

United States Department of the Interior
 National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: James A. Bland High School

Other names/site number: Big Stone Gap Town Hall; Big Stone Gap Elementary School; Rexall Carnes Middle School; VDHR ID 101-5013

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 505 E. 5th Street South

City or town: Big Stone Gap State: VA County: Wise

Not For Publication:

Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A X B ___ C ___ D

<p>_____ Signature of certifying official/Title: <u>Virginia Department of Historic Resources</u> State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	<p>_____ Date</p>
<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____ Signature of commenting official:</p>	<p>_____ Date</p>
<p>_____ Title :</p>	<p>_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>2</u>	<u>6</u>	buildings
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>3</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>3</u>	<u>9</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION: School

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

GOVERNMENT: Government Office

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT: Pedagogical Modernism

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: CONCRETE; BRICK; METAL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

James A. Bland High School (now Big Stone Gap Town Hall) is located within the municipal boundary of Big Stone Gap, Virginia, an incorporated community in the southwestern corner of Wise County. Designed by prominent Wise County architect Charles B. McElroy and built by Kingsport, Tennessee-based Armstrong Construction Company, the school exemplifies the Progressive Modernist architectural style. The property is located to the southeast of Big Stone Gap's main thoroughfare, Wood Avenue, and the surrounding commercial district. The south fork of the Powell River frames the southern and eastern boundaries of the school, industrial arts building, and athletic field, which are collectively situated on 19.27 acres. The primary school building is a single-story, L-shaped, 17,437-square-foot structure with a basement that provides space for storage and the boiler room. The building is situated upon a poured concrete foundation and is constructed of wood framing with common bond brick veneer. It retains many of the defining external characteristics of the Pedagogical Modernist style: the flat-pitched roof; heavy, plain cornices and metal coping; recessed entryways; and original steel frame multi-pane hopper windows on the southeast facade. Although the Town of Big Stone Gap altered the northern wing of the main school building's interior, window bays, and some entryways upon acquiring the property in 1987, the building retains historical integrity in terms of its general floor plan, gymnasium, bathrooms, teacher's lounge, lockers, tilework, and boiler room. The industrial arts

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building, located to the southeast of the main school building, is a 3,600-square-foot structure that remains largely unaltered. It is situated on its original footprint and retains original hopper windows, car bays, brickwork, and coping. The athletic field to the southwest of the school buildings is a contributing resource, and the Town of Big Stone Gap's Parks and Recreation division still uses it for its original purpose. Non-contributing secondary resources on the campus include six outbuildings located adjacent to the western edge of the main school building, rows of wooden storage bays located between the school and athletic field and along the property's southern boundary, and several concrete block storage bays.

Narrative Description

Setting

James A. Bland High School is located within the southeast corner of the business district of Big Stone Gap, an incorporated community in the southwestern corner of Wise County. The property is located to the southeast of Big Stone Gap's main thoroughfare, Wood Avenue, and the surrounding commercial district. Although the school was not included in the Big Stone Gap Historic District, (NRHP SG100003482), it lies just four blocks to the south.

To accommodate the school's construction, six individuals sold parcels of land to the county's Board of Education in 1952. Sellers included Addie Tatum Thomas, Garfield Barnes, Joe Looney, Elizabeth E. Tucker, Joseph G. Long, and Herbert Taylor. The parcels amounted to 19.27 acres, as the *Kingsport Times* reported in 1953.¹ The properties were located in a portion of the town that Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from 1908, 1913, and 1923 suggest contained a considerable concentration of Black residents; they list Black schools and churches, as well as a Black I.O.O.F. hall constructed in 1913 (no longer extant). Therefore, the school, while within walking distance of the town's business district, was more immediately situated within a residential area lying between the town's commercial center and the South Fork of the Powell River. The river wraps around the southern and eastern boundaries of the property, while modest houses of pre-WWII and more recent construction lie immediately to the north, northwest, and northeast. Due east of the school and across 5th Avenue is a small cinderblock property that served as the Appalachian Girl Scout Center. This property, conceived by Bland High School teacher Miriam Fuller and constructed by students at the high school, was completed in 1967. Shrouded by trees and tinged with green moss due to the moist river air, the building is in poor condition but nonetheless symbolizes African Americans' deep commitment to providing exceptional educational opportunities and extracurricular activities to Wise County youth. Due west of the school is the original athletic field, currently owned and maintained for its original use by the Town of Big Stone Gap's Parks and Recreation division. While the school and field are situated on land that gently slopes down toward the Powell River, properties across the river

¹ "Separate Value Appraisals Ordered for School," *Kingsport Times*, March 18, 1977; "Delinquent Tax Suits," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, June 19, 1952; Matthew Bright, "Historical Information About Big Stone Gap Town Hall Building, 505 E. 5th Street South," copy of unpublished notes in Jinny Turman's possession; "Colored High School Ready 1953 Semester." By 1977 the Town of Big Stone Gap was vying to purchase "seven acres" of the property from the Wise County Board of Education, an amount that likely excluded the athletic field at the time.

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are steeply sloped, hinting at the stark mountainous terrain that envelops the community. Deciduous trees grow along the river and throughout the residential area surrounding the property, creating a lush, green environment that attracts waterfowl and wildlife year-round. The Town of Big Stone Gap now maintains a popular three-mile greenbelt that winds around the riverside boundary of the property.

Because Big Stone Gap was platted along the valley floor, which runs on a northeast to southwest axis, the school reflects a similar orientation. Although the main school structure is an 'L' shape, when looking on a map oriented to the north, the school is positioned like an inverted 'V.' The property's primary entrance and gymnasium face 5th Avenue, which runs southeast to northwest, and a parking lot for public use lies between 5th Ave. and the building's main façade. Fifth Avenue dead-ends at the riverbank just south of the school's industrial arts building, but a combination paved and dirt drive provides access to additional parking and storage bays located on the southern, western, and northern sides of the property. Most of the land immediately surrounding the school is paved or gravel, although small grassy areas are located on the northern and southern ends of the public parking lot as well as on the western sides of the main school building. The athletic field remains covered in grass and is surrounded by trees to the south (riverside) and west, and homes to the north. An additional parking lot is located at the far western end of the athletic field. A small cluster of trees separates the parking lot from the field, a feature that creates a park-like atmosphere.

James A. Bland High School

James A. Bland High School,² with its multipurpose gymnasium and cafeteria, classrooms with lecture and workspaces, modern library, basement workshops, health clinic, and separate industrial arts facility fully reflected new thinking about the role of environment and experience in a child's learning.³ The school retains many of its Modernist characteristics, including its single story, 'L'-shaped floor plan; flat-pitched roof; heavy, plain cornices and metal coping; recessed entryways; and some of its steel frame multi-pane hopper windows, particularly on the southern end of the school and on the industrial arts building.

The main school building has an L-shaped footprint, oriented such that the property's northeast corner points almost due north. The building, constructed on land sloping gently southward toward the river, is one story but includes basement space on both wings. The building's northern flank at the time of the school's operation would have included the main entrance and offices, the library, classrooms, a laboratory, teachers' lounge, and student bathrooms, all of which were linked by a corridor running the full length of the wing. The property's southern flank includes a distinctive multipurpose space that served as the gymnasium, auditorium, and cafeteria. The school kitchen was located adjacent to the multipurpose room on the southwestern end of the building. This same end also includes a modern split-level addition with a shed roof. The construction date of this addition remains undetermined, although it is likely post-1965. The

² Local newspapers also referenced James A. Bland High School as James A. Bland Memorial High School, as was the case in an article about the school's dedication in the *Coalfield Progress*. See "Rev. Cain Speaks at Dedication New Colored School," *Coalfield Progress*, February 4, 1954.

³ "Colored High School Ready 1953 Semester," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, January 15, 1953.

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addition is not indicated on the 1987 blueprint, but aerial photographs clearly signal its presence in 2002. Although the brick on the addition is of more recent origin than that on the original building, it was designed to blend with the rest of the main school building. The addition sits on a concrete block foundation, which departs from the poured concrete foundation of the main building, but the common-bond brickwork, heavy stone sills, and metal coping are consistent with the school's design aesthetic. The basement beneath the property accommodates a furnace room, coal room, and storage space. Although the basement has suffered neglect, original Kewanee Type C Boilers and light fixtures remain intact. A crank to raise and lower coal and other supplies likewise remains extant on the ground level above the main entrance to the basement.⁴

The original portions of the school and industrial arts buildings are constructed of concrete block set upon poured concrete foundations. Both properties retain their original common-bond brick veneers, which feature one header course for five courses of stretchers, although the brickwork on the main building's entryway was covered in stucco as part of the 1987 renovations. Both buildings retain many of their original Modernist features. Heavy cornice bands with metal coping cap the exterior walls on all sides of the buildings, unifying each wing. Large window bays sit upon heavy concrete sills, and windows on the northern wing of the main school building are unified by a belt course running the entire span of the northern façade. No belt course exists on the western or southern facades although sills are replicated throughout. Notably absent are lintels; the window bays fully extend to the cornice to maximize light, one of the defining characteristics of Pedagogical Modernism. Many of the windows and doorways have, however, been altered. Window bays on the eastern, northern, and western facades have been filled in, and original hoppers replaced with single or double-hung windows. Only the industrial arts facility and southern end of the multipurpose auditorium retain their original windows. Likewise, entryways on the eastern, western, and southern ends of the main school building have been covered or filled in. Many of the original double doors, sidelights, and transoms have been replaced with single doors, filled with brick or cinder block (southern façade of the industrial arts building), or covered with corrugated metal or vinyl siding (western and southern ends). The rear entrance to the auditorium and main entrance to the industrial arts building retain excellent integrity, however, with original doors and transoms.

The main building's interior is likewise altered but still retains many of its original design elements. Only one significant alteration has been made to the building's footprint, and several rooms throughout the school, including the basement, the multi-purpose space, the industrial arts building, showers, certain bathrooms, and interior storage spaces carved out of classrooms reveal the building's history as an educational institution. Upon entering into the building through the main, east-facing entrance, one immediately notices the original interior brickwork that runs from ground-level to about two-thirds the height of the wall; original lockers lining both sides of the hallway; a water fountain niche; and what would have been the administrative offices on the right. Just past the main entrance to the left are the double doorways to the multipurpose room. Closet spaces, bathrooms, and showers retain original fixtures, glazed tile, and flooring, and many entryways throughout the building remain in their original locations.

⁴ "Warm Weather Boosts Work on Colored School," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, March 19, 1953.

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Upon acquisition of the property, the Town of Big Stone Gap commissioned renovations that were carried out between 1987 and 1988. A blueprint for the renovations provides the best evidence of the major alterations. The most significant renovations occurred on the building's northern flank, the section containing classrooms and offices. Alterations included partitioning of classrooms and the central corridor. The school's main offices on the east end became the Water Collection office (formerly the school receptionist's office), the Bookkeeper's office (formerly the principal's office), and vault spaces for the Town. The school library was transformed into the Town Council Chamber, and classrooms became office spaces for town management. Contractors partitioned off the western half of the corridor to accommodate the Big Stone Gap Police Department. They inserted a dispatch room into the center of the corridor, narrowing the original hallway and effectively dividing what used to be a long, open space connecting all of the classrooms – a space where students would have gathered in between classes to socialize and retrieve books from their lockers. Contractors also inserted additional partitions to create an office for the Chief of Police and police officers; space for booking, interrogation, and holding cells; an evidence room; and a conference room, located at the western end of the building. The library and four classrooms were transformed into approximately thirteen different rooms. The men's and women's bathrooms along the south side of the corridor remain in their original locations, although the blueprint indicates that renovations included some minor alterations to the fixtures. None of these renovations altered the footprint of the building, but they did create a less open environment for work, a considerable departure from the Pedagogical Modernist focus on encouraging creativity, collaboration, and open inquiry.

