Cocke County Heritage Development Report

A Legacy to Be Preserved and Celebrated: African American Heritage Resources in Cocke County, Tennessee

A Public Service Project of the
Center for Historic Preservation
Middle Tennessee State University
Cocke County Heritage Development Report

A Legacy to Be Preserved and Celebrated: African American Heritage Resources in Cocke County, Tennessee

Sponsored by

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**Introduction**

This project is a collaboration of the staff at the Middle Tennessee State University Center for Historic Preservation, graduate students in Middle Tennessee State University’s public history program, and the residents of Cocke County. This Heritage Development Report is designed to identify key African American landmarks in the county, tell the story of those landmarks, and develop recommendations for how to best conserve those foundations to Cocke County’s history. The hope is that this report will offer several feasible options for telling a more complete and dynamic story about the heritage in this gateway community to the Great Smoky Mountains.

**Who is Involved**

The Center for Historic Preservation is a research and public service institute committed to the heritage development—the identification, research, preservation, interpretation, and promotion—of our historic environment. With the resources of a university and a network of national, state, and local partners, the Center responds to individuals, agencies, and organizations working toward preservation goals.

The Center works most closely with the history students in MTSU’s public history program. The students working on this project are doing so as part of their requirements in Hist. 6520: Seminar in Historic Preservation. The students, under the guidance of the staff at the Center, conducted preliminary research; two days of onsite fieldwork and interviews; and then conducted further research in order to bring together a comprehensive history and set of recommendations for the people of Cocke County.

During the two days of fieldwork, Center staff and the MTSU students met with a group of local residents whose initial inquiry to the Center had been about preservation needs for the Tanner School building. Now a community services center, the Tanner School had originally been a Rosenwald school and as the African American population and educational needs grew, the building itself grew to house those students. It continued to serve Cocke County’s African American children until integration sent those students to study with the rest of children in the county.

As with any school, but particularly African American schools, it is impossible to tell the story of a school without discussing the surrounding community that supported the institution. On both days of onsite fieldwork, MTSU students completed a preservation needs assessment of the Tanner School building and conducted interviews with Tanner alumni. Other MTSU students and Center staff left with Cocke County residents to identify key sites that tell the wider story of African American history in the county. These sites create a heritage trail that demonstrates the support network for the Tanner School and the foundations of both the current and past African American community.
Also during the onsite fieldwork, staff and students met with the Cocke County Department of Tourism, which is supportive of this project, to discuss ways to best leverage these key heritage tourism assets. Currently the Cocke County Department of Tourism is eager to welcome this addition to their tourism programming.
Section 2: The Tanner School as a Heritage Tourism Anchor

Tanner School Historical Narrative

In the second half of the nineteenth century, education was limited for both whites and blacks in the city of Newport. A private school for white students was housed in a circa 1874 two-story brick Masonic Hall, while black students attended private school in a small log building that was located on the outskirts of town. Circa 1898, the city of Newport opened public elementary schools that included a large brick school for white students and a small frame building for black pupils. This school for blacks, Summit School, was located in the Jones Hill community on the southwestern edge of town.\(^1\) Although by 1917 there was a high school for white students in Newport, there were no high schools for black students in the city at this time, and blacks who wished to attend school past the eighth grade had to attend private black normal schools and colleges in other towns.\(^2\)

According to local histories, in the early 1920s, as the crowded condition of Summit School was becoming increasingly unbearable, John M. Jones, who was running for mayor, promised the black community a new school in exchange for voting for him in the 1923 election.\(^3\) After he took office, the city passed a $100,000 bond for civil improvements, to be used largely for the construction of a thirteen-room addition to the

\(^1\) Robbie D Jones, “Segregation and Interracial Cooperation in East Tennessee; Building Tanner High School at Newport, 1923-1948,” 4-6. This is an excellent source for additional information about Tanner School and the development of the East Tennessee area and Newport, specifically.

