



Mary Fairfax was a beloved teacher at the Simms School in the city.

Well-Known Teacher, 'Second Mom' Dies At 94

Mary Frances Fairfax
Taught 4-Plus Decades

By **MELVIN MASON**
Daily News-Record

Mary Frances Fairfax, a well-known educator who spent more than four decades in the classroom, many of them in Harrisonburg's all-black school during segregation, died Saturday at her home on East Gay Street. She was 94.

Fairfax, a Harrisonburg native, taught at the Lucy F. Simms School, Harrisonburg's all-black school, from 1941 until it closed in 1966. After the city desegregated its classrooms, Fairfax taught for a decade at Waterman Elementary School.

In a 2001 interview, Fairfax said desegregation was good, but

Family Influenced Career Choice Of Valley Schoolteacher Mary Frances Fairfax

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she bemoaned the closing of the Simms School.

"When the school closed it really killed the community," she said at the time.

In that same interview, Fairfax remembered her joy while teaching at Simms, which opened two years before she started teaching there.

She said she treasured an old photo of the Simms School choir. "That's my pride and joy, that chorus," she said. "They had the most beautiful voices."

In the photo, Fairfax is listed by her maiden name, "Miss Awkard," the long-time accompanist. In earlier years, when Mary Awkard was the only music teacher, she directed from the piano.

Influencing Pupils

Those who knew Fairfax say her excitement about teaching affected those she taught.

Though Fairfax had no children of her own, Fairfax's niece, Mary Ann Tucker, 54, remembered that her aunt

cared deeply for her students, seeing them in some ways as her own.

"She was always concerned about her students. It didn't matter if they were African-American or Caucasian," Tucker said. "She had high expectations of her students and for those of us in her family. She was very proud of all our accomplishments."

Tucker, who also attended the Simms School, said Fairfax frequently contacted her former students after they left the classroom.

"To so many people, she would say 'Are you doing your best? Are you in school?' She followed through on her students. She kept in touch with her students, and they would always correspond with her."

Held Master's Degree

Fairfax went into teaching because of her family, which placed great value on education, Tucker said.

Tucker says her aunt, who received a bachelor's degree from Virginia State University and a master's from Columbia University, influenced

her own career choice. Tucker taught in Chesterfield County schools near Richmond for 32 years.

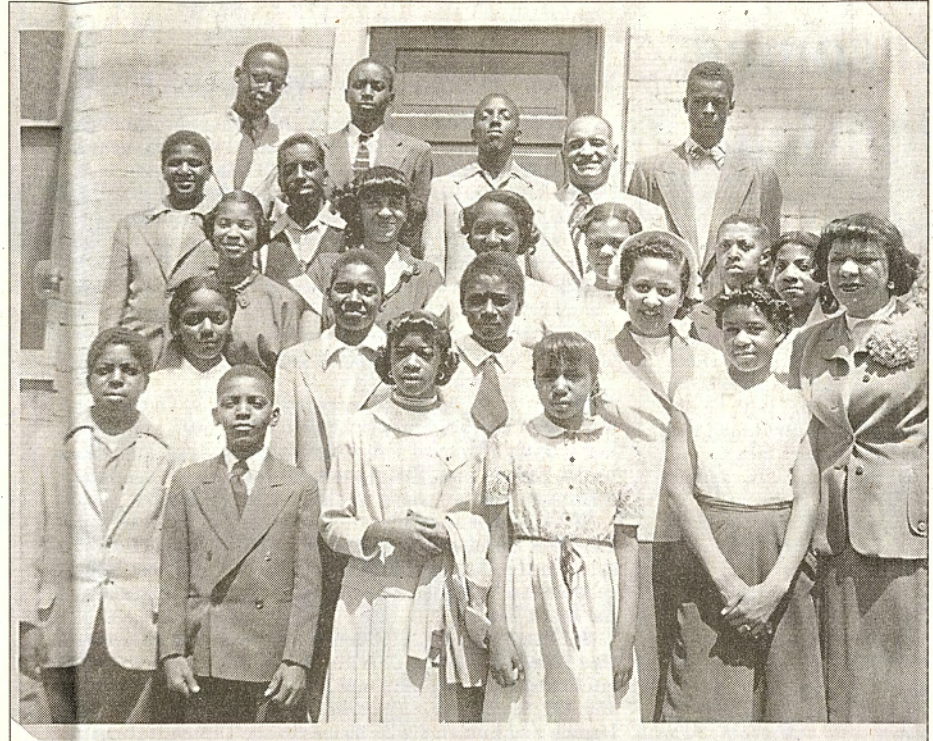
"She was definitely my second mother," Tucker said Sunday after arriving in Harrisonburg.

'Lady Of Wisdom'

Amelia Jones, a former secretary at Simms, said Fairfax commanded respect and was always reliable in what she told others. Jones remembers Fairfax and her now-deceased brother, Joseph Awkard, as always attending Simms and Effinger Street school reunions to keep the memory of the school alive. The school, though not used for classes anymore, is now a center that houses several community groups.

"She was a lady of wisdom," said Jones, who lives in Penn Laird. "If she told you something, you could count on it."

Funeral arrangements are pending with the Kyger Funeral Home in Harrisonburg.



Courtesy photo

Mary Frances Fairfax (far right) stands with a group of Lucy F. Simms students in a May 1952 photo. She taught in local schools for more than 40 years.

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