Certain alterations were made to the multi-purpose room, although it retains excellent integrity. The Town renovated the former kitchen space and bathrooms that abutted the gymnasium by upgrading bathroom fixtures and expanding stalls to fulfill ADA mandates. Regrettably, the retractable tables along the western wall of the gymnasium, where students would have dined together, have been removed, although their stalls are now delineated by colorful paintings of former Wise County school mascots, including the Central High School Buffaloes, recognizing the high school that preceded Bland. The current flooring of the gymnasium is not original; a photograph appearing in *The Post* in 1954 shows a freshly polished hardwood floor. A vinyl composite tile now surfaces the basketball court. The acoustic tile drop ceiling is also not original; the same photograph reveals the metal girders that support the roof. Windows were originally composed of three, 3x7 groupings of rectangular plate glass windows, flanked by single columns of seven panes. The windowsills were located halfway up the building and, characteristic of Pedagogical Modernism, extended to the roofline. Now, the window height is reduced by half, capped with stucco infill that matches the alterations to the windows along the northern corridor. This stucco aligns with the drop ceiling on the interior, likely intended to mask a contemporary HVAC system. The rectangular windows were replaced with singular glass plates. Still, the blueprint suggests that many of the original features of the multi-purpose room remain intact. The renovations retained key architectural elements from the original design, including showers (which have original tile and hardware); the kitchen, food storage space, and the retractable service window; the back porch; stage; and office on the southeast corner of the wing, which appears largely unaltered. The stage retains its original hardwood flooring and

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hopper windows.⁵ The gymnasium continues to serve its original function by providing recreation space for the Town of Big Stone Gap's Parks and Recreation division, as well as an important community gathering space for elections, arts festivals, and more.

The contributing structure maintaining the greatest architectural integrity is the Industrial Arts Building, located to the southeast of the main school building. It is original to the property, having been built in 1953. Currently being used as a warehouse for the Town of Big Stone Gap, it has experienced comparatively few alterations. It retains most of its original hopper windows, metal coping, the original main double-door entryway with transom window, and garage bays on the western end. Alterations include a few windowpane replacements; one central window bay on the southern façade replaced with a single door and cinder block infill; a small external shed added to the western end of the southern façade; and a transom removed from a doorway on the northwestern corner of the building.

Non-contributing secondary resources, erected along the northern, western, and southern peripheries of the school, include a string of small wooden storage sheds, cement block bays, and six metal storage buildings. All post-date the 1960s.

Integrity Analysis

James A. Bland High School, now the Big Stone Gap Town Hall, retains excellent historical integrity. The main school building, industrial arts building, and athletic field, minus minor additions, retain their original footprints and collectively convey the appearance and feeling of a school. Despite interior alterations and enclosure of the hopper windows on the northern wing, the main school building still harbors many of its original features central to a Pedagogical Modernist property: the lockers, gymnasium, stage, hopper windows, showers, and cafeteria service window. Adding to its integrity are the intact boiler room; flat-pitched roof; heavy, plain cornices and metal coping; and recessed entryways. The industrial arts building remains largely unaltered. Therefore, the property as a whole, and the buildings in particular, continue to convey the spirit of Pedagogical Modernism. Finally, although the property ceased operating as a school, it is worth noting that the site retains a vital element of its *functional* integrity: that of civic center. Much as it did for the town's Black population in the 1950s and 1960s, Bland High now provides all residents of Big Stone Gap with a place to gather for athletics, voting, and community meetings. Given that architects like Charles McElroy, who drew from the philosophy of education reformer John Dewey, intended for their buildings to foster (among other things) students' civic sensibilities, it is noteworthy that seventy years after its completion, Bland remains central to Big Stone Gap's civic life.

⁵ Tom Matthews, "Wise County numbers down, needs up," *Kingsport Times-News*, February 9, 1982; Melanie Crouch, "Wise County to Sell School to BSG," *Kingsport Times-News*, April 11, 1986; Stephen Igo, "Big Stone Gap moving offices to 'Old Carnes,'" *Kingsport Times-News*, April 4, 1988; Miriam DeLois Morris, "Negro Education Started in 1899," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, January 28, 1954.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION
ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK
SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance

1952-1965

Significant Dates

1952

1958

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Shorter, Cato Hadras

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

McElroy, Charles B.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Bland High School is being nominated under Criterion A for its association with Education, Black Ethnic Heritage, and Social History, and under Criterion B for its association with C. H. Shorter, an important Black educator who became Principal of Bland High School. This property reflects the efforts of African Americans in southwest Virginia to educate their children despite profound social and economic constraints that systemic racism and discrimination placed upon them. Given that the school was constructed and dedicated shortly before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it serves as a poignant symbol of the Commonwealth of Virginia's and Wise County's efforts to resist integration by "equalizing" segregated education and, following the ruling, refusing to place Black students in white schools. At no point between 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did the Wise County Board of Education integrate its public school system, placing Bland within a statewide pattern of resistance. Unlike a few counties in southwest Virginia that integrated in the early 1960s, Wise County resisted until state leaders, fearing a loss of federal education funding, compelled the county to integrate. Four years later, in 1969, the first class of integrated students arrived on the property following a fire at East Stone Gap Elementary School. Principal Shorter is a vital figure in this property's story; he was a primary driver pushing for high quality education for Wise County's Black student population. Prior to Bland's construction, he oversaw the expansion of the school curriculum at Central High, in Appalachia, Virginia, to ensure his students preparedness for college and the workforce, rather than just trades like coal mining. With new funding available from the State of Virginia to "equalize" segregated education in the 1950s, Shorter ensured that Bland High School would be state-of-the-art and modern in every respect. He devoted his life to expanding opportunities for his students, evident in the lengths he and his wife, Mary Beatrice, went to provide resources, amenities, and support beyond the classroom. The period of significance for James A. Bland High School is 1952–1965, the timeframe marking the school's design, construction, and operation as a segregated high school in Wise County. It is being nominated for its significance at the local level.

Acknowledgements

This nomination is the result of many contributors who devoted precious time, energy, and resources to developing the narrative. Dr. Gail Shorter-Judson and Dr. Jé Judson drew from family collections and alumni resources to develop the statement of significance for Criterion B, as well as portions of the statement of significance for Criterion A. Special thanks go to Math Rowe, who, as a student at the University of Virginia's College at Wise, developed the historical context behind the creation of the school featured in Section 8. Additional UVA-Wise students contributed information on the history of Bland High School's teachers, alumni, and extracurricular activities. They include Isaiah Artrip, Shayleigh Cire, Kenny Lynch, Will Ireson, Alexander Martin, Cheyenne Riggins, and Samuel Shackelford. Without the additional research that Dr. Tom Costa and UVA-Wise student Zoe Crihfield conducted on Black education in Wise County, this project would have taken even longer to complete. Many others offered advice,

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information, and encouragement. Reverend Sandra Jones provided insight into the lives and stories of key teachers and students; Matthew Bright allowed us access to his personal notes on the history of the school; and, of course, the staff of the Town of Big Stone Gap—especially Town Manager Steve Lawson—have been essential to the development of this project. A committee consisting of alumni, children of alumni, and Black leaders throughout the Central Appalachian coalfields provided feedback on drafts of this document. Other thanks go to the volunteers at the Lonesome Pine School; Burke Greer and Brenda Smith at the Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park; and staff at the Virginia State Archive in Richmond who collectively provided us with access to historical resources. Finally, we would like to thank Michael Pulice, Western Region Architectural Historian for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, for his many years of guidance, his assistance with the more technical parts of the nomination, and for taking the time to work with students as they developed this project.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Criterion A: Education, Social History, and Black Ethnic Heritage

Educational History:

Prior to the American Civil War, North Carolina was the only southern state to maintain a comprehensive public education system. It began in 1840 but was exclusively designed for non-elite whites. While Virginia did not outlaw the education of individual free or enslaved Blacks, it banned schools for African Americans. Following the Civil War, public education spread through the South, as free and formerly enslaved African American men entered politics and helped to author new state constitutions required for re-entry into the Union. The Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen’s Bureau) played a pivotal role in establishing state public education systems.⁶ A federal agency charged with aiding “displaced Southerners, including newly freed African Americans” in the final year and immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the Freedman’s Bureau maintained a variety of responsibilities, most notably education. Its educational mandates included “encouraging Black communities to raise money to purchase land for school buildings, providing building material from abandoned military buildings, transporting teachers to their schools, and paying rent on schoolhouses.”⁷

The State of Virginia provided meager funds for the Freedmen’s Bureau—forty-four cents per capita allotted for African American students—which limited its ability to educate Black youth. This educational program did not last; it ended with the ratification of the new Virginia

⁶ Ronald E. Butchart, “Freedmen’s Education in Virginia, 1861-1870,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/freedmens-education-in-virginia-1861-1870/>; Marianne Julienne and Brent Tarter, “Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, September 29, 2021, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/public-school-system-in-virginia-establishment-of-the/>.

⁷ “Freedmen’s Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866,” United States Senate, accessed January 6, 2022, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/FreedmensBureau.htm>; Butchart, “Freedmen’s Education in Virginia.”

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Constitution in 1869, which established a public education system that was supposed to cater to all Virginia students, regardless of race, beginning in 1870. Limited biracial schools had formed in Petersburg, Norfolk, and Richmond since the Civil War, but state leaders ultimately rejected an amendment proposed by formerly enslaved person Thomas Bayne (rejected by a vote of 56 to 15), which would have prohibited racial segregation. After the re-admittance of Virginia back into the United States, the General Assembly ratified the new Constitution that established a segregated public education system.⁸ The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the constitutionality of “separate but equal” public facilities, reinforced the continuation of segregated public schools throughout the United States for the next half-century.

The creation of the public education system in Virginia was a slow process. Many white Virginians opposed public education, believing school taxes to be too expensive, that they should not pay to educate freed slaves, and that public schools would lack religious instruction. The Superintendent of Public Instruction, William Ruffner, who focused Virginians instead on the moral and economic benefits of public education, deftly navigated those various fears. Nearly thirty years after the creation of the public education system in Virginia, it became invaluable to citizens and spread across the entire state, including the state’s southwestern counties.⁹

Prior to 1870, public education in Wise County was incredibly rudimentary, falling far behind the rest of the state with only twenty-five schools. Twenty-two of these were in one-room log cabins. Teachers were often paid in the form of tobacco instead of money as cash was limited. However, following the coal boom of the 1880s and the founding of companies like the Tinsalia Coal and Iron Company (est. 1880), which shortly after its creation folded into the Virginia Coal and Iron Company (est. 1882), and Stonega Coke and Coal Company (est. 1902), the entire area transformed. Public education for whites dramatically improved, leading to the creation of the first secondary school in Wise County, Big Stone Gap High School, and the employment of principals on a twelve-month basis at Virginia City School (near St. Paul), the first employment of its kind in the state.¹⁰

The same opportunities did not exist for Black students, especially within the realm of secondary education, which had previously been offered by some Freedman’s Bureau schools. Additionally, *Plessy v. Ferguson* ultimately forced Black southwest Virginians, many of whom lived in segregated coal camps, to find alternate ways to educate their children. For many, this meant establishing schools in Black churches. In Derby, owned by Stonega, Black mining families sent their children to a two-story community center that doubled as a church and school. In Big Stone Gap, public education began in 1899 with the establishment of an elementary school at Mt. Hermon Presbyterian Church. After the church burned down during the 1909-1910 school year, classes temporarily shifted to the A.M.E. Zion Church until Principal J.H. Byers oversaw the construction of a new “two-room white brick structure with two basements” in

⁸ Julienne and Tarter, “Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia.”

⁹ Julienne and Tarter, “Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia.”

¹⁰ Lonesome Pine Office on Youth, *Looking Back: Wise County in the Early Years* (self-pub., 2004), 222-223; “Virginia Coal and Iron Company,” and “Stonega Coal and Coke Company,” Social Networks and Archival Context, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://snaccooperative.org/>.

