

The Old Oakton Schoolhouse Comes Alive for Lessons About History



Jeff Clark, Video Production Specialist with Fairfax County Public Schools, addresses a group of County residents in the historic Oakton Schoolhouse in Oakton Community Park.

On 24 April, the Greater Oakton Community Association (GOCA) hosted Jeff Clark, Video Production Specialist with Fairfax County Public Schools, for a presentation “Education in Fairfax County from 1870-1945”. The gathering of over 45 local residents marked the first time the historic schoolhouse located in Oakton Community Park has served as a place for the community to gather since 1912!

In a fascinating talk supplemented with audio-visuals, Mr. Clark reviewed the expansion and evolution of public schools during this period. He noted that researching the history of schools in Oakton and the rest of the Providence District is an ongoing challenge, because many of the pre-1922 school board records of the Providence District were destroyed. Among the many interesting points he conveyed:

- Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) was established in 1870 following the Civil War when Virginia was readmitted to the Union, with the passage of the Virginia Public Free Schools Act as part of the new Virginia constitution. This constitution established the first statewide system of free, public education for all children in Virginia. FCPS oversight of County schools was initially divided into six magisterial districts, including one named Providence, the progenitor of today’s Providence District even though the overall structure has changed over time.
- The Oakton schoolhouse is one of 15 remaining one-room schoolhouses in the county, although not all are in good condition or open to the public. The earliest public one-room schoolhouses had either log, frame, or brick construction. They were equipped with such niceties as well-water, outhouses, and wood-burning stoves. Many of the original log or frame construction buildings burned down over time.
- Black children were educated separately during this period, generally in more rudimentary buildings. While the schools for White children were enlarged, improved, modernized and/or replaced over time, Black children stayed in the same

buildings for a far longer period of time and usually had access only to books that had been handed down from the White schools.

- The school-age population grew dramatically during this period, from about 4,250 in 1870 to over 8,700 in 1945. The growth was not steady, however; the school population actually declined during the period of 1910 to 1930. In 1870 there were 28 schools for White students and 13 schools for Black students, employing a total of 44 teachers. By 1909, there were a total of 99 schools spread throughout the county.
- The school year was shorter in the beginning, following a farm-friendly calendar, and was extended gradually over time. School was open to anyone from ages six to 21, and consisted of grades 1-7. Generally, boys' attendance dropped off once they were old enough to work on the farm. (Education wasn't made compulsory—at that time, from ages 8-12—until 1908, and kindergarten wasn't introduced county-wide until 1968.)
- As one would expect of a one-room schoolhouse, children of all ages sat together, and a single teacher taught academic basics to several levels of elementary-age boys and girls. Principals also taught. Over time, when the one-room schoolhouse became too small for the growing population, a second and then third room were sometime added. The addition of rooms allowed students to be divided into different grades.
- Mr. Clark discussed in particular the lengthy and distinguished tenure of Milton D. Hall, a teacher who later served as superintendent from 1886 to 1929. Hall was a dedicated public servant who at one point actually took out a mortgage to pay teachers from his own resources when state funding was delayed, which was a frequent occurrence.
- Enrollment growth and the introduction of school buses and rail lines eventually changed the character of the communities the one-room schoolhouses served, and the lives of the children within them. Students who had once walked to a local, often one-room schoolhouse, now rode a bus to a larger “consolidated school” where they were taught in separate grades.

While for the time being, schoolhouse capacity is limited to roughly 45 people at a time, primarily due to pandemic rules, and the events there are time-limited due to the current lack of onsite restroom facilities, GOCA nonetheless sees this talk in the schoolhouse as a great start to what will become an occasional series. Future events will include additional talks on local history and other topics, musical events, and community meetings.

Suggestions are welcome. Stay tuned for early announcements of such events in the occasional GOCA newsletter and also on the GOCA website.