\(^2\) Ibid., 14-15.

city’s white elementary school, and for the construction of a new black elementary school.4 This school, which would eventually become known as Tanner School, was originally called the “Newport Consolidated School” in 1924, and was known by the white community as the “Newport Colored School.”5

The funding for the Newport Consolidated School was largely raised by the community; however, funds were also provided by the Julius Rosenwald Fund (JRF). Sears-Roebuck magnate Julius Rosenwald funded his first school for Tennessee African Americans in 1915. According to historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle, in 1917, Rosenwald created the philanthropic Julius Rosenwald Fund, which opened a Southern Office in Nashville in 1920. The goal of the JRF was to financially assist in constructing model rural schools for African Americans. Schools that requested assistance from the JRF had to meet minimum standards concerning the site size and length of school term, as well as meet other basic requirements, including having new blackboards and desks for each classroom, and at least two sanitary privies on site. JRF grants were based on the number of teachers employed, ranging from $500 for a one-teacher building to a maximum of $2,100 for a school of ten or more teachers. The JRF also provided grants of $200 per classroom for additions to existing Rosenwald Schools from 1921 to 1931.6

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5 Ibid., 14.

Additionally, Hoffschwelle states that, “The principles of black self-help and industrial education dominated the JRF school construction plan.” The schools included facilities for industrial, agricultural, and home economics instruction.

An article in the June 24, 1924, edition of the Newport Plain Talk credits local judge and member of the State Board of Education, William Oscar Mims, with being a catalyst in obtaining the Rosenwald grant for the Newport Consolidated School. Others credit Ruth Webb O’Dell, a local white schoolteacher and the first female superintendent of the County Board of Education, with supporting educational reform in the county that resulted in an extension of the school year and the construction of fourteen new schools, including Newport Consolidated. Regardless of who was responsible, the Rosenwald Fund approved the 1923 grant request by the Newport City and County Boards of education and donated $1,100 toward the construction of a four-teacher school. Further funding for the school came from the Tennessee Board of Education in the amount of $1,250, a $300 contribution by the local white community, and a $200 donation by the local black community; however, the largest contribution, that of $7,450, was donated by local boards of education. This made the total cost of the Newport Consolidated School $10,300.

John Williams Rice, a black schoolteacher, sold the city a three-acre lot on Mulberry Avenue for the purpose of constructing the Newport Consolidated School. Rice, who operated the town’s brick-making business, also donated the bricks that were

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used in the construction of the school. Local black craftsmen in the community were responsible for most of the construction of the building with donated labor.\(^9\)

The original Newport Consolidated School building contained three classrooms. The classrooms could be easily converted into an auditorium by opening folding doors or partitions that separated the three rooms. A hallway ran the full length of the front elevation and connected the three classrooms.\(^10\) A basement contained two rooms, used as the boiler room and kitchen/cafeteria. The exterior of the building had two entrances on the north elevation, each with a frame porch supported by square columns.\(^11\)

![Newport Consolidated School c. 1924](image)

Local histories list some of the first teachers at Newport Consolidated School as Una V. Gorman, Lillie May Mills, Mattie Reinhardt, Irene Gorman Smith, Mrs. Brazzelton, May Frazier Leeper, Gladys Brabson Morton, and Mattie Lee Brabson Crumbley and the principals of the school as Dr. Dennis Branch, Reverend Hargraves,  

\(^9\) Ibid., 16-17.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 19; O’Neil, “The Road to Tanner Was Long and Arduous Part II,” 9A.  
Mr. Miller, Mr. Hudson, Mr. Tippet, Mr. Crumbley, Reverend Joiner, and Reverend Rakestraw. \(^{12}\) Local lore also claims that Leon Pope, a schoolteacher from Knoxville, became the first principal of Newport Consolidated School in 1924 and taught ninth grade. Although, according to local history, the original intention was to continue to add an additional grade of high school at Newport Consolidated each year, the County Board of Education refused to hire additional high school teachers.\(^{13}\)

According to historian Robbie D. Jones, three important events occurred in the late 1920s that profoundly affected the future of Newport Consolidated School. In 1926, the City Board of Education hired Dr. Dennis Branch as principal of the school. Dr. Branch was an educated and well-respected black physician who held degrees from Shaw College, in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the University of Tennessee Medical School, in Memphis. He would serve as principal of the school until 1931.\(^{14}\) Also important was when attorney and former Tennessee governor Ben W. Hooper joined the County Board of Education in 1927. As governor, Hooper had supported educational reform at the state level. Perhaps most importantly for those associated with Newport Consolidated School, Hooper was a friend of the black community. Finally, critical to the success of Newport Consolidated School, was when Dudley S. Tanner, a white schoolteacher, became the State Rosenwald Agent for black schools in 1929.\(^{15}\)

\(^{12}\) “The Rosenwald Schools of Cocke County: Tanner School.”


