https://www.fauquier.com/localnews/the-man-behind-the-school-who-was-william-c-taylor/article_f872c6dd-b645-4a7a-8f22-4707615cc880.html

The man behind the school: Who was William C. Taylor?

Fauquier County's Taylor Middle School is named after the renowned Black educator

By Tate Hewitt Staff Writer
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The Taylor family at 1902 from left: Alice Anne, Alice A., William Charlton and Elsie Leigh. Identified by county preservationist Heather Hembrey, who researched the Lucasville School for Prince William County. Photo courtesy of the Berea College Archives, Berea, Kentucky.

Submitted

For years, people have debated what to do with Taylor Middle School, possibly the only government building in Fauquier County named after an African American.

But today, few remember William C. Taylor, the man the school is named after — leaving records from college archives, newspaper clippings and the work of local historians to paint an incomplete picture of a pioneering force behind education in Prince William and Fauquier counties.

William Charlton Taylor was born between Aug. 22, 1858, and June 1859 — records disagree — to enslaved parents in Lexington, Kentucky.



Most of the remaining photographs of William C. Taylor capture him as an older man with a cane.

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There's not a lot of information about the early years of his life, which soon collided with the Civil War, but as the war ended and Taylor entered his 20s, he went to school. He started in 1880 at a prep academy at Berea College — the first college in the South to be integrated. According to college records, he graduated in 1887 with a bachelor of science degree – an extraordinary accomplishment for someone born into slavery.



Four years later, Taylor married Alice A. Woodford, of Winchester, Kentucky. The couple had two daughters, Alice and Elsie, while Taylor worked as a teacher, eventually becoming principal of a grade school in Lexington, Kentucky and later serving on Berea's Board of Trustees from 1896 to 1901.

Around that time the family moved to Virginia, ostensibly so Taylor could teach science and agriculture at the Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth, later known by the name of its own founder: Jennie Dean.

Taylor would work there until 1929, serving as the school's principal twice — sometime after the turn of the century and later around 1927, according to school documents. As a teacher, he was responsible for teaching students about the fast-evolving field of agriculture. As a principal, he worked to steady the school's funding, appealing for donations from philanthropists in cities such as New York and Washington, D.C.

In the meantime, Alice Taylor worked on-and-off at the Lucasville School in Manassas. For two years, William C. Taylor also worked there, stepping into the role on Sept. 16, 1907 when another teacher failed their employment examination, according to documents from the Manassas District School Board. That year he earned $125 for teaching at the school for five months.

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W. C. Taylor

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The Manassas Industrial School,

FOR THE TRAINING OF COLORED YOUTH.

LOCATED AT MANASSAS, VIRGINIA.

Manassas, Va., March 20 1904.

Pres. Wm G. Frost,
Berea, Ky.

My Dear Sir:—

I have just received a copy of the Lexington Leader containing that great plea made by you before the Senate of Ky.

I consider it not only a plea for my people but for all humanity - pointing justice to higher ground. I thank you for it and trust whatever may be done in the case, in the future, Providence may lead by the light of Christian principles.

Please give my regards to Pres. Frost.

Very sincerely,

Wm C. Taylor

Census records fill in scant details of what must have been a busy life. By 1910, the Taylor family lived on a farm on Brentsville Road. By 1920, their daughter Annie had married. By 1930, Taylor was 71 and working in Warrenton, commuting home to Manassas. By 1940, he moved away from the farm into a rented home in Warrenton's Madisontown neighborhood. His salary was $1,200 a year.

He also remarried — wedding Ruth Butler on April 10, 1936 in Alexandria. He was 68, she was a 28-year-old Fauquier county native.

He started working in Fauquier County after being hired as the principal of the County Training School in 1929. The school was later renamed The Rosenwald School, after benefactor Julius Rosenwald, the Sears Roebuck magnate who help to fund thousands of schools for Black children across the South.

The Rosenwald School was built so close to the railroad tracks that passing trains would drown out school lessons, according to former Rosenwald teachers interviewed by Fauquier Magazine in 1993. Over time, the school expanded to nine rooms, a workshop and 11 teachers, but it wasn't large enough. It was the only high school for Black students in Fauquier County — those outside of the Center District had to travel or overnight at Jennie Dean if they wanted a high school diploma.

Taylor would retire from the Rosenwald School in 1945. The *Fauquier Democrat* reported at the time that he was "the oldest teacher in active service in the State of Virginia." His long career was commended by the Fauquier County Teachers Association, the Democrat went on to report: "Mr. Taylor was a pioneer in education and was credited with having made possible the first accredited high school for negros (sic) in Northern Virginia."

He lived just long enough to see the opening of William C. Taylor High School in 1952.

"I want to express my deep, heartfelt appreciation for the honor of having named the new colored high school William C. Taylor High School," Taylor wrote in an open letter to the community, according to a 1969 Fauquier Democrat article.



William Charlton Taylor died on Nov. 23, 1952. receiving funeral services at Warrenton First Baptist, where he was a deacon for many years. Taylor's grave is in the foreground next to wife Ruth Taylor in the Warrenton Cemetary.
Photo by Tate Hewitt

He died that year on Nov. 23; his death certificate noting a “coronary occlusion” as cause of death, or a blocked artery in modern terms, often the cause of a heart attack. Taylor’s funeral was at Warrenton First Baptist, where he was a deacon for many years, and he was buried in Warrenton Town Cemetery, in Section C East, lot 114, grave 1.

His grave can still be seen today. It’s in the back, overlooked and a little forlorn. But his real tribute is around the corner of Keith Street and down E. Shirley Avenue, emblazoned across the bricks of Taylor Middle School.

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