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1912. A statewide aid organization, the Negro Organization Society of Virginia, may have contributed \$6,000 to the construction of this facility. The school grew steadily, eventually incorporating “Junior High School courses” in the 1920s and, by 1931, high school courses. As Miriam DeLois Morris (Fuller) recounted in her 1954 history of Black education in Big Stone Gap, “overcrowded conditions and overloaded teachers” compelled school officials to drop high school classes. The situation in Appalachia was equally strained. C.H. Shorter, who in the early 1930s oversaw instruction at a “little two-room elementary school,” began offering high school classes but faced considerable spatial constraints. Demand grew, and the school eventually accommodated Black high school students from across Wise County. Black coalfield residents’ determination to educate their children motivated them to pool their resources and to find ways to transport students across rugged mountain terrain. Accommodating most of the county’s Black student population, however, placed considerable pressure on school administration and facilities.¹¹

Even with the restructuring of Wise County’s school boards in 1923, which resulted in seven regional boards consolidating into a single county board of education under Superintendent J. J. Kelly, Jr., African Americans in Wise County were not uniformly able to access secondary schooling opportunities until the opening of Appalachian Training School in 1938. This institution became the first formal secondary education institution for Blacks in Wise County. The school served grades eight through twelve in a small, wooden two-room schoolhouse that later included a library. It was conveniently placed north of Appalachia on a road that connected to several key coal towns: Derby, Roda, Osaka, Arno, and Stonega.¹² For transportation, several families in the Black community provided their own vehicles until a bus was purchased years later. After several years of operation, Principal Shorter suggested the school change its name from Appalachian Training School to Central High School.¹³

These successes multiplied as the Black community expanded from the 1930s to 1950s. Indeed, in 1941, Prof. Shorter reported to the *Chicago Defender* that the school anticipated its greatest enrollment to date. Through the 1940s, population pressures on the school became so great that six African American families in the town of Big Stone Gap sold their own parcels of land to Wise County to construct a new secondary school, what would become James A. Bland High School.¹⁴

¹¹ Gibson Worsham, “Derby Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), p. 8; Miriam DeLois Morris, “Negro Education Started in 1899,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, January 28, 1954; “Negro Organization Marks 40th Anniversary: Society Blazes Trail in Old Dominion Progress,” *New Journal and Guide*, November 8, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Black Newspaper Collection, p. 15.

¹² Tom Costa, “Education of African Americans in Wise County (Central HS to Bland HS): From Brown v. Board to integration of public schools in Wise County,” unpublished notes, July 26, 2020.

¹³ Costa, “Education of African Americans”; “Appalachia,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1941, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Black Newspaper Collection.

¹⁴ “Appalachia,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1941; Bright, “Historical Information About Big Stone Gap Town Hall Building, 505 E. 5th Street South.”

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The property sale along the South Fork of the Powell River rode on the heels of a multi-decade effort by the NAACP to pose legal challenges to segregation. The organization initially emphasized “school equalization,” directly challenging *Plessy’s* “separate but equal” doctrine. Following a successful lawsuit against Norfolk city schools in 1940, the NAACP issued “lawsuits against more than a hundred school districts” throughout the state of Virginia, more, according to historian Brian Daugherty, than in any other state. The lawsuits challenged severe discrepancies between Black and white teachers’ pay as well as funding for facilities.¹⁵

Collectively, equalization lawsuits forced Virginia’s public officials, and politicians across the South, to more adequately fund Black schools. Although some resisted, many political leaders reluctantly accepted that they would have to put forth more public funding in order to forestall racial integration itself. Equalization programs thus gained momentum throughout the South during the 1940s. One of the prime examples of this was South Carolina and the *Briggs v. Elliot* case of 1951, which eventually became part of five lawsuits that composed *Brown v. Board of Education*. Lawyers argued for desegregation but on the grounds of inadequate funding for student transportation. Although the lawsuit was dismissed due to a technicality, it prompted South Carolina to begin its equalization program.¹⁶

Virginia began its process of racial equalization in public education following a lawsuit filed by African American teacher Melvin O. Alston for salary discrimination in Norfolk County. Alston won his case through the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, forcing the racial equalization of teacher salaries in Norfolk County in 1943.¹⁷ Initially focused on salaries and facilities, racial equalization programs quickly expanded to encompass bus transportation, the inequality of educational programs, and textbooks. In 1948, a United States District Court charged Surry County Public School Board and its superintendent with racial discrimination in “providing and maintaining school facilities, including buildings, equipment, bus transportation, libraries, and qualified instructional and janitorial personnel, and [from] paying Negro teachers in Surry County, Virginia, less salaries.” Furthermore, the U.S. District Court demanded that administrators address these issues by the end of 1950. Several counties objected to this forced equalization by discontinuing curriculum in white schools (King George) or simply refusing to comply (Gloucester and Prince George). In both instances, the U.S. District Court issued fines and demanded the end of racial discrimination to be “effective immediately,” foreshadowing vague wording later used in *Brown v. Board II*.¹⁸

The John Battle Construction Fund, named after its key sponsor, Virginia’s 56th Governor John Battle, allotted \$45 million over the 1950-1952 biennium to “assist the counties and cities in the construction of needed school buildings and to meet the emergency existing because of the

¹⁵ Brian J. Daugherty, *Keep On Keeping On: The NAACP and the Implementation of Brown v. Board of Education in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 16.

¹⁶ Rebekah Dobrasko, “Equalization Schools” and “*Briggs v. Elliott*,” *South Carolina’s Equalization Schools 1951-1960*, accessed January 9, 2022, <http://www.scequalizationschools.org/>.

¹⁷ Doxey A. Wilkerson, “The Negro School Movement in Virginia: From ‘Equalization’ to ‘Integration,’” *The Journal of Negro Education* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1960): 17-29.

¹⁸ Wilkerson, “The Negro School Movement in Virginia,” p. 20.

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inadequacy of public school facilities.” The postwar baby boom had created a new urgency for upgrading the state’s educational facilities. Although not stated explicitly in the legislation, Battle funds provided monies for racial equalization programs due to forced court orders. (Lawsuits did not always succeed; Battle money, for instance, was already available upon the filing of the *Davis, et. al. v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* case. The Prince Edward County school board had refused to build a new African American High School. This case eventually became part of the collection of lawsuits that constituted *Brown v. Board of Education*). This fund continued until 1960 and provided over \$75,000,000 in Virginia’s revenue to build (or repair) African American schools—and actively halt racial integration.¹⁹

Wise County Public School Boards similarly responded to mounting pressures from the county’s Black citizens by using the Battle Fund to build the new high school. In 1952, the county board of education received \$150,000 from the fund to construct what would become James A. Bland High School. This sum ended up providing roughly fifty percent of the school’s total cost.²⁰ While significant, this sum paled in comparison to funding provided at the same time for the construction of two new white schools in the county. In 1954, the proposed J.J Kelly High School received \$408,460 and Pound High School received \$200,000 in direct state aid.²¹

The high school was named after composer James A. Bland, a prolific Black songwriter and member of The Georgia Minstrels. Bland’s popular songs included “Dem Golden Slippers” and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” the latter of which became Virginia’s state song in 1940.²² Newspapers indicate that Dr. J. Albert Large of Appalachia, VA, recommended Bland as the school’s namesake. Dr. Large was a member of the Lion’s Club of Virginia, the organization responsible for lobbying Virginia’s General Assembly to designate “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” as the state song. The Lion’s Club had similarly contributed a substantial sum of money toward the erection of a marker over Bland’s gravesite in Pennsylvania. Dr. Large presented his idea to the local Parent-Teacher’s Association, which they supported. The PTA, in

¹⁹ Paul Saunier, Jr., “It Happened in the Legislature,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, February 16, 1950; Foney G. Mullins, “A History of the Literary Fund as a Funding Source for Free Public Education in the Commonwealth of Virginia,” (PhD diss., University of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2001), 58.

²⁰ “Rev. Cain Speaks at Dedication New Colored School,” *Coalfield Progress*, February 4, 1954.

²¹ “Governor Stanley’s Address at High School Dedication,” *Coalfield Progress*, May 13, 1954.

²² Forced to cater to white audiences to make money, Bland wrote songs in the late 19th century that evoked whites’ nostalgia for the antebellum South. He did this by incorporating, for instance, lyrics that presented mythologized depictions of happy, contented enslaved people in songs like “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” As historian Colin Anderson explains, “he wrote many songs with racist stereotypes to survive in an industry that demanded such themes at the time.” This reality made him a controversial figure in the post-Civil Rights era. Black state legislators in Virginia led efforts throughout the 1980s and 1990s to retire the song, which the General Assembly finally did in 1997. Whatever the motive behind the Lion’s Club’s recommendation of Bland’s name and subsequent debates over the nature of his work, there is no public record of controversy or disagreement in the 1950s over the naming of the school. See Colin L. Anderson, “Segregation, Popular Culture, and the Southern Pastoral: The Spatial and Racial Politics of American Sheet Music, 1870-1900,” *Journal of Southern History* 85, no. 3 (August 2019): 592; Jacquelyn Sahagian, “Virginia State Song,” *Encyclopedia of Virginia*, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/virginia-state-song/>.

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turn, presented it to the Wise County Board of Education, which officially adopted the name in 1953.²³

Construction on Bland High School began in the fall of 1952 and was completed a year later, at the end of 1953. Wise County architect Charles B. McElroy designed the school in the style of Progressive Pedagogical Modernism, a style he replicated in other county educational facilities, including St. Paul High School (1974).²⁴ Kingsport, Tennessee-based firm Armstrong Construction built the one-story modern structure. The architectural style, apparent in the building's horizontal brick structure, tiered windows, and spacious classroom design that emphasized hands-on learning, signaled the influence of progressive pedagogical theorist John Dewey on new school construction.²⁵ Bland High School was "modern throughout," as the *Bristol Herald Courier* reported upon the school's opening in 1954. The high school had "a reception room, principal's office, library, science laboratory, six classrooms, including home economics and commercial, combination auditorium and gymnasium, and cafeteria. A separate building . . . accommodate[d] the shops and classroom for industrial arts."²⁶

Upon completion, school officials held two dedications, the first of which featured Rev. J.W. Cain, pastor of Norton's Chestnut Grove Baptist Church. Cain, by then in his 70s, had retired the previous decade from his mining career with Stonega Coal and Coke Company. In his retirement, he had ascended into local prominence as pastor for the Second Mt. Calvary Baptist Church at Dante, pastor of Chestnut Grove, and Vice President of the Norton Ministerial Association. Bland's other dedication, likely not coincidentally, was held two weeks ahead of the much-anticipated Supreme Court ruling on the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, which the court handed down on May 17, 1954. This latter dedication attracted white dignitaries from across the state, including Superintendent of Virginia's Department of Education Dowell J. Howard and Governor Thomas Stanley—later known for orchestrating massive resistance to the ruling—who used the publicity opportunity to tout the state's ostensible commitment to Black education.²⁷

The new school was indeed a massive improvement from the basic two-room schoolhouse and limited donated library of Central High School. In total, the project cost between \$285,000 and \$325,000 USD (\$2,898,386 to \$3,305,178 USD in 2021), according to the *Coalfield Progress*.

²³ Shannon Erikson, "James A. Bland (1854-1911)," BlackPast.org, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/bland-james-1854-1911/>; "New \$300,000 School for Negro Students Named for Composer Opens Monday," *Bristol Herald-Courier*, January 24, 1954; "Voice of the People—The Toll Road, Segregation, and 'Old Virginny'," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, September 1, 1956.

²⁴ "Alonzo Monday Addresses Audience at Dedication," *Clinch Valley Times*, April 25, 1974, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://clinchvalleytimes.net/2019/06/21/remembering-the-1973-74-school-year-at-st-paul-high-school-part-2/>.

²⁵ Ward, "Architecture of Academic Innovation," 6-10.

