

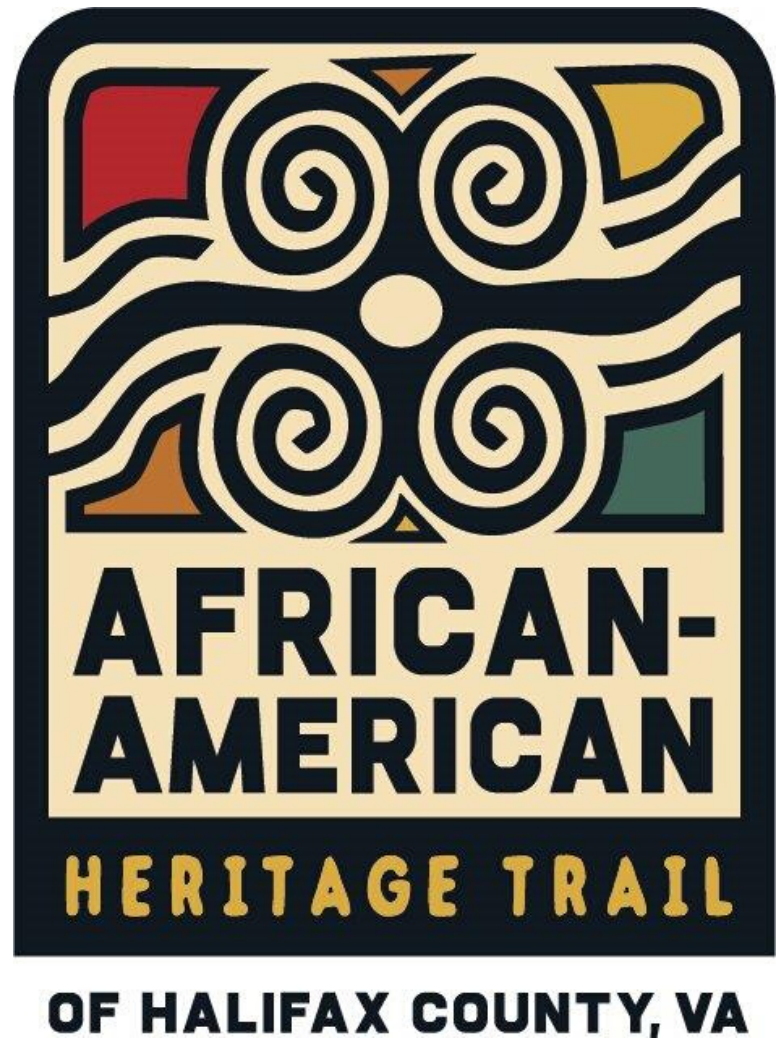


Halifax County African American Heritage Trail

*Identifying, preserving, sharing, and celebrating
African American heritage in Halifax County*

Our Goals

In its infancy, the goal is to create the county's most comprehensive African-American Heritage Trail from the colonial period through the civil rights era. The trail will provide a broader understanding of the lives of African American pioneers, entrepreneurs, civic leaders, and business owners who struggled, triumphed, and established themselves in the fabric of our community. It will focus on commercial, educational, recreational, and religious sites and provide a portrait of land ownership, political and civil rights activities, and burial sites. More than just a map of various sites, the trail will be content-rich and provide access to primary documents that will provide a broad range of information to users.



The project will bring together the efforts of a diverse group of local scholars, historians, educators, and community leaders to identify, preserve, and share the area's rich African American heritage.

In the making is a heritage trail guide that recognizes distinguished African Americans, illuminating local people, places, and events that reflect the county's diverse history. The trail will tell the stories of these people, places where they lived and died and, events that reveal their courage and determination.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a physical trail that interprets and visualizes the heritage themes that tell the story of African Americans in Halifax County. It is envisioned that this trail will begin with the five sites already identified by Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail. Additional sites will require gathering of documentation before being included on the trail. There is nothing to prevent further sites from being added to the trail as more information becomes available.

L.E. Coleman African American Museum

Mountain Road School No. 1



Mountain Road School No. 1 was built circa 1919 for black students in the community.

Following the closing of the school, the building was used for a variety of purposes before it was remodeled and opened to the public as the L. E. Coleman African-American Museum in 2005. Its mission is “to research, collect, and preserve the art, history, and culture of African Americans with emphasis on Halifax County and to foster among people the awareness and perspective from the past and find purpose for the future.”

The museum is named in honor of Reverend Lee Ernest Coleman who was born in Dolphin, Virginia, in 1891. He moved to Halifax County where he was a minister to several churches and played a major role in raising funds to build Halifax Community Hospital.

The L. E. Coleman African-American Museum is located at: 3011 Mountain Road, Halifax, VA 24558.

Mary M. Bethune High School

Halifax Training School, 1920-1956
Mary M. Bethune High School, 1956-1969



The Banister Baptist Association built a private African-American training school in 1827, originally consisting of four wooden buildings and a dormitory. The school year was six months, and the grades went only as far as the ninth. Because of transportation difficulties in a county as large as Halifax, the school was primarily a boarding school. Board was \$200 a year, which was prohibitive for most blacks at the time.