These three leaders worked tirelessly to convince the County Board of Education of the importance of supporting the Newport Consolidated School. In one instance, the County Board of Education had resolved to discontinue the services of its Jeanes worker. The Anna T. Jeanes Fund, established in 1907, supported the work of African American industrial supervising teachers at rural black schools. In 1929, Branch, Hooper, and Tanner all fought to convince the County Board of Education of the importance of the Jeanes worker to rural African American schools in both Cocke and neighboring Jefferson County. In 1930, it was decided that the Jeanes worker would be retained.

Branch, Hooper, and Tanner also lobbied successfully for continued improvements to the Newport Consolidated School facilities. By 1929, the JRF had supplied a $120 grant for the addition of a new library in the main hallway. Also, a frame annex that housed an economics classroom had been added to the rear of the school. Another JRF grant provided equipment for this annex.

With the increase in available classroom space, efforts were renewed to hire high school teachers at Newport Consolidated. Ben Hooper offered a motion to hire Miss M. L. Powell as the first official high school teacher of the school; however, she declined. In September 1930, Miss Hattie L. Young accepted the offer. During this time, the black community honored Dudley S. Tanner’s tireless efforts to secure the Jeanes worker, improve the school facilities, and hire high school teachers by renaming the Newport Consolidated School in his honor. It now became known as “Tanner Training High School.”¹⁶

By December 1930, eighteen black students attended Tanner Training High School and seven of these were bussed in from rural areas in the county. In 1931, the first high school students graduated.\textsuperscript{17} The first graduating class consisted of three pupils, two girls and one boy. A local history document lists the first graduates as Gladys Brabson, Elizabeth Thomas, and Jay Hayworth.\textsuperscript{18} Local histories claim that these first graduates spent their days carrying bricks in order to have the building completed in time for their commencement.\textsuperscript{19}

This same year, the number of high school students being bussed into Tanner doubled, and the county hired a second high school teacher, Timothy Curtis Needham. With the addition of these new students, space quickly became an issue, as only one of the three classrooms was for high school classes. This led to the main hallway being converted into a principal’s office and an additional classroom.

By the beginning of the 1930s, a growing number of students were attending Tanner School, and the local school boards appeared to be accommodating this growth with the addition of new teachers and the alteration of facilities. This would change, however, with the onslaught of the Great Depression. The Great Depression devastated Cocke County, including the public education system. In the winter of 1933, despite a thirty-five percent salary reduction for teachers, the layoff of several bus drivers, and the elimination of school improvements, the County Board of Education was nearly broke. It was decided that the county should seek support from President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs; however, the school board only sought funding for the white schools, leaving

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{18} “The Rosenwald Schools of Cocke County: Tanner School.”

\textsuperscript{19} O’Neil, “The Road to Tanner Was Long and Arduous Part II,” 9A.
schools like Tanner to fend for themselves. This would be the beginning of nearly a
decade in which continued improvements were made to white schools while Tanner
received no funding for facilities improvements.

Although repairs and repainting occurred at the county’s white schools in 1933,
by 1939 both the white and black county schools were in such poor condition that the
State Board of Education downgraded county high schools from Grade A and threatened
to revoke their accreditation. To pay for the necessary improvements, the county
approved twenty-year bonds for $90,000; however, the building program only included
the county’s three white high schools, and Tanner was again overlooked.