²⁶ "New \$300,000 School for Negro Students Named for Composer Opens Monday," *Bristol Herald Courier*, January 24, 1954; "Rev. Cain Speaks at Dedication New Colored School," *The Coalfield Progress*, February 4, 1954.

²⁷ "Rev. Cain Speaks at Dedication New Colored School," *The Coalfield Progress*, February 4, 1954; "Leading Negro Minister Dies at Norton," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, May 5, 1955; "Bland School is Dedicated at Gap Friday," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, May 13, 1954.

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On the surface, the building reflected state leaders' efforts to equalize public-school facilities in Wise County. Several heralded it as such, stating, "Virginia . . . has spent vast sums of money, to provide 'equal opportunities,' the new Negro school at Big Stone Gap." However, commentary in the *Coalfield Progress* following the *Brown v. Board* decision demonstrates that many white Virginians had expected improved facilities like Bland High School to forestall integration. The "value" of schools like Bland, the paper's editor speculated, "could be largely discounted, if integration is enforced."²⁸

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States stood against the multiple injustices of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its detrimental effect on African American children with its landmark ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In this decision, the Supreme Court declared that "separate-but-equal" violated the Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, thus it demanded racial integration of public schools. Southern politicians immediately voiced their opposition to the decision, although it took a couple of years for them to forge cohesive strategies to resist the ruling. In 1956, several top southern officials, including Virginia's Senator Harry Byrd, responded with the Southern Manifesto, decrying what they perceived as a "clear abuse of judicial power." Byrd's response emboldened counties to actively stall integration across the state, including Wise.²⁹ As the *Coalfield Progress* noted, "Many southerners, in Washington public life, men in the upper brackets, were openly resentful. And others in the South expressed defiance." This defiance materialized through legal and public avenues, such as the creation of a Pupil Placement Board and a surge of white supremacist attitudes in newspapers. Further opposition came from public officials and journalists who cast doubt over the Supreme Court's authority to rule on questions of public education, which they contended fell under the purview of states and counties.³⁰

The ruling triggered an immediate backlash at the local level. County newspapers largely written by and for whites reveal a negative response to the ruling, with only a few articles urging calm. Many anticipated years of "litigation" to work out details of the ruling.³¹ This negativity continued through 1954 and into 1955, sometimes exposing considerable white supremacist ideology in the area. It was evident in statements like, "If integration ever becomes a reality, and a success, it must mean those of the Negro race must have made the greater effort."³² This author explicitly denied the injustice of the public education system toward African Americans by stressing that education was an "individual issue rather than a racial issue." He further expanded on this concept of individualism by saying African Americans needed to "justify" their individual advancements. Other articles in *The Coalfield Progress* expressed doubt in the Supreme Court's authority over state and local school boards or their ability to make such a "far-reaching" decision. Several Wise County officials argued that due to ratification of the Virginia Constitution in 1869, which mandated a segregated education system following the failure of

²⁸ "Will We Ever Solve It?," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954.

²⁹ Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 98.

³⁰ "Will We Ever Solve It?," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954.

³¹ "All to Gain—Nothing to Lose," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 27, 1954.

³² "Will We Ever Solve It?," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954.

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Bayne's Amendment, the Supreme Court's decision did not apply.³³ This argument surfaced several times in the *Coalfield Progress*, and its chief proponent was Wise County's Superintendent J.J. Kelly, Jr., who had served in that position since January 1917. He spoke at a Norton Kiwanis Club meeting where he delivered this argument against the Supreme Court's decision and his plan for halting integration. He contended that Virginia's state constitution had decreed segregation even before the formal creation of its public school system in 1870, and the 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution relegated responsibility of education to the states. Thus, the responsibility of enforcing this federal decision ultimately lay within the hands of the state.³⁴

Local officials' efforts to halt integration only strengthened under Virginia's wider policy "massive resistance." In Virginia, the General Assembly adopted a unique legislative strategy to strangle integration through a plan proposed by Governor Stanley. Stanley, who had initially urged Virginians to thoughtfully and calmly proceed with desegregation, switched positions abruptly after Senator Byrd, who controlled the state Democratic Party, compelled him and other top officials to resist. The "Stanley Plan" followed the recommendations of the Gray Commission Report, which studied the effects of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in Virginia, by introducing fifteen new bills to resist desegregation. Major points included the Pupil Placement Act, requirement of appeals to be sent through the Governor to State Courts then to Federal Courts, closure of integrated schools, removal of state funds from integrated schools, and approval of tuition grants for those schools that continued segregation.³⁵ These state bills then transferred over to local bills and structures, such as the creation of the Wise County Pupil Placement Board in 1957. Evidence is unclear as to whether Wise County's Pupil Placement Board began operation in 1957 or just began receiving 3200 blank Pupil Placement forms from the Suproco Company, based in Nashville, Tennessee.³⁶ Additionally, this evidence is ambiguous due to the earliest Wise County Pupil Placement applications starting in September 1960. Beyond the uncertainty of its beginning, its impact was incredibly harsh as well as discriminatory to African American families and students. Wise County education officials granted no special placements, meaning not a single African American student was admitted to a white school from 1957-1965.³⁷ Furthermore, in over six folders, not a single application from Wise County's Pupil Placement Board admitted a white student to James A. Bland High School or South Coeburn, another African American high school in the county. Even African American students in lower grades could not escape county scrutiny as J.J. Kelly announced another piece of halting legislation, stair-step integration, which started with first graders in 1954-55. Each year, another class of incoming first graders would be integrated. In general, halted racial

³³ Julienne and Tarter, "Establishment of the Public School System in Virginia."

³⁴ "Kelly Outlines Plan for Public School Integration," *The Coalfield Progress*, June 24, 1954. See also, "All to Gain—Nothing to Lose," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 27, 1954; "Will We Ever Solve It?," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1954; and A. Willis Robertson, "Washington As Viewed By Your Senator, A. Willis Robertson," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 27, 1954.

³⁵ Thomas Martin, "Legislature Passes Segregation Plan After Bitter Struggle: Stanley Plan Will Completely Bar Integration Everywhere In Virginia," *The Cavalier Daily*, September 25, 1956. On Governor Stanley and the Gray Commission, see Daugherty, 22-25, 38-43.

³⁶ Library of Virginia, Records of the Virginia Pupil Placement Board, 1957-1966, Box 5 – Folder 8.

³⁷ Library of Virginia, Records of the Virginia Pupil Placement Board, 1957-1966, Box 5 – Folder 4.

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integration existed on every public education level, whether elementary or secondary, which denied opportunities for African American students in Wise County until 1965.³⁸

The Coalfield Progress reported on May 20, 1965, that Bland High School was set to graduate its last class of students. Although it offered no explanation, county residents would have understood that the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 had effectively put an end to Virginia's and other southern states' efforts to resist integration. Among other strategies, the law empowered the federal government to withhold funds from noncompliant school districts. Although the Wise County Board of Education would ultimately reopen the school, at the time of the report the county superintendent, W.C. Richmond, appeared resolved to simply shutter the property. The paper noted that the "practically new school" was hardly a decade old.³⁹

Bland High's closure in 1965 marks the end of its period of historical significance. It reopened in 1969 as an integrated elementary school following a fire at another area school.⁴⁰ In 1975, the Wise County School Board redesignated what had officially become Big Stone Gap Elementary School as a middle school serving "fifth, sixth and seventh grades." They named it Carnes Middle School after revered educator and coach Rexall H. Carnes, who taught at Bland High School.⁴¹ The property continued operation as the town's middle school until the mid-1980s, when county officials deemed it "inadequate in terms of space and facilities." As early as 1976, parents had begun pushing the Wise County School Board to build a new school, citing population pressures, the lack of a modern playground, and uncovered walkways. Their campaigning eventually compelled the Wise County Board of Supervisors to fund a new school. The supervisors subsequently voted on April 10, 1986 to sell the property to the Town of Big Stone Gap for \$35,000. That year marked the end of the facility functioning as a school; the county opened a new middle school, Powell Valley, to replace Carnes. The Town of Big Stone Gap municipal government officially relocated to the building in May 1988, and to prepare the space for this new role, they commissioned major renovations to the property, particularly to the interior.⁴²

Social history:

The May 20, 1965, article on Bland's closure mentioned the names of the graduating class's valedictorian, Carey Shorter, and salutatorian, Cherrie Alice Bell. Ms. Bell, the daughter of Cherrie Reasor, served as her class secretary, was a member of the Bland cheerleading squad, and played piano for the junior choir at Macedonia Baptist Church. The young woman taught Sunday school, and her service to her community earned her a DAR service award in 1965. The son of Principal C.H. Shorter, Carey, too, was a model young citizen. He won the VFW Citizenship Award in 1965. He boasted a 3.67 GPA and had amassed an impressive school

³⁸ "Kelly Outlines Plan for Public School Integration," *The Coalfield Progress*, June 24, 1954.

³⁹ "Bland High School—1965 Graduates," *The Coalfield Progress*, May 20, 1965; Daugherty, *Keep On Keeping On*, 106.

⁴⁰ "Burned School Plans to Go On," *Kingsport Times*, December 31, 1968.

⁴¹ George Dalton, "Wise School Board Reviews Plans for Proposed Schools," *Bristol Herald-Courier*, July 9, 1975.

⁴² Melanie Crouch, "Wise County to Sell School to Big Stone Gap," *Kingsport Times-News*, April 11, 1986; "Wise School Funds Approval to Pay Increased Facility Costs," *Kingsport Times*, October 13, 1976; Steven Igo, "Big Stone Gap Moving Offices to 'Old Carnes'," *Kingsport Times-News*, April 4, 1988.

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record as captain of the basketball team, a member of the football team, an active participant in music and theater programs, and an emerging leader within his church, Davidson Chapel Methodist. After graduation he attended Hampton Institute anticipating a major in electrical engineering. Many of Ms. Bell's and Mr. Shorter's classmates, like the graduates who preceded them, boasted equally impressive records. Although white segregationists went to great lengths to limit Black educational achievement and economic advancement, African American coalfield residents consistently challenged those structural barriers, particularly through their devotion to educating their youth.⁴³

Bland High's graduates were impressive by any standard. Among them included ministers, scientists, engineers, recipients of the Army Commendation and Purple Heart medals, government officials, scholars, educators, bankers, corporate executives, and authors.⁴⁴ The following provide just a few examples. Class of 1961 graduates included Charles Griffin, Bland High Valedictorian, and Paul Rier, Jr. the Salutatorian. After Paul Rier, Jr. graduated Bland, he attended Hampton Institute, graduating in 1966 with a Bachelor's degree majoring in chemistry.

Rier, Jr. began a long career at Goodyear Tire as a Design Engineer, eventually retiring as Director of Rubber Technology at Goodyear/Cooper. Both of Paul's parents, Paul Rier Sr. and Lucille Rier, taught in coal camps and later taught fifth and sixth grades, respectively, at Bland Elementary School on Hamblen Street in Big Stone Gap. Paul and Lucille Rier had three children: Eulene, Jackie, and Paul, all graduates of Bland High and all accomplished. Another 1961 graduate was Darlene Vandora Long Curry, one of several children of Bertha and Joe Long of Osaka, Virginia. After graduating from Bland, she attended Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, eventually becoming a public school teacher in Prince George's County, Virginia.⁴⁵ John Wayne Saxton Jr. graduated from Bland High School in 1962. He first enlisted in the Air Force. After honorable discharge, Saxton worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and became part of a team that built the Brighton Dam reservoir in Brookeville, MD. He also served as an Election Judge in Montgomery County, MD, for two decades. Saxton additionally volunteered as a board member, treasurer, and website manager for the Military Road School Preservation Trust (MRSPT), named on behalf of a Washington D.C. school created for African American students in 1864.⁴⁶ Bernard Wiggins, also a 1962 graduate, became a pediatric doctor

⁴³ "Bland High School—1965 Graduates"; "DAR Good Citizen Awards Are Given," *Kingsport Times*, February 23, 1965; "Seven Students Will Receive VFW Awards," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, May 6, 1965.