In 1920, the school was rebuilt as the Halifax Training School to house African-American high school students. Later it was upgraded and renamed the Mary Bethune School.

By 1950 it was the state's largest rural black high school.

While there was no running water in labs, little money for equipment and supplies, and no transportation, a national magazine reported that 27 of the 64 seniors went on to college, far above the national average of 20 percent at that time.

In 1956, to meet "separate but equal" standards and stave off integration in the face of court decisions, the county erected the present building, officially named the Mary M. Bethune High School of Halifax County.

Despite the county's efforts, the school was the hub of the local integration movement in 1969. After integration in 1970, Mary M. Bethune became a junior high school. All county high school students—black and white—attended Halifax Senior High School.

The original Mary M. Bethune High School building has subsequently been renovated and renamed the Mary M. Bethune Government Office Complex. The complex provides services for the community and houses the School System administration.

The Mary M. Bethune High School is located at 1030 Mary Bethune Street, Halifax, Virginia.

Meadville Community Center



The result of a dream of Caleb Robinson, who imagined an African-American gathering place to enhance and educate the community.

Caleb Robinson was born in Jamaica in 1864, and educated at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. In 1893, he formed the McKinley Institute on land he purchased in the Meadville section of Halifax County. He imported northern teachers to train African-American girls in reading, writing, and industrial arts at the school. On his deathbed, Professor Robinson gave the land to the school's executive board. He had expressed to them his dream of an African-American gathering place to enhance and educate the community, but at the time, the community was a poor one, and his idea lay dormant for a quarter of a century. Then in 1975, three African-American Baptist organizations, along with local leaders, formed an organization chartered as the Meadville Community Center.

Through determined community efforts, they financed and built the present Center, which was dedicated October 10, 1978. Dr. Martin Luther King Sr. was the guest speaker at that occasion. The building left the association in debt for more than \$90,000, but through sales and raffles, personal gifts, church assessments, and school children's pennies, the debt was paid and the mortgage burned in 1991. Today the Center, which seats 400-500 people, is a significant educational and community focal point, enriching the lives of the residents of Halifax County and its neighbors.

The Meadville Community Center is located at 7114 Chatham Road, Nathalie, Va.

Mizpah Presbyterian Church



Many churches in the second half of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century helped fill African Americans' need for schooling. Frequently the church would raise funds to build the school, with county governments occasionally offering some limited financial assistance. Parents donated much of the building labor and materials. They were also largely responsible for land and building maintenance once the school was built.

The Mizpah Presbyterian Church, founded in 1890, is an example of such a collaboration. In 1901, the Mizpah School was constructed on the land where the church still stands. The school served local black children in grades one through seven. Teachers were poorly paid, often living with students' parents and moving from one family to another. For their board, they were expected to keep up the maintenance of the school building by sweeping, applying oil to the floors to keep the dust down, shoveling coal or putting wood in the stove, and simultaneously supervising the children. There were, however, highly respected in their community and looked to for leadership.

Because the school was connected with the church, students not only studied the "three r's" but also memorized Bible verses and sang hymns and songs. Many families relied on their children to work the fields with them, though, so the school year was seldom more than four or five months long, and absenteeism was high.

In 1935 the Mizpah School was converted to a community day care facility, one of the first at that time in Southern Virginia.

Of Note: The Honorable William A. Kent (1914-1993) served for many years as church elder and clerk of the session. He became the first African-American elected to public office in South Boston when he joined the city council in 1969. He served eight years as vice-mayor and four years as mayor. He retired in 1990 as mayor. He was the owner/operator of Kent's Funeral Service in South Boston.

Mizpah Presbyterian Church is located at 308 Ragland Street, South Boston, Virginia

Washington Coleman Elementary School



Determined to provide elementary education for young African Americans, the Rev. Parham B. Ragland started a school in his backyard sometime around 1875. Though the “Backyard School” was private, Rev. Ragland was able to garner financial support for his project from the Town of South Boston, thus representing the first known public support of black education in Halifax County. The one-room school grew and led to the establishment of a public black grammar school in Bloodfield (also called Mayfield). The school was eventually named the M.H. Coleman Grammar School. Though it was damaged by fire in 1937, it was repaired, reopened, and operated until 1948, at which time it was moved to the former Booker T. Washington High School building.

Booker T. Washington High School had been built for the black high school students who had been attending classes in unsatisfactory quarters above a store at 1811 North Main Street in South Boston. By 1932 funds raised by the black community were joined with those from the South Boston School Board to build this four-room school with library, multi-purpose rooms, and a central office. Although the building was well equipped, it was a small school and limited in curriculum. In 1948 Washington High was merged with the Halifax Training School to provide a centralized black high school with an expanded curriculum. In 1969 Halifax high schools were integrated, and all black and white high school students went to the Centerville High School. The former all-black high school was then renamed Washington-Coleman Elementary School and still serves as an active part of Halifax’s educational community.

Washington-Coleman Elementary School is located at 1927 Jeffress Blvd., South Boston, VA.