In response, the black community called a meeting with the city and county
school boards at the Newport City Hall on October 14, 1939. A committee representing
the black community requested that a building program for Tanner School be enacted.
The county school board responded by saying that this would not be possible, as it was
the city school board that owned the school and not the county; however, both boards
agreed to attempt to devise a solution for the problem.\footnote{Jones, “Segregation and Interracial Cooperation in East Tennessee,” 26-29.}

In November 1940, the improved white schools that had been renovated using the
bond money were opened. This caused the black community to meet with the County
Court to request an addition for Tanner High School. At the meeting, the court members
promised the black community a $10,000 addition to the school, and on December 13,
1940, the county school board tentatively approved a building project for the school, so
long as the County Court approved and appropriated the money. It is unclear as to why this never took place.\footnote{Ibid., 29; O’Neil, “The Road to Tanner Was Long and Arduous Part II,” 9A.}

In April 1941, the county school board approved an improvement project for county elementary schools that included a $3,000 addition to Tanner School if the city agreed to match the sum. However, Tanner would be disregarded yet again, as the project to improve white elementary schools was funded in October 1941, while Tanner was excluded from the county’s plans.\footnote{Jones, “Segregation and Interracial Cooperation in East Tennessee,” 29.}

By 1942, Tanner had forty-eight high school pupils attending class in one room. Subsequently, the State Board of Education reduced the schools rating due to overcrowding, and, the following year, the State Board of Education stated that the school could no longer operate without a rating.\footnote{Ibid., 30; O’Neil, “The Road to Tanner Was Long and Arduous Part II,” 9A.} By this time, the black community had become outraged by the county’s failure to improve Tanner School while making continued costly improvements to white schools using public funds. With this latest development, the black community sought the advice of the NAACP. The NAACP appointed a committee of local leaders and helped them to prepare a five-point petition that demanded that the County Board of Education make improvements to Tanner High School. The petition called for the construction of a high school building and gymnasium. It argued that the current building was too small to house an accredited four year high school, that the State was threatening to revoke Tanner School accreditation, that nine-tenths of the parents of students attending Tanner School could not send their children away to attain a high school education and, therefore, a suitable high school
should be located nearby, and that it would not only reflect well upon the Court, but that
to not assist in the development of black youths might be a liability to the county and
state.\textsuperscript{24}

The sixty-five signature petition garnered support from leaders of both the black
and the white communities. As a result, in July 1942, the school board voted to hire an
architect and construct a new black high school building. Although the school board
approved the measure, it did not promptly provide funding for the project. Interestingly,
however, improvements continued between 1943 and 1946 at white schools. Frustration
over disagreements with the county caused at least one principal, Reverend W. C.
Hargrave, who served as principal from 1943 to 1946, to resign.

In October 1947, the school board finally funded the long-awaited Tanner School
expansion project. A local white carpenter and contractor, Benjamin A. L. Click, Sr.,
received the bid to construct the addition, and Roland Dykes, Sr. completed the masonry
work. The five-room addition opened in 1948 and included a new bathroom, kitchen,
and cafeteria, and five new classrooms, three of which were to be used for high school
classes. Several years later, in 1954, the county school board provided funding for
Tanner School’s first gymnasium.\textsuperscript{25}

Reverend Isaac Rakestraw, an African-American schoolteacher from Knoxville,
became principal of Tanner School in 1946 and supervised the improvements to the
school. By 1955, two hundred and eighty-six students had, at one time, attended school

\textsuperscript{24} Jones, “Segregation and Interracial Cooperation in East Tennessee,” 30-32; O’Neil “The Road
to Tanner Was Long and Arduous Part II,” 9A.

\textsuperscript{25} Jones, “Segregation and Interracial Cooperation in East Tennessee,” 30-34.
at Tanner. One hundred and fifty-three had graduated while the remaining one hundred and thirty-three left Tanner before completing twelfth grade.\textsuperscript{26}

Although there is little information pertaining to additional construction projects at Tanner School, prior to the integration of Cocke County schools, circa 1960, an addition was added to the front Rosenwald portion of the building. In 1966, integration occurred in Cocke County, and most of the high school students attending Tanner School went to Cocke County High. The last graduating class prior to the integration of schools in Cocke County consisted of three pupils, Deborah Danzie, Jerry Carr, and Alfreda Carr, in 1966. Local histories state that, until its closing in 1966, every black person in Cocke County could trace their academic roots to Tanner School.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} O’Neil, “The Road to Tanner Was Long and Arduous Part II,” 9A.