⁴⁴ See, for example, "Children's Book Author Comes Home," *Kingsport Times*, May 28, 1974; "Gap Native Scientist in Maryland," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, July 4, 1968; "Miss Janice Martin and Delbert Horton Are Wed," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, July 3, 1968; "Stonega Man Receives Award in Vietnam," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, March 23, 1967; "In the Service," *Kingsport Times*, June 25, 1965.

⁴⁵ "Darlene Curry Obituary," *Legacy.com*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/legacyremembers/darlene-curry-obituary?pid=186871169>.

⁴⁶ "Obituary for John Wayne Saxton, Jr.," *Snowden Funeral Home*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.snowdencares.com/obituary/John-SaxtonJr>.

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in Lebanon, TN. He graduated from the University of Virginia's Medical School. Wiggins was also an army veteran.⁴⁷

Many Bland alumni entered into military service. Through the mid-1960s, Big Stone Gap's newspaper, *The Post*, published information about Bland High School graduates who entered the military. Articles often included detailed information about rank, training, and educational background, which, for many, included college. Emanuel Reasor Jr., a native of Appalachia, Virginia, and 1960 Bland graduate, "attended Virginia Theological Seminary and College" prior to being transferred to Amarillo, Texas, to become trained as an "aircraft maintenance specialist."⁴⁸ A 1962 graduate, William Horton, likewise entered into the Air Force, receiving training as an air policeman beginning in 1963. Jimmy L. Lomax entered the U.S. Army in 1959, completing his basic training later that year before transferring to "the 55th Artillery on Bell Isle, Michigan."⁴⁹ Women entered service as well; Brenda Leeper, who first attended Morristown College, enlisted in the Women's Army Corps in June 1963. She was promoted to Specialist-4 status in September 1964 after having served in the WAC as a librarian.⁵⁰

Collectively, these individuals stood as a testament to the strength and determination of African Americans in Wise County to secure bright futures despite the structural barriers. Adults held high expectations for their children, and many went above and beyond the duty of regular parenting to mentor all young people in their community. Black business owners, church and civic leaders, property owners, and educators invested their time, energy, and money into the children's education. They expected much from their young people. As Reverend Sandra Jones explained about her life growing up in Big Stone Gap, she maintained constant contact with teachers, particularly at church. The community "expected" children "to learn." Given the robust community support and tight social networks, she believes Bland High School students received a "top notch education." Jessie Mae Reasor Zander, an Appalachia native who graduated from Central High School in 1949 and later became the first Black student enrolled in Berea College following the overturning of Kentucky's Day Law, which enforced segregation, distinctly remembers community members who expected Black youth to attend college. One local woman, a Presbyterian named Ms. Morris, "would round up students to say 'Where are you going to school?'" Such high expectations proved common among Black coalfield residents. Arthur Saxton explained, "They were not just teaching for the sake of teaching or for their financial livelihood, but they were teaching for the livelihood of the black race." Sociologist William Turner, having himself grown up in a coal community just across the state line in Kentucky,

⁴⁷ "Bernard A. Wiggins, MD," UVA Medical Alumni Association, August 22, 2018, <https://www.uvamedalum.org/in-memoriam/bernard-a-wiggins-md/>; "Bernard Wiggins Obituary," Legacy.com, February 3, 2015, <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/tennessean/name/bernard-wiggins-obituary?id=10548412>.

⁴⁸ "Armn. Basic Reasor transferred to Amarillo," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, February 28, 1963, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/585621903/?terms=%22airman%20basic%22&match=1>.

⁴⁹ "William Horton is air policeman," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, December 27, 1962, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/585889915/?terms=%22is%20air%20policeman%22&match=1>.; "Jimmy L Lomax gets Army re-assignment," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, October 1, 1959, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/585503619/?terms=%22gets%20army%20re-assignment%22&match=1>.

⁵⁰ "Local girl at Fort Rucker," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, October 1, 1964, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/585902984/?terms=%22at%20fort%22&match=1>.

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affirms these recollections. The segregated “schools . . . were, for the most part, first class,” he writes. “That is, as far as what was meant by the contradictory and incongruous proclamation ‘separate but equal.’”⁵¹

Teachers proved vital to student success. Bland’s staff was highly educated and well connected to extended networks of Black professionals throughout the United States. They “exerted great and lasting influence over the entire Black community,” as Turner remarks of his own experience in Letcher County. Upon opening in January 1954, Bland High School’s educators included Principal Shorter, who taught mathematics; Rexall Carnes, who taught social studies, physical education, and coached football; English instructor Grace Murphy; librarian Miriam DeLois Morris; Ruth Taylor, who taught French; and Bernis Zander, teacher of physics and chemistry.⁵² Rexall Carnes attended Swift Memorial and LeMoyne Colleges, and eventually received a master’s degree from Indiana University. Prior to joining the staff at Central and then Bland, Carnes served as principal at Big Stone Gap Elementary. While at Bland, he led their football team, the Buffaloes, named in honor of the famous Buffalo Soldier Army regiments, through undefeated seasons and a Tri-State Conference Championship. Carnes’s wife, Lucille Thomas Carnes, had taught students in Stonega, an area coal camp, prior to joining Bland’s staff in 1955. She taught home economics. Both Rexall and Lucille remained educators at Bland High until it closed in 1965, and Carnes proceeded to teach at Powell Valley High School following integration. Later in his life, Carnes became a prominent leader within the Big Stone Gap community and chaired the committee overseeing the historically Black Oak View Cemetery.⁵³ Ruth H. Taylor (Perry) was born in Big Stone Gap. She attended the Appalachian Colored Training School in the early 1940s, appearing on the honor roll multiple times. Like Rexall Carnes, Grace K. Murphy came to Bland having taught at Central High School. She received her Bachelor of Science degree from Virginia State University and later completed a master’s degree at North Carolina A&T. Ms. Murphy taught English at Bland for the duration of its existence as a high school.⁵⁴ Miriam DeLois Morris began working at the school in 1954 and was shortly thereafter married to Foster D. Fuller, who taught mathematics and industrial arts at the school from 1958 until 1964. Miriam Morris received her bachelor’s degree at Virginia State University

⁵¹ Reverend Sandra Jones, “Growing Up Black in Southwest Virginia: A Panel Discussion,” Monday, February 14, 2022, notes in Jinny Turman’s possession; Jessie Zander, interview by Betsy Brinson, June 3, 1999, Kentucky Oral History Project, Kentucky Historical Society Special Collections and Archives; Arthur L. Saxton, *Growing Up Colored, Negro, Black in the Gap* (Louisville, KY: Profound Publishing, 2018), 35; William H. Turner, *The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Towns* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2021), 232.

⁵² “BSG Negro School to Open Monday,” *Kingsport Times*, January 18, 1954.

⁵³ “Wise County Educator Dies at 57,” *Bristol Herald-Courier*, October 4, 1974; “Colored Schools Make Dimes Roll,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, February 11, 1943; Central High School Yearbook, 1949-1950; “All Colored Schools,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, August 12, 1954; “All Colored Schools,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, July 13, 1950; George Dalton, “Bland Buffaloes Take 6-0 Win Over Bristol,” *Kingsport Times*, September 8, 1964; “Park Program Opens Friday,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, June 14, 1951; “Big Stone Gap Due Special Meeting to Air Annexation,” *Kingsport Times*, August 9, 1967; “Board Evicts Noisy Bandsman,” *Kingsport Times*, May 29, 1974; “Wise County Will Provide Interim Development Funds,” *Kingsport Times*, July 3, 1973.

⁵⁴ Ancestry, “Ruth Taylor in the 1940 United States Federal Census,” *1940 United States Federal Census - Ancestry.com*, 2023, ancestry.com; Central High School Yearbook, 1949-1950; “BSG Negro School to Open Monday,” *Kingsport Times*, January 18, 1954.

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before becoming the first Black student to attend the University of Virginia's College at Wise (then Clinch Valley College) in 1960. Miriam and Foster Fuller eventually left Virginia, both receiving their doctorates.⁵⁵ Several other educators taught at Bland for a year, including C.C. Kizer (1957), Ms. R. Jean Ellis (1957), music teacher Ms. Viola Davis (1958), and French teacher Ms. Grace W. Setzer (1961). Additional teachers and staff included Thelma Starnes Taylor, Assistant Coaches Eugene Moss and Joe Jackson, Ruth Perry (History), Joyce Lillian Spelling Coleman (French), and the Head Cook Illinois Mitchell, who, like so many other figures essential to Bland's history, went on to become a leader within the broader Big Stone Gap community following integration. Mitchell had a reputation for fixing "the best meals in the county," according to Superintendent Kelly, and the breakfasts, lunches, and dinners she served provided vital sources of nutrition for children in the years before subsidized school lunches.⁵⁶

One of the many distinguished alumni of Bland High School, Dr. Peggy Griffin, who after her graduation in 1957 proceeded to receive numerous bachelor's and master's degrees in education and theology, and a doctorate in education from Northern Illinois University, remembers the excellent education that Bland's faculty provided. She recalls that "students who studied math under Professor Shorter excelled in the math and science fields." Similarly, those "who studied English under Grace Knight Murphy" proceeded to "become successful writers, journalists, and teachers of composition." And she reserved special praise for the teachers from her own community—those who had graduated from Central High School, received college educations, and returned to teach the next generation. "What an inspiration they were!" she exclaimed.⁵⁷

Criterion B: Cato H. Shorter (Education and Black Ethnic Heritage)

Cato Hadrass Shorter served as the principal of three high schools in Wise County, with his career culminating in his Principalship of James A. Bland High School between 1954 and 1965, the period of significance for this nomination. His educational career in the county began in 1937, a time that marked the height of segregation in the South. Shorter deftly navigated the tumultuous years following the *Brown v. Board* ruling, providing an anchor to students and the community in an uncertain time. He is significant as an educator, mentor, community leader, business owner, and parent, and rightly deserves recognition for his contributions to the establishment of Bland High School, an institution that undoubtedly would not have materialized without his leadership. Due to the discrimination he and other Black educators faced during this period, and the absence of official school board records dating to this period, this statement of significance necessarily relies heavily upon family accounts, oral histories, memoirs, and other primary source material not found in the public record. There is, however, a well-documented association between

⁵⁵ "Former Gap Teacher Accepts Position At Missouri U.," *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, June 29, 1972; "Uva Wise Names Library Foyer after First African American Student," *UVA Wise*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.uvawise.edu/news/2020/08/uva-wise-names-library-foyer-after-first-african-american-student>.

⁵⁶ A list of teachers and staff at Bland High School is in the Jessie Mae Reasor Zander Collection at the Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park, Big Stone Gap, VA. On Mitchell's career as a cook at Bland High, see Gail Shorter-Judson, email to Jinny Turman, March 12, 2024.

⁵⁷ Peggy Griffin, email to Jinny Turman, June 10, 2023; "Lifetime Achievement Award Peggy Ann Griffin," ATCB 2023 Biennial Reunion Highlights, ATCB Alumni Association, <https://sites.google.com/site/atcbalumni/2023-reunion>.

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Principal Shorter and secondary education in Wise County in regional and prominent Black newspapers. Shorter exerted tireless effort to reach and improve the lives of his students both within and beyond the classroom. Like other Black educators in Southwest Virginia, he maintained high expectations of all his students, encouraging them to pursue professional opportunities, college educations, and military careers after high school. The school may represent a prominent architect's vision of modern education, but what happened inside of the school was ultimately what mattered, and that was the result of C.H. Shorter's leadership and guidance. For this reason, this property is being nominated based on both Criterion A and B, the latter for its association with this remarkable Black leader.

