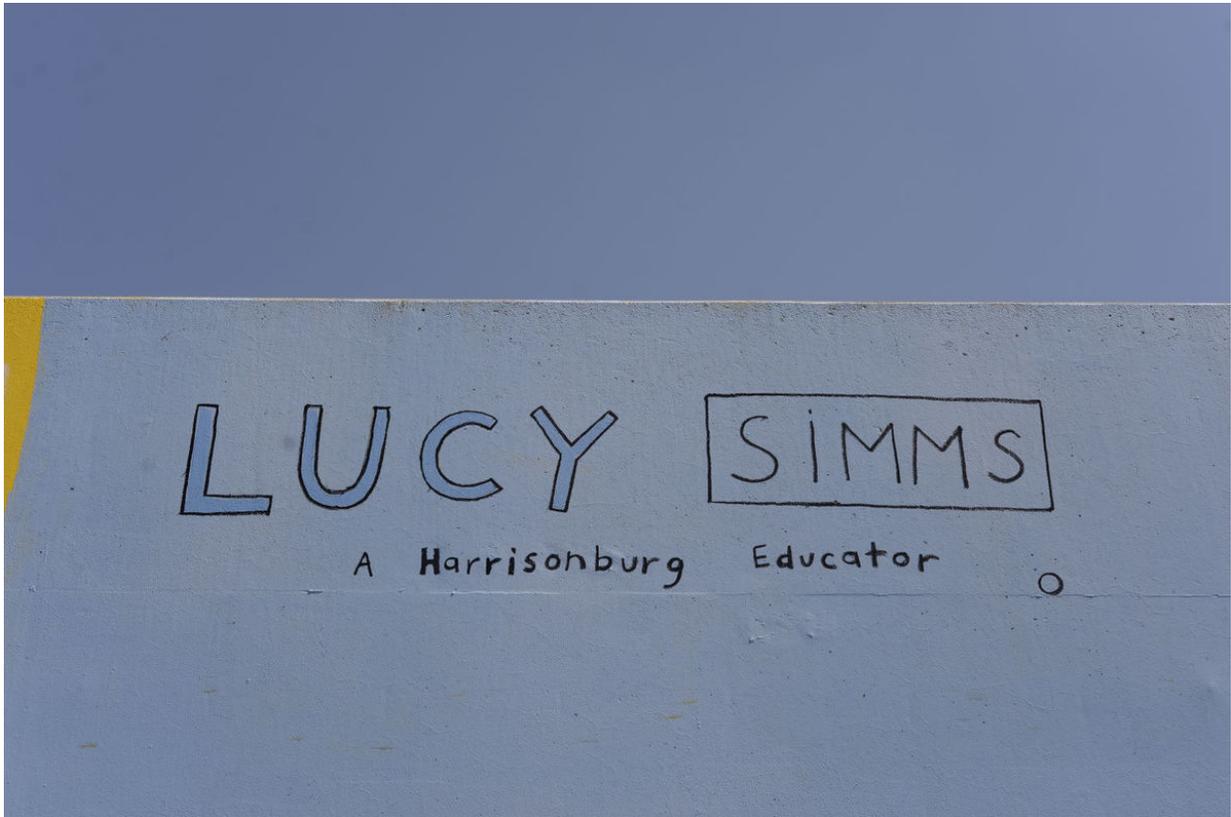


# Ms. Lucy leaves a lasting legacy

- Sammy Criscitello | The Breeze
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- Sam Taylor | The Breeze

Students in JMU's Documenting Black History class will open an exhibit chronicling the life and accomplishments of Ms. Lucy Simms.

In 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation freed millions of enslaved African-Americans, including one of Harrisonburg's first African-American educators — Lucy F. Simms. Known as “Ms. Lucy” to her 1,800 students, Simms' commitment to helping African-Americans discover their potential was unprecedented, as she missed just one half-day of teaching throughout the duration of her 56-year-long career.

While de facto segregation in the U.S. now only lives in history textbooks, Simms' legacy is withstanding. After she died in 1934, the Lucy F. Simms School was built in honor of Ms. Lucy, and continued to educate African-Americans in Harrisonburg until integration caused all-black schools to close in 1966. The school is now called the Lucy F. Simms Center for Continuing Education, and on April 20, the center will open an exhibit created by students in JMU's Documenting Black History class; a special-topics course taught by Mollie Godfrey and Sean McCarthy that strives to honor Simms.

Even though 82 years have passed since Simms taught her final lesson, one of her former students still recalls Simms' impact.

"What she taught came deep from within, and you could feel it," said Doris Allen, 88, a member of Simms' final class. "She was such a powerful woman; she walked six miles to teach school."

The coming exhibit strives to display Simms' impressive character to Harrisonburg residents of all ages. It also looks to inform JMU students about the Harrisonburg of days past, as it'll be temporarily available for viewing on campus in Roop Hall.

"That history is often forgotten, so our whole point of doing this is to give a voice to 200 years of students and a community who never really got the chance to talk," said Emily Nava, a junior history and international affairs double major who wrote an undergraduate thesis on "Black Harrisonburg."

Simms was born into slavery around 1855, and decided to pursue a career in education after being freed in her mid-teens. She attended the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia, from 1874 to 1877 alongside Booker T. Washington, with whom she shared the ideal of working to serve the African-American community by helping them discover their intellectual capabilities.

After graduating, she returned to the Valley and taught for one year at the Athens "colored" school, which was later called Zenda. She next taught in the basement of

Harrisonburg's Catholic church, where she notably faced opposition for educating African-Americans. In one documented incident, a member of the janitorial staff would frequently hide her teaching supplies before class in hopes of preventing her from teaching. For the final 52 years of her life, Simms would call the Effinger Street School, a newly established all-black school in Harrisonburg, home.

“She started a legacy because you never really had black education — ever,” Nava said. “After the Emancipation Proclamation, when African-American kids could start going to school, black Harrisonburg was the place where they could go to school, so they all commuted here. We have maps of the bus routes, and people traveled two hours to come and be taught by her.”

Simms primarily taught lower-level elementary students, and built a strong relationship with each student. She provided each pupil with a detailed report card that included specific comments, and even mentioned their weight and height. If she knew that any of her students had to walk to school, she would meet them on their way.

“Her teaching style was that the students would show up, and she would get them ready for the day by fixing their clothes and brushing their hair and teaching them these manners that would help them move forward post-education,” Nava said. “It wasn't about just the brain but rather the being, and believing that they were good enough to receive an education.”

Simms' impact on Harrisonburg extended outside of the classroom, as she was in the United War Work Campaign, which helped raise money for black troops in World War I. She was also a part of the Colored Teachers Association and was a Sunday school teacher.

“One day she was talking to the principal and he was asking about a student in her class who had lighter skin,” Nava said. “He thought that student didn't belong and she said, ‘How fortunate that student is to belong to a race with such varied skin tones.’ She was known to have said, ‘I am teaching and working for my race.’”

For Lindsey Campbell, another JMU student participating in this project, her sole focus is to satisfy the people who hold Simms' legacy close to their hearts.

“I don't want to take ownership of it, I don't want my name on it or anything — I just want the community to feel that we've represented their voices and their story well,” Campbell, a senior writing, rhetoric and technical communication major, said.

Even though Simms didn't live to see schools become integrated, many people in Harrisonburg will never forget her impact. In 2015, a mural of Simms was painted on the western wall of the Elizabeth Street parking deck in memory of the foundation she set for educating African-Americans.

“Her legacy has lived on because parents have passed the word,” Allen said. “It just keeps on roaring about who she was and how she conducted herself.”

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