\textsuperscript{27} “The Rosenwald Schools of Cocke County: Tanner School.”
Bibliography


“The Rosenwald Schools of Cocke County: Tanner School.”

Preservation Assessment

IMMEDIATE NEEDS

I. **Plumbing.** The building’s bathrooms need attention. Pipes are aged and fixtures are in poor condition, especially in the first floor bathrooms. Recommend inspection by qualified professional plumber.

II. **Roofing.** A weather-tight roof is essential in the preservation of a building. A poor roof will permit the deterioration of its materials. The roof of the Tanner School is in adequate condition, but conduct periodic inspection to ensure its integrity.
GENERAL NEEDS


II. Energy conservation. Well-constructed older buildings are generally more energy-efficient than new construction. They use less energy because they were built with a well-developed sense of physical comfort and they maximized the natural sources of heating, lighting and ventilation. Caution should be the watchword when considering future work. Some measure designed to reduce perceived energy loss may result in inappropriate alteration of architectural features or damage the building. See National Park Service Preservation Brief 3, “Conserving Energy in Historic Buildings,” http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief03.htm.

III. Attention to previous repair work. Some past work merits a more professional update. The cosmetic repairs to the back of the building on the exterior of the kitchen area could use attention, both for aesthetic and safety reasons.
I. **Future work and the building’s historic character.** Any future renovation or restoration work should pay careful attention to the historic character of the building. Previous replacement of its windows has kept the Tanner School from being eligible for the National Register. If a heritage center is established, pay careful attention to that portion of the interior with respect to its historic appearance. Expose original material if possible and create an entrance to that area that is mindful of the building’s historic quality. If the original floor or wall material is extant, exposing them would be beneficial. Caution should be the watchword when considering future work. The National Park Service provides one source for guidelines. [http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm)

II. **Continued maintenance.** Once the recommendations described in this report have been met, stewards of the building should establish a schedule for regular inspection to determine maintenance requirements.
Heritage Tourism Options for the Building

The Tanner School building is already serving the needs of the community by housing several non-profits that offer a wide variety of community outreach programs. The members of the community and programs in the building would like to see this tradition continue. This seems to be an ideal use for the building because it ensures that Tanner School continues to be a place of gathering, education, and support for the community at large. While no longer serving the original purpose of the building, it continues the spirit of what African American schools meant to the community.

Just as Tanner continues to serve the surrounding community, it could also serve a wider audience through heritage tourism programming. By inviting in tourists to experience the heritage and legacy of Tanner School, it increases the visibility of Tanner’s mission while also strengthening it as a community institution. Through exhibits about Cocke County’s African American heritage, Tanner will give back to the community financially through tourist dollars and socially by increasing the dialogue for a more comprehensive local history. Indirectly, this supports social justice by celebrating a previously marginalized story.

African American Heritage Tourism

While the exhibits and driving tours of African American resources in Cocke County will be designed and marketed for all audiences, the African American tourist audience is a largely untapped resource for the Appalachian region. For the heritage and cultural tourism industry, many destinations and sites are seeking to actively pursue the African American tourist. The African American market is one of the three fastest growing markets in the travel industry and is ranked as the most stable and resilient market segment. Also of interest to cultural attractions, African American tourists are more likely to travel in groups and 73% of African American households travel yearly.28

Perhaps the largest trend setter for this phenomenon in heritage tourism is the city of Philadelphia. In 1988 the city decided to corner the minority tourist market and it is currently the top destination for African American tourists, bringing in $400 million annually. Aside from the tourist dollars this market brings in to the city, the way that they have reshaped themselves to be appealing to that tourist audience has increased diversity, cultural enrichment, and quality of life for all of Philadelphia’s residents. All of those factors have created a more stable business community in Philadelphia, so the benefits are profound in both direct and indirect ways.29

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Figure 1: African American Demographic Distribution

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There are currently 1,020,558 African Americans in Tennessee. With gas prices at all time highs, rather than traveling all the way to Philadelphia, African American tourists will most likely be looking to stay closer to home. Tennessee is ideally geographically situated in relation to the African American tourist audience. While current economic troubles and unstable gasoline prices may cause a decrease in other types of visitors, it could also increase the ease of marketing to the regional African American audience.

