https://www.fauquier.com/localnews/alumni-fight-to-keep-taylor-legacy-name-alive/article_9af0d2c1-ae33-4a0d-a5b1-aefef75fd028.html

Alumni fight to keep Taylor legacy, name alive

By Tate Hewitt Staff Writer
Nov 6, 2025

1 of 5



Photos by Coy Ferrell/Graphic by Jon Wile

The alumni of William C. Taylor High School know they are not getting any younger.

Some walk to the monthly meetings of the Taylor Historical Society, aided by canes or walkers; others are represented by their spouses in memoriam – and funerals are an increasingly common excuse for absence.

Down Shirley Avenue, heavy construction equipment moves concrete and earth to renovate the place that formed these alumni: a segregation-era high school that was the first to educate Black students from Fauquier County in a building that alumni describe as “just the bricks.”

Taylor opened in 1953 without pavement leading to the front door, when books were hand-me-downs from then all-white Fauquier High School, and parents, who may not have had a crack at high school themselves, had to raise money for band instruments, uniforms and drapes.



Still, it was a leg up at a time when high school was a ticket off tenant farms or working as a live-in maid in a wealthy home.



W.C. Taylor High School opened in 1952 and was the first school in the county to serve African American students from the 7th to the 12th grade until Fauquier County schools integrated.

File photo

Taylor students ran with the opportunity, forming an award-winning band and a fearsome football team, learned debate and parliamentary procedure, hosted acts like the Ronettes ("Be My Baby") and James Brown, and many graduated into white-collar jobs in tech and government contracting.

Now retired from those careers, Taylor alumni have spent the last decade organizing to save the building – and the Taylor name – and advocating for elected officials to balance the future needs of students with this community's demand to preserve a living artifact.

With that task nearing a 2028 finish line, Taylor alumni are looking to the broader community to keep Taylor's legacy alive for future generations of students.



From Left, sisters Janice Carswell and Donna Benn sit next to Ron Ferrell of the Fauquier Education Fund at the Taylor Historical Society on Oct. 22, 2025
Photo by Coy Ferrell

Building an incubator of excellence

Among the alumni working to preserve Taylor's legacy are Earsaline Anderson and Maxine Brown. They've carried the torch for more than half a century as founding members of the Taylor Alumni Committee, which started off by fundraising for Taylor.

"It wasn't so much for the school as it was for the students," Anderson said. "Those that didn't have funds to go on a trip, or books for the library, or to plant a trees and benches outside — wherever there was a need, we would give the funds for that."

They also planned regular reunions, keeping the community together as the world changed around them and providing an output for "Taylor pride," like that exhibited by alumna Janice Carswell.



Janice Carswell speaks at the latest Taylor Historical Society, on Oct. 22, 2025. Her family attended three generations of the school.
Photo by Coy Ferrell

Carswell, two of her siblings, and other members of her family attended each of the three schools that have inhabited the Taylor building. She graduated from high school in 1966; her son attended Taylor Junior High, and her daughter attended Taylor Middle School – all in the same building.



“My sister, my brother and myself were some of the first members of the William C. Taylor High School marching and concert band, an award-winning band,” Carswell said.

“Our mother and our father were band boosters, and they raised money and sold cupcakes and things so that we could get band uniforms — because when they built the school, they didn't give us any frills.”



Wait for Taylor Middle School renovation is finally over

Members of the Taylor Historical Society like Carswell often speak with pride about rising above the circumstances they grew up in, aspirational stories that they hope to preserve for the next generation of students. Fauquier County School Superintendent Major Warner said those stories helped chart his own path.

“My mom and dad, like a lot of folks, came through (Taylor) when circumstances were a little bit different, which changed their educational journey,” Warner said. “I don't know that I'm standing here ... if people didn't navigate and fight and scratch and claw.”

After Taylor got its footing, integration took out its knees — redirecting students to Fauquier High starting in 1965 and shrinking the student body of what was the incubator of excellence for Fauquier County’s Black community.



But that community stuck together after the building was repurposed. Anderson and Brown organized reunions every few years until 2017, when plans to replace the school with a new, modern facility to meet the needs of today’s students began circulating around the county.

Superintendent of Schools Major Warner appears at a meeting of the Taylor Historical Society on Oct. 22, 2025. His parents were Taylor Alumni, and his father was a Taylor High School bus driver.

Photo by Coy Ferrell

It seemed that Taylor had run its course. It would be cheaper to build a new school than retrofit Taylor for a new generation, and the building had problems that raised questions about its original construction. It was built on a floodplain, and many rooms are accessible only from the outside — unnecessarily forcing staff and children into the elements.