Cato Hadrás Shorter, a twin to Paul Lawrence Shorter, was born in Eufaula, Alabama, on November 6, 1906, to parents Joseph Shorter and Addie Belle Jones Shorter. Born with an enlarged heart, he was not expected to live past three years old and was given the name Cato as a temporary name, after the physician who delivered him. He and his four siblings grew up in Cuthbert, Georgia: Charles, Benjamin, Cato, Paul and Josie Bell Shorter. The family's primary line of work was farming and picking cotton; Cato's father also taught math to youth in the area.⁵⁸

Shorter left Georgia and enrolled at Knoxville College (KC) in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he majored in math and minored in chemistry. Upon graduating in 1932, he moved to Jellico, Tennessee, where he was appointed principal and math teacher at the Jellico Colored School. There, he met his bride, Mary Beatrice McClellan, and they married in November 1936.⁵⁹ Shorter's best man was his best friend from college and classmate in the math department at KC, Joseph A. Matthews. Matthews was the Principal at East Benham, Kentucky, Colored High School, and it was he who learned of and informed Shorter about an available principalship in Southwest Virginia, specifically Wise County. The school was located at the historic Macedonia Baptist Church on Oak Street in the town of Appalachia. Two teachers, Shorter and Thelma (Starnes) Taylor, shared one classroom and covered grades one through nine. The classroom was heated by a potbelly stove, and on Fridays, the teachers had to remove the partition to accommodate church services over the weekend. Following discussions with county officials through 1937, the school relocated into a new, two-room white frame building on Callahan Avenue, a property completed by the beginning of the fall semester in 1938. Shorter assumed the principalship of this new school, initially named Appalachia Training School. The student population quickly grew, requiring the construction of an additional two classrooms shortly thereafter.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Mary Beatrice McClellan Shorter recalled Professor Shorter's early experiences at Central and Bland High School before desegregation. See McClellan Shorter, conversation with Jesse Mae Reasor Zander, Big Stone Gap, VA, April 3, 1996, notes in Shorter family's possession.

⁵⁹ Cato Hadrás Shorter and Mary Beatrice McClellan, Campbell County, Tennessee, Marriage Records, November 27, 1936.

⁶⁰ Jesse Mae Reasor, "History," ATCB Alumni Association, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://sites.google.com/site/atcbalumni/history>; Saxton, *Growing Up Colored, Negro, Black in the Gap*, 22; Shorter conversation with Zander.

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During the 1930s, Blacks had difficulty finding lodging in Wise County. Landlords were advised not to rent to Black tenants, so Shorter and his wife found accommodations with local Black families. Upon his relocation to Wise County, Shorter initially secured a room with kitchen privileges from widow Cherrie Reasor who lived down the street from the church on Oak St. with two young granddaughters, Jesse Mae and Ida Mae Reasor. The Shorters' second residence was with a Mr. Wysong in a house located on a hill with one room and kitchen privileges. Their third home provided more spacious quarters upstairs over Johnny Wood's restaurant across the street from Central High School.⁶¹

Including the Appalachia Training School, Shorter would serve as the principal of two schools built exclusively for "colored" students. Both schools, ATS and, eventually, Bland, served Wise and Lee County's Black student population before desegregation.⁶² Shorter recommended renaming the Appalachia Training School around 1940. He suggested the name "Central High School" to indicate a more serious mission and to lift morale. According to a report in the *Chicago Defender*, the principal felt that the new name better "describe[d] the actual purpose of the school," which was to educate students broadly and not just provide vocational training. Central High School flourished under his administration, leading graduates to gain admittance into colleges and universities like Knoxville College, Hampton [Institute] University, Shaw, Berea, and Virginia State University.⁶³ Although renaming the school reflected Shorter's vision for preparing his students to enter professional careers, renaming did not ease logistical burdens of managing large populations of students on a severely limited budget. He especially struggled with transporting students to and from school during a time in which Wise County provided little-to-no funding for Black education. During the 1940s, parents transported students using private cars and a private bus, owned by Johnny Wood, until the Wise County School Board increased its budget to pay bus drivers to transport all students.⁶⁴

Shorter and his wife, Mary, had their first son, Donald Edward, in 1942, during the height of global conflict. His career as an educator was disrupted during World War II, when he was drafted into the military in 1943.⁶⁵ Shorter was initially drafted into the U.S. Army but instead joined the 51st Defense Battalion of the Marine Corps, the Corp's first Black unit, which had been established in 1942. He chose the Marines because he felt that this military branch would provide him the opportunity to become the best soldier possible.⁶⁶ Mr. Joe Perry became interim principal until Shorter returned two years later. He was honorably discharged in October 1945 and shortly thereafter resumed his position as Principal of Central High School. One month after his return from service, he purchased a family home for \$1550 in Big Stone Gap, only a three-

⁶¹ Shorter conversation with Zander.

⁶² Saxton, *Growing Up Colored, Negro, Black in the Gap*, 20-42.

⁶³ "Appalachia," *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1941, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Black Newspaper Collection; Jesse Mae Reasor, "History," ATCB Alumni Association, accessed December 19, 2023, <https://sites.google.com/site/atcbalumni/history>.

⁶⁴ Rowe, "James A. Bland High School"; Costa, "Education of African Americans."

⁶⁵ Cato Hadrass Shorter (1906-1981), "U.S., World War II Draft Cards, 1940-1947," and "U.S., Marine Corps Muster Rolls, 1798-1958," Ancestry.com, accessed December 14, 2023.

⁶⁶ "51st Defense Battalion," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/51st_Defense_Battalion (accessed July 12, 2024).

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mile distance to the high school in Appalachia.⁶⁷ Given this new stability, Cato and Mary subsequently had three more children, Carey (1946), Lynn (1948), and Beatrice Gail (1950). Cato Shorter, a dedicated teacher and businessman—he was a practicing barber on weekends—remained family-focused. He frequently sent money home to his mother in Georgia and provided financial support to his only sister, Josie Bell Shorter Longino, who graduated Knoxville College in 1943 with a bachelor's degree in English and minor in Secondary Education. Josie Bell would join her brother's teaching staff at Central High teaching English.⁶⁸ Josie and Cato's nephew, Benjamin Shorter, Jr., graduated Central High School in 1948. His classmates had called him Choo-Choo, for as a student he played quarterback on offence and linebacker on defense.⁶⁹

On the advice of his two best friends from college, Joseph Matthews and Samuel A. Cain, Headmaster of Morristown Community College High School, Shorter later pursued and completed a Master's degree in Rural Education from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University over the summer months between 1955 and 1958.

On weekends, Shorter enjoyed spending time in his barber shop meeting townspeople and teaching his sons good work ethics, shining shoes, and performing odd jobs at the shop. They also maintained lawns, delivered newspapers, and sold stockings to women of color in Derby, Stonega, and Big Stone Gap. To keep the Black community informed, Shorter's eldest son, Donald, delivered the *Afro-American Newspaper* (Baltimore, MD). With connections through colleagues from Knoxville College graduates, Cato Shorter often sent newsworthy articles about the social life of Blacks in Southwest Virginia, including information on Central and Bland High Schools, to the *Chicago Defender*, a paper that garnered a national audience.⁷⁰

Despite a decline in coal production immediately following World War II and a sharp decline in coal jobs following an agreement between the UMWA and coal industry that allowed for mining mechanization, the need for Black educators continued. This was due to the postwar baby boom.⁷¹ Population growth, coupled with the deterioration of Central High School, a building constructed with poor quality materials, led to the need for a more modern educational facility. These trends accompanied the NAACP's mounting legal pressures on states like Virginia which had never intended to provide "equal," but separate, educational institutions. Given state leaders' recognition that the federal government or courts would likely force integration if they did not put forth funding to improve Black schools, Wise County officials approved plans to build a

⁶⁷ Wise County Tax Record, Reception Number 260-288, Document Date November 15, 1945, Sale Price \$1550, Doc Description: Deed of Bargain and Sale, Wise County Virginia Geographic Information System, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://wisecova.interactivegis.com/map/>.

⁶⁸ Josie B. Shorter, *Knoxunior* (Knoxville, TN: Knoxville College, 1943), 21.

⁶⁹ Donald Shorter, email to Jinny Turman, July 11, 2024.

⁷⁰ See, for instance, "Appalachia," *The Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1941, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Black Newspaper Collection.

⁷¹ Demographic data for Appalachia, Big Stone Gap, and Wise County, Virginia, respectively, found under "Appalachia, Virginia," Wikipedia, accessed December 14, 2023, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appalachia,_Virginia; "Big Stone Gap, Virginia," Wikipedia, accessed December 14, 2023, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Stone_Gap,_Virginia; and "Wise County, Virginia," Wikipedia, accessed December 14, 2023, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wise_County,_Virginia. On the coal industry during the postwar era, see Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 9-20.

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modern high school. Bland High, constructed of sturdy wood framing, poured concrete, and brick, benefited from the Battle fund and was built along with a spate of other high schools across the county in the mid-1950s.⁷² Bland High opened its doors in 1954, and the county closed Central High School.

Black coalfield educators like Shorter were forced to navigate racism in their communities although the nature of coal mining demanded a certain degree of cooperation underground. As historian Ronald Lewis explained of life in the coalfields generally, “Even though Black coal miners received equal pay for equal work, the migrants [from places like Alabama] did not escape segregation in Appalachia. State and local public officials enacted the full complement of Jim Crow laws in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia and coal companies generally imposed these racial restrictions in social and institutional life.” Integration prevailed inside the mine, but segregation ruled on the outside and separate facilities were often not equal.⁷³ Additionally, despite the 1954 Supreme Court ruling invalidating segregation, several Virginia Governors, from Stanley to Harrison, outright resisted the ruling—falling in line with the Byrd machine’s application of massive resistance—or otherwise sought “minimal compliance” until 1965.⁷⁴ Governor Lindsey Almond, for instance, in office from 1958 to 1962, proclaimed that “there should remain a separation of schools, churches and recreational facilities,” upholding the separate-but-equal ideology.⁷⁵

However, C.H. Shorter found at least a few influential white allies in Wise County. Shorter approached Joseph C. Smiddy, President of Clinch Valley College (present day University of Virginia at Wise), a former friend from Jellico. President Smiddy shared an observation at Mary McClellan Shorter’s funeral in 2008 when he stated, “He and Professor Shorter worked together to integrate education long before it was supported in Virginia by desegregation.” Here he was referring to the agreement between Shorter and Smiddy to enroll Miriam DeLois Morris (Fuller), the librarian at Bland High School, into the typing program in 1960. This was despite the current prohibition on racial integration at institutions of higher education. To ensure the librarian’s safety in that environment, Smiddy had her report directly to him as President. This agreement helped Shorter strengthen the typing program at Bland High. Shorter held the librarian’s position open until she completed her studies, backfilling her duties with senior students or substitute teachers.⁷⁶

Wise County Superintendent Dr. J.J. Kelly established several “firsts” for the public schools, including placing all high school principals on twelve-month employment contracts; establishing

⁷² “Reminiscences of J.J. Kelly, Jr.,” interview conducted by W.D. Richmond, Historical Society of Southwest Virginia, Rootsweb.com, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~vahsswv/historicalskechtes/kellyjj%20reminiscences.html>. On equalization, see Daugherty, *Keep On Keeping On*, 7-21.

⁷³ Ronald L. Lewis, “From Peasant to Proletarian: The Migration of Southern Blacks to the Central Appalachian Coalfields,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 55, no. 1 (1989): 77-102.

⁷⁴ Daugherty, *Keep On Keeping On*, 52-53, 72.

⁷⁵ Quote found in Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, as cited in Rowe, “James A. Bland High School.”

⁷⁶ Gail Shorter, “VTS 01 1 Merger of the McClellans & The Shorters,” interview with Dr. Joseph “Papa Joe” Smiddy, YouTube, 14:30 min, March 5, 2021, <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=RcXPEprqBsc>.