Building off of the success of the annual Tennessee Picnic celebration, a driving tour of nearby African American sites and an interpretive experience at Tanner School could widen an already established African American heritage tourist tradition in Cocke County. Rather than only being a one time a year event, like the successful Tennessee Picnic, using a part of Tanner school as a visitor center and the availability of a driving tour could make African American heritage tourism a year-long event.

Figure 2: Local Sales Tax by Grand Division of Tennessee.  

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While Cocke County is officially listed as economically distressed, this is in part due to its commitment to maintaining an authentic rural heritage. That commitment lends itself to supporting an African American heritage tourism project that emphasizes strong roots and true stories. Unlike other parts of East Tennessee, which are highly commercialized, the authentic setting and traditions of Cocke County strengthen the context for any heritage tourism programming.

Visitor Center in Tanner School
Ideally, Tanner School could host a small visitor center in one easily publicly accessible room. The best location for this visitor center would be one of the rooms that is on the first floor with a door near the parking lot. It is important that visitors are able to easily find the visitor center and that they do not need to walk far to get there. There is ample parking in front of the basement access doors, which also happen to face the road. Making it as easy as possible for visitors to find you, as well as ease of entry will greatly increase the possible success of a visitor center.

While the Cocke County museum and visitor center is immediately adjacent to Tanner, the museum keeps infrequent hours, and in order to enter the building, a visitor needs to park relatively far away and then must climb uphill to enter the building. This will deter elderly and disabled visitors from even attempting a visit. Because of this problem,

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Figure 3: Local Sales Tax of Cocke County and East Tennessee

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Tanner School has the opportunity to serve those visitors who might not otherwise be able to access the Cocke County visitor center and museum. In addition to this underserved audience, all other visitors will have the convenience of being able to visit two visitor centers in one stop. Rather than being competition, a Tanner School visitor center simply enhances services already available in that location.

Figure 4: A Basement Room with Easy Access to Parking.

Whichever room houses the visitor center, it is important to have easily visible signage that people can see from the road, and then signage on or next to the building itself that clearly directs visitors where to go. If the visitor center is in a room that is not immediately accessible by an exterior door, then there needs to be clear signage inside the building directing visitors to the correct location. The point is to be as welcoming and visitor friendly as possible.

Visitor Center Checklist
- Easily accessible location (preferably handicap accessible)
- Reserve nearby parking
- Extensive and clear signage

Exhibits in Tanner School
Because the visitor center would serve both tourists and residents alike, it will need to meet both of those needs. Ideally, the room would contain interpretive panels, most likely attached to the wall. These panels would discuss the history of the school, the African American heritage of Cocke County, and identify the sites that speak to that heritage. While the visitor center should probably avoid becoming a collecting
institution, it could offer a few mementos from the past such as yearbooks that residents and visitors could read through.

Themes for the visit could include a history of Tanner School, the Tennessee Picnic, and a history of African Americans in Cocke County as told through the remaining African American heritage landmarks still in the county. While these are all large topics, it is important to keep in mind what makes a good exhibit: brevity. An exhibit is not meant to be a book on a wall. A good exhibit has simple sentences and short paragraphs, but a minimum of text. The best parts of exhibits are the stories told by pictures and other images. If visitors want more information on the subject, they can read a history of these topics. A quality visitor center orients guests with solid contextual information without overwhelming those visitors with too much information. Also, while the exhibits only provide a virtual experience of Cocke County’s African American heritage, if there is ever a problem with reprinting a driving tour of the heritage sites in the county, this exhibit can always fill that gap.

In addition to these exhibit panels, the visitor center should probably also have ample chairs or benches for visitors to rest and for community members to gather. Because there are insurance, liability, and security issues when an institution decides to accept donated items (which is why the Cocke County museum is often closed), it is probably wisest for Tanner not to accept any donated artifacts. If there are extra yearbooks that people do not mind if they go missing, then this might be the one exception.

