-room schoolhouse had an alcove which contained an oil burning stove. Every other Friday the mothers and students brought ingredients for soup, which they cooked on the stove for a hot lunch. How wonderful that little schoolroom must have smelled on soup Fridays! On the Fridays in between, the pupils prepared hot chocolate on their stove.

Grades 1-7 were taught at the Thornton School. During most of the 1920s between thirty and thirty five children attended school there. According to the yearend report filed by the teacher Miss Lucile T. Muse at the close of the 1925-26 school year, average daily attendance was twenty-eight although forty-three children were enrolled. Miss Muse that year was only nineteen years old but she had two years of teaching experience and was a high school graduate. For a term of eight months and three weeks, she was paid \$641.25 or \$75 a month for room and board in Dumfries.