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summer high schools; offering home economics and business education in all high schools; and establishing and maintaining a county-wide vocational school, among others.⁷⁷ As a strong leader, Shorter subscribed to J.J. Kelly's philosophy on education, "to teach pupils the fundamental subjects and how to think. Dr. Kelly believed the schools should be dedicated to the improvement of the mind and life of the pupils." Fundamental to this was the Socratic notion, which Shorter frequently shared with his students, that to truly know oneself was to recognize that they knew nothing.⁷⁸

Shorter carried out these unfunded mandates in several ways. He provided a comprehensive home economics summer sewing program for 7th grade girls as well as programs for all high school girls during the year. He called on the PTA to help fund the typing and shorthand program by requesting them to purchase and loan typewriters to the school. A leader by example, Shorter purchased a blue Olympic Typewriter and placed it on loan to the school, as did other teachers and parents. Shorter asked the librarian, Ms. Fuller, to incorporate typing into her job although she had no typing skills or experience. After one year teaching typing and shorthand, she requested formal training to prepare her students properly.⁷⁹ Shorter additionally established a pipeline from Big Stone Gap to the Pentagon in Washington D.C., which enabled Bland High graduates to obtain clerical or secretarial jobs immediately upon graduation. He established a vocational program for the boys at Bland that taught them masonry, woodworking, and bricklaying.⁸⁰ Graduates were able to obtain jobs in Richmond, Virginia, and elsewhere. Finally, Shorter personally traveled, often great distances, to check on Bland graduates who had enrolled in college. His son, Donald, recalls making long trips with his father to Berea and Shaw, for instance, to make sure that the students were succeeding in their pursuit of college degrees.⁸¹

Professor Shorter's educational mission transcended classroom and community. At Bland, as indicated above, he employed talented graduates from Central High School, people like Miriam DeLois Morris (Fuller), Bernis Zander, and Ruth Taylor Perry. These educators left indelible marks on the students they instructed.⁸² Shorter taught all high school math classes and served as principal while his spouse, Mary Shorter, served as his unpaid office assistant. Residents of Big Stone Gap would often see him on Sundays trimming hedges on the campus of Bland High School to maintain a manicured look. He ran his barber shop on Friday evenings and during the day on Saturdays while providing movies to coalfield communities after church services.⁸³ During segregation, "colored" children in Big Stone Gap area were not allowed to attend public movie theaters or swimming pools with white children.⁸⁴ With segregation continuing for a

⁷⁷ Kelly interview.

⁷⁸ Kelly interview; Donald Shorter, email to Jinny Turman, July 11, 2024.

⁷⁹ Sandra Pogue, "Celebrating Women of Achievement: Dr. Miriam Fuller, 2014 Women of Achievement Recipient," *HER Magazine* (March 13, 2019): 15-17, <https://issuu.com/newstribune3/docs/hermagazinemarchapril2019>.

⁸⁰ Saxton, as cited in Rowe, "James A. Bland High School."

⁸¹ Notes from phone conversation with Donald Shorter, in Jinny Turman's possession, July 16, 2024.

⁸² Griffin email to Turman.

⁸³ Donald E. Shorter, "Family Vignettes," Zoom Family Conference Call, Feb 3, 2021, notes in Shorter family's possession.

⁸⁴ Kluger, as cited in Rowe, "James A. Bland High School."

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decade after *Brown v. Board*, Shorter provided Sunday movies for Black students at either local churches, community centers, or elementary schools near coal and coke camps. From the 1950s to the early 1960s, Shorter rented reel-to-reel movies featuring Black artists, including Lena Horne, Sidney Poitier, and Harry Belafonte. He traveled with his oldest sons, Donald and Carey, to coal camps, creating a mobile movie theater in the Derby, Osaka, Stonega, Arno, Imboden, Andover, and Roda communities. Donald set up the equipment and changed movie reels.⁸⁵ Shorter minimized the challenges of racial inequality and systemic racism by educating students through films, demonstrating possible opportunities outside of coal-mining employment.

Shorter's tenure as chief administrator was smooth and peaceful most days, despite Jim Crow laws, but periodically tumultuous. He believed in high academic and moral standards for both his teachers and students, and he had a reputation as a strict disciplinarian. Shorter subscribed to Superintendent Kelly's philosophy on education. In an oral history, Kelly asserted that he had "no place for the so-called progressive education school system where pupils run the schools and sometimes the teacher also runs. We want discipline in our schools and unless you get discipline you cannot hope to be successful in your teaching."⁸⁶ Shorter likewise believed in an orderly school. He expected teachers to delay a student's advancement a year or two if they were unable to grasp basic academic concepts; he felt it was in the student's best interest to repeat the grade. Teachers doubled down to nurture students in need, recognizing that students were already behind due to hand-me-down textbooks provided by the Wise County School system. Similarly, teachers were held accountable for moral behavior. Professor Shorter made the difficult decision to terminate a beloved teacher who had violated school policy. This decision sparked a revolt from a few teachers and the PTA Board Chair, who circulated a petition among the PTA requesting Shorter's removal. A competition also erupted between two teachers as they vied for what they anticipated was the soon-to-be vacant principal's post. Although the PTA called a meeting with Superintendent Kelly to present their petition, the Superintendent ruled to reaffirm Shorter as principal. Dr. Kelly advised all teachers to either "resign or return to work." Seeing few options for alternate employment, the teachers quietly returned to their positions.⁸⁷

The end of Shorter's educational career mirrored that of many distinguished Black educators following integration: they often faced demotions or lost their jobs entirely. Madeline Will, Staff Writer of *Education Week*, accurately described the situation in an article in 2019: "*Brown v. Board of Education* had unintended consequences, the effects of which are felt today. It caused the dismissal, demotion, or forced resignations of many experienced, highly credentialed Black educators who staffed Black-only schools. Tens of thousands of Black teachers and principals lost their jobs as white Superintendents began to integrate schools but balked at putting Black educators in positions of authority over white teachers and students."⁸⁸ These demotions and layoffs likewise occurred in Wise County. According to the Southern Education Reporting Service, only ten of the sixteen Black teachers employed in Wise County in 1965 would remain

⁸⁵ Shorter zoom call.

⁸⁶ Kelly interview.

⁸⁷ McClellan Shorter conversation.

⁸⁸ Madeline Will, "65 Years after 'Brown v. Board,' Where Are All the Black Educators?" *Education Week*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/65-years-after-brown-v-board-where-are-all-the-black-educators/2019/05>.

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employed, and the county planned to relegate them to the status of “teacher helpers” to white staff.⁸⁹ Shorter’s position with the Wise County School System changed from Principal to “Visiting Teacher,” a position requiring him to deliver clothes to children and families in great need. This was a demeaning job for a man of his experience and education, with bachelor’s degrees in math and chemistry and a master’s degree in rural education. These demotions and layoffs, which occurred in both Big Stone Gap and nearby Norton, Virginia, prompted the county’s Black educators to file a lawsuit against the Wise County school board in June 1965. The Virginia Teacher’s Association, composed of Black educators throughout the Commonwealth, represented the plaintiffs.⁹⁰

Shorter faced several major changes to his life beginning in 1968. That year, he was involved in a single-car accident. The county car he drove had received maintenance that day; on his return trip from work, a brake failure occurred at the bottom of the mountain between Norton and Powell Valley leading to an accident where he broke his hip and leg. Shorter was placed on temporary disability, recovering at his home on 5th Avenue in Big Stone Gap. By late 1968, after all four of Shorter’s children had left home for college or to start their lives, Cato and Mary became foster parents of five siblings—two girls and three boys, ages 18 months to 11 years—until they aged out of foster care. Although Wise County officials deemed this a temporary arrangement, the children’s birth mother returned home and trained for employment to reclaim her children. However, seeing how different the children were and the lives they lived with the Shorter family, she chose to leave them in the couple’s care with their consent.⁹¹ Cato and Mary had a good relationship with all the children.⁹² Testimonies by three of the five foster children were shared regarding the Shorters’ parenting skills. The oldest foster son (2nd oldest child) passed away by age twelve. Dr. Marshall Sherles, the fourth child, states:

My foster father was a very strict person. He was not shy about dishing out punishment when needed. Because he was a barber, he had old leather razor straps that he would use as a belt. In today’s society, some would call it abuse, but let me be clear, he was not intending to hurt us or abuse us, but he wanted to get his point across about the discipline he expected and demanded from us...This couple [the Shorters] who raised four kids of their own and were enjoying their lives, opened their doors to five young children in desperate need. And even though these events may seem sad, the choices these people made saved my life. I am the man I am today because someone cared enough to try to make a difference in my young life.⁹³

⁸⁹ “Desegregation Cited in Loss of Negro Teachers’ Jobs,” *Southern School News*, June 1965, p. 20, Tennessee Virtual Archive, <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll22/id/2766>.

⁹⁰ Donald Shorter, “50 Years of Integration,” presentation delivered to the Biennial Reunion of the ATCB Alumni Association, August 24, 2015, p. 4, copy in Jinny Turman’s possession; “School Board Faces Suit in Teacher Jobs,” *The (Big Stone Gap) Post*, June 24, 1965.

⁹¹ McClellan Shorter conversation.

⁹² Marshall Sherles, “Opportunities and Choices,” in Kay Kizer, et. al., *Faces of Foster Care, Vol. 1* (Independently Published, 2023), 33-36.

⁹³ B. Gail Shorter-Judson, “Fostering a Village of Support,” in Kay Kizer, et. al., *Faces of Foster Care, Vol. 1* (Independently Published, 2023), 78, 84-86.

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In 1974, shortly after Bland educator and coach Rexall Carnes died of a massive heart attack, the local NAACP President, Talmadge Warren, visited the Shorters' home in Big Stone Gap. The Shorters' youngest daughter, Beatrice Gail (Shorter-Judson), who was home visiting, recalls Warren sharing the news that the local white leaders wanted to honor Carnes' memory by renaming the school—which had transitioned from Bland High School to a middle school—after the late coach. Warren asserted that “the NAACP disagreed with this decision. The middle school had gone unnamed until that point, and since he died first, before Cato Shorter, it seemed that white leaders made the decision to name it after Carnes.” Beatrice Gail recalls the disappointment of both of her parents at this news given their years of long, dedicated service to and leadership of Bland High School.

Doctors advised Shorter to have the pin connecting his hip and thigh bone removed a few years after the accident, but he refused. This refusal caused an intrusion of bone marrow around the pin, thus requiring another surgery and possibly breakage of the bone to remove it. He declined this surgery, and this intrusion likely led to the bone cancer that he ultimately died from on May 1, 1981. Upon his death, former students presented a resolution to his widow. Dr. Jesse Mae Reasor Zander, a 1948 graduate of Central High, Shorter mentee, and granddaughter of the same Cherrie Reasor family who had rented Cato and Mary Shorter a room in Appalachia for his first Principalship, dedicated a poem in Shorter's memory entitled “He Fathered Us All.”⁹⁴ In addition to numerous community service such as Outstanding Citizen awards from the Kiwanis Club of Big Stone Gap, recognition from The Lion's Club along with others throughout Wise County, Shorter was inducted posthumously into the Knoxville College Alumni Hall of Fame 2013 in for his dedication to education, leadership and service.⁹⁵

Shorter's descendants and alumni of the Appalachian Training School, Central High School, and Bland High School keep memories of Principal Shorter, and of their time as students in Big Stone Gap, alive through an alumni association. Lynn Shorter became a central figure in establishing by-laws and non-profit status for the ATCB (Appalachia Training, Central, Bland) Alumni Association, which meets biannually in Wise County. ATCB developed and funded a commemorative wayside with photos of Cato Hadrass Shorter and information about his life and work, placed just outside of Bland High's gymnasium.⁹⁶

An adult Sunday school teacher at Davidson Chapel Methodist Church, Shorter was often heard quoting his favorite passage from 2 Timothy 4:7-8 during weekly Assembly Meetings at Central and Bland High School. “I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...” He was a man of deep faith, convictions, and vision. He was always family-oriented, student-centered, and a proponent of high academic and moral standards.