So, with the looming threat of the building's closure, the Taylor Alumni Committee members planned what they expected to be the last reunion inside Taylor.



Chair Earsaline Anderson stands at a meeting of the Taylor Historical Society on Oct. 22, 2025

Photo by Coy Ferrell

A game-changing reunion

That 2017 event proved pivotal, providing the initial push needed to save the Taylor building and transform the alumni committee into the Taylor Historical Society — a wider coalition that has since welcomed participation from school staff, including Nick Napolitano, a former principal of Taylor Middle School.

"When I became principal of Taylor, I didn't understand the history of it," Napolitano said. "And I didn't understand the alumni were so active."

He quickly learned.

The Taylor Historical Society invited him to speak that weekend and soon welcomed him with open arms. He reciprocated by connecting the group with the George Mason Film Lab, which filmed **a documentary about Taylor High School** in 2019 — interviewing former students about their experiences inside the school.

Napolitano is one of multiple school employees who attend regular Taylor Historical Society meetings. Others include Prashant Shrestha, assistant superintendent for budget and planning; Josh Johnston, director of facilities; and David Graham, who just retired as assistant superintendent of administration.



Assistant Superintendent of Business and Planning Prashant Shrestha appears at a meeting of the Taylor Historical Society on Oct. 22, 2025. Photo by Coy Ferrell

Their attendance is an extracurricular activity for these staff members. They provide a place for the historical society to meet, brief alumni on the renovation work, and provide contact with RRMM, the architect for the $54 million renovation project. They listen and

contribute to the historical discussion, and for that work, Anderson considers them core members of the group.



Shrestha has often consoled members of the group around the many twists and turns of the grassroots effort to save the building.

“I will never forget the class reunion at Taylor,” Shrestha said. “That was a pivotal moment for me as a human being. It really connected some dots for me in understanding the community.”

More auxiliaries

Shrestha brought his financial experience to the group, as did fundraiser Nancy Griffin-Bonnaire, who jumped at the chance to reconnect with the alumni after she wrote about the 2017 reunion for Discover Fauquier.

Griffin-Bonnaire, now executive director of the **Fauquier Education Foundation**, has since written fundraising letters, crafted grant applications and even set up the Taylor Legacy Commission, which ensures donations to the group remain tax-deductible.

That money helps to fund ongoing efforts to build commemorative benches and a statue of William C. Taylor that the group has commissioned — a seven-foot bronze sculpture by Waynesboro craftsman Robert Bricker that will eventually be installed in front of the renovated Taylor Middle School.



Former School Board Member Duke Bland appears at a meeting of the Taylor Historical Society on Oct. 22, 2025. He was the sole African American member of the Fauquier County School Board as they debated replacing the Taylor Middle building.

Photo by Coy Ferrell

Another group member, Duke Bland, is working to help obtain the commemorative benches. In 2017, he was the sole Black member of the Fauquier County School Board, and the chair of the building committee.

He said alumni presence at meetings of the school board and the Fauquier County Board of Supervisors helped to preserve the school from demolition at the very moment those boards were debating the building's future.

"There were a number of students that had very warm feelings about Taylor, this community and its history," Bland said. "We really wanted to make sure that this iconic building, Taylor Middle School, stayed at the very focal point of this conversation."



Bland said the fight to preserve the building and the name of educator William C. Taylor reminded him of the **parable of the three deaths**. Originally written by David Eagleman, Bland heard a minister retell the story at a funeral several years ago.

“He said, ‘His first death is when he closes his eyes and takes his last breath. That's death number one. Death number two is when his clay body is returned to the soil. And the third death is when his name is spoken for the last time,’” Bland recounted.

“So, with that in mind, this man will not die,” Bland said. “That's why it's so important we keep this going.”

*Reach Tate Hewitt at **thewitt@fauquier.com**.*

*Want to stay up to date on the best stories about Life in the Piedmont? **Sign up for the Fauquier Times’ daily newsletter, The LIP, here.***

Tags

Warrenton | Taylor Middle School | Taylor High School | W.c. Taylor High | Fauquier County Public Schools | Fauquier County | Major Warner | Taylor Historical Society | Fauquier High School | Earsaline Anderson | Taylor Alumni Committee | Prashant Shrestha | Fauquier Education Foundation | Duke Bland | Fauquier County School Board | Nick Napolitano

Tate Hewitt

Learn more about your privacy options