⁹⁴ Jessie M. Reasor Zander, “He Fathered Us All,” unpublished poem created upon the death of Cato H. Shorter, May 1981; ATCB Alumni Association, “A Tribute to Cato H. Shorter,” in Shorter family's possession.

⁹⁵ “Mr. Cato Hadrass Shorter,” *Knoxville College Presents The 4th Annual Robert H. Harvey Alumni Hall of Fame* (Knoxville, TN: Knoxville College, October 25, 2013), 13.

⁹⁶ “Tribute to Lynn Shorter Hanks,” *ATCB Alumni Association Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (October 1, 2019), p. 4, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jrVj5JfeDh7AP9wITUE2Tp205fvOJMIY/view>.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University

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 Other

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): 101-5013

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 7.78

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 36.86218 | Longitude: -82.77259 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

James A. Bland High School
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Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Bland High School nominated parcel boundary, depicted on accompanying maps, is comprised solely of adjoining Wise County tax parcel 021274, which contains the recreation areas, and 021275, which contains the school and ancillary buildings. Both tax parcels are included in entirety.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary includes the former school building itself and all historic and non-historic buildings, structures and sites associated with the former school or its current usage as the Town of Big Stone Gap municipal center, including the recreation area with ballfields directly west of (behind) the school building, which were historically part of the school property and are now collectively under town ownership.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Math Rowe; Dr. Jinny Turman; Dr. Gail Shorter-Judson; Dr. J  Judson; with assistance from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources

organization: UVA-Wise; Univ. of Minnesota

street & number: 215 Zehmer Hall, One College Ave

city or town: Wise state: VA zip code: 24219

e-mail: jt8zn@uvawise.edu

telephone: 308-440-5848

date: 7/16/2024

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

James A. Bland High School
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County and State

- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photo Log

Name of Property: Bland High School

City or Vicinity: Town of Big Stone Gap

County: Wise

State: Virginia

Photographer: Michael Pulice and Dr. Jinny Turman

Date Photographed: April, 2020 – February, 2023

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 21 North wing and gym looking south
- 2 of 21 North wing looking east-southeast
- 3 of 21 North wing looking north
- 4 of 21 School looking northwest
- 5 of 21 North wing looking northeast
- 6 of 21 East wing south elevation, looking east-northeast
- 7 of 21 East wing south elevation, looking west-northwest
- 8 of 21 North wing south elevation looking northeast
- 9 of 21 East wing west elevation, looking southeast
- 10 of 21 Interior: Main entrance and corridor
- 11 of 21 Interior: Main corridor with lockers
- 12 of 21 Interior: Gym looking south-southeast
- 13 of 21 Interior: stage and curtain
- 14 of 21 Interior: basement with original boilers
- 15 of 21 Industrial Arts Building looking east
- 16 of 21 Industrial Arts Building interior view
- 17 of 21 Industrial Arts Building, south façade
- 18 of 21 Equipment sheds looking south-southeast
- 19 of 21 Parking lot and equipment shed looking south-southwest
- 20 of 21 Ballfields looking west-southwest
- 21 of 21 Non-historic utility buildings looking northwest

James A. Bland High School
Name of Property

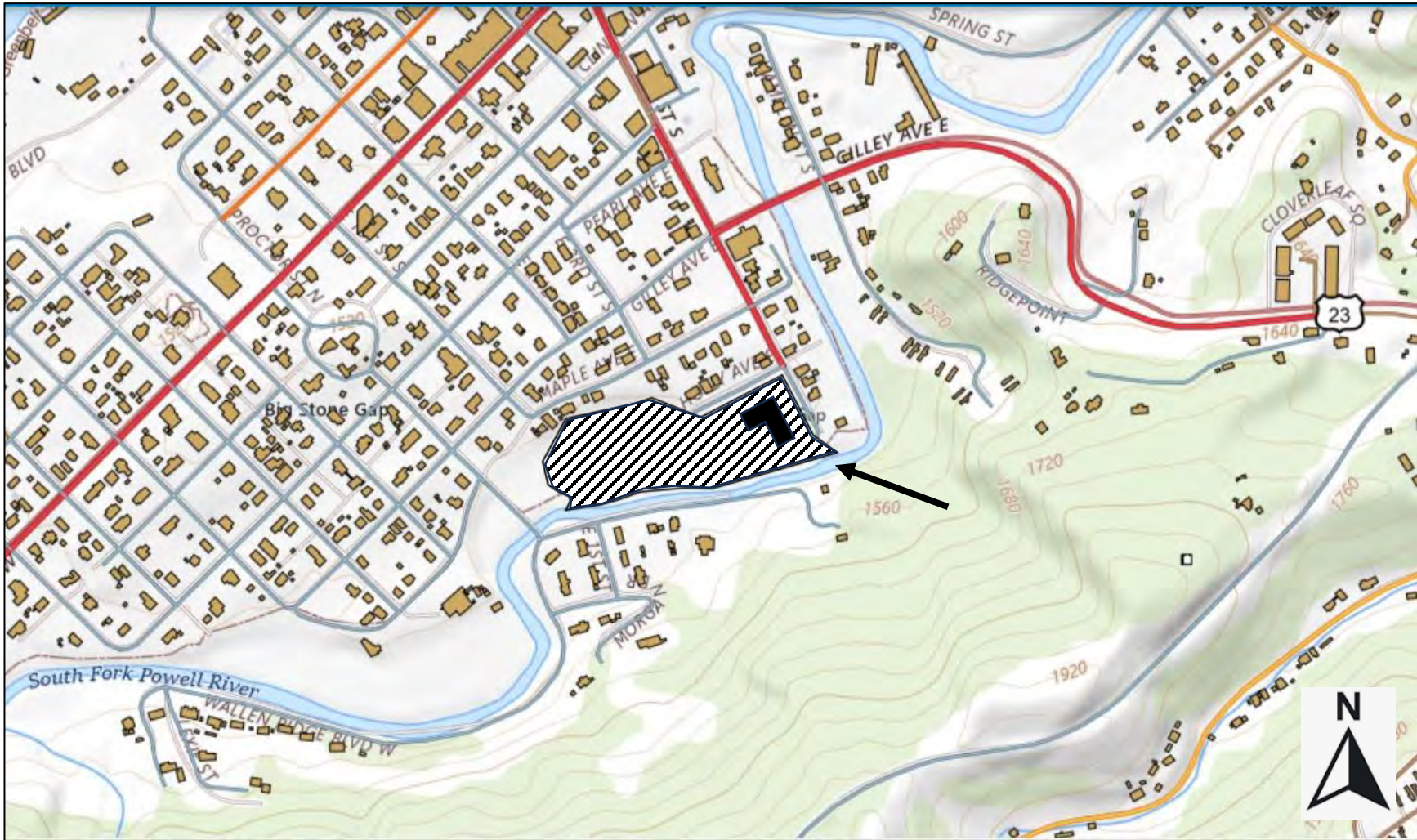
Wise County, VA
County and State

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.



Bland High School

Town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia

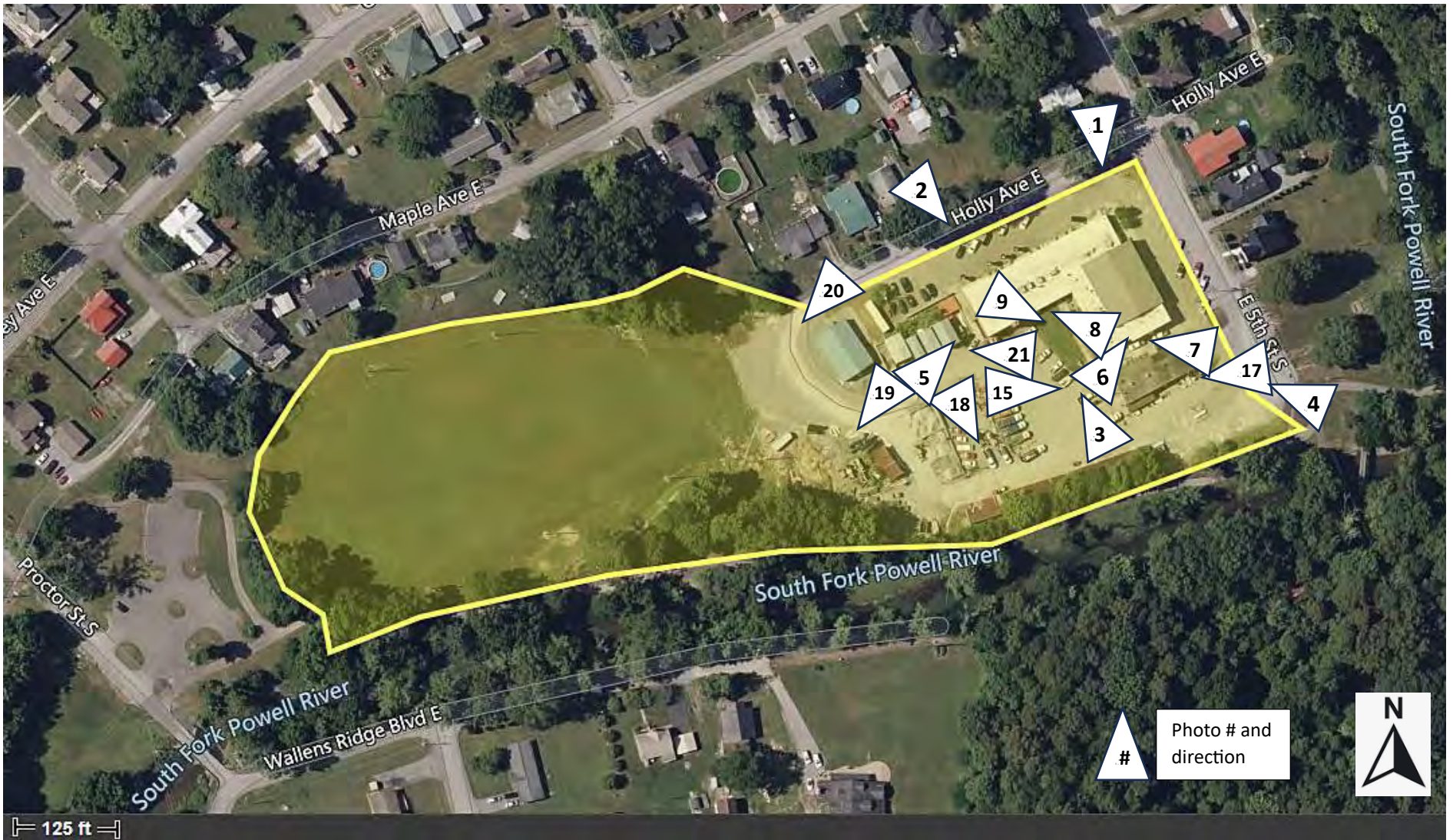
Latitude: 36.86218 Longitude: -82.77259



Bland High School

Town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia

Latitude: 36.86218 Longitude: -82.77259



Bland High School

Town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia

Latitude: 36.86218 Longitude: -82.77259



ONE WAY →

ONE WAY
DO NOT
ENTER

ONE WAY ←



POLICE
BIG STONE GAP

677

POLICE

POLICE

677



















EXIT

BUILDING DEPARTMENT
CHECK IN AT
REAR WINDOW

PUBLIC DEPARTMENT
THROUGH
THIS DOOR









KEWANEE

TYPE C

KEWANEE BOILER
KEWANEE

CORPORATION
ILLINOIS

KEWANEE

KEWANEE BOILER
KEWANEE



NO

NO PARKING

**NO
PARKING**
DO NOT
BLOCK SHOP
DOORS

DANGER
ACETYLENE





TOWN OF BIG STONE GAP
WAREHOUSE

SPEED
LIMIT
10

CONGESTED
AREA