Otherwise, the exhibits could be enhanced with a “memory book.” This could contain scanned historic photographs, yearbook pages, stories, etc. The memory book could then be available for alumni or descendents to flip through when they visit. It would also serve as a conversation piece when community members gather there to socialize. In addition to this type of memory book, the visitor center could also have available paper and pencil for visitors to write down their memories and stories. In addition to inviting community involvement and participation in the exhibit space, these options are easily renewable. If a copy of the memory book wanders off or is damaged, because it was digital to begin with (and should be stored on a CD and/or a computer), it can always be reprinted or easily expanded.

**Exhibit Checklist**
- **Exhibit Themes**
  - Tanner School
  - Tennessee Picnic
  - Cocke County African American Heritage Sites
- **Limit Text on Panels**
- **Tell the Story with Images**
- **Do Not Accept Donated Artifacts for a Museum**
- **Include Seating**
- **Create a Digitized Memory Book**
- **Paper and Pencil for Visitors to Leave Their Stories**
Section 3: Inventory and Assessment of Key Resources

Cocke County African-American Heritage Assets

CEMETERIES

1. Jaybird Cemetery

Jaybird Cemetery is located near the center of Newport, in the midst of the Colonel Charles T. Rhyne Housing Project on the corner of Cooper and Alley Streets. Severely overgrown, the cemetery is inaccessible to the public. While no sign demarcates the plot as “Jaybird Cemetery,” concerned citizens of the Newport community have identified the area as one needing extensive attention and maintenance. It appears as if the town is apathetic about the condition of the cemetery since debris and thorny vines cover the entire landscape, denying safe entrance and movement throughout the grounds. Rather than removing the tall and ominous vegetation masking the area to allow the public to move around unhindered, however, Newport has elected to block it off with a chain linked fence and “no trespassing” signage. In fact, Jaybird Cemetery’s condition is so deplorable that the cemetery advocacy group “Saving Graves” has included it in their Endangered Cemetery Report.

This photograph illustrates one aspect of Jaybird Cemetery’s overgrowth. Plant life has taken over the cemetery, nearly or completely masking its headstones and footstones. In addition, tall thorny shrubs threaten safe movement throughout the grounds.

Ironically, one of Newport’s most renowned African-American veterans, Private Harold Carr Jr., is buried at the site underneath a large cedar tree. According to public memory, Carr, a teenager, lied about his age in order to enlist in the military during the Korean War. Regardless of America’s refusal to grant civil rights to all citizens, he made the ultimate sacrifice, dying at age 16. Although he is the namesake of a community park in Newport, his gravesite has been enveloped by the intrusive overgrowth, virtually erased from the landscape. It was not until research was being compiled for this report that researchers literally stumbled upon Carr’s burial plot and identified the site. In addition to Carr’s presence, the gentlemanly brick, ice, and coal entrepreneur J.W. Rice is buried at Jaybird Cemetery. The diverse national and regional societal contributions made by Carr and Rice render Jaybird Cemetery a valuable asset to the African-American community.

Pictured above is the headstone of Harold Carr, teenaged Korean War veteran. Carr’s story of bravery is well known throughout the Newport community.

2. **Gum Springs Union Cemetery**

   Gum Springs Union Cemetery is located a short distance off Morristown Highway (US25E) on a hill near a dilapidated Rosenwald School building. A circular drive surrounds the cemetery grounds, providing easy accessibility. The area is well-maintained, presumably one of the better tended burial grounds in Cocke County. One of the most remarkable features of Gum Springs Cemetery is its prevalence of veteran graves. Primarily of service in World War II and Korea, approximately 40 veteran burial sites exist here. Of local significance, celebrated educator May Frazier Swagerty Leeper is buried here as well. The charitable ‘Miss May’ “devoted her life to the education and improvement” of African-American children in Cocke County, serving as Tanner School’s first teacher.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{35}\) Ibid., 52.

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*These panoramic views of Gum Springs Union Cemetery illustrate the site's shape (as demarcated by the gravel circular drive), density, and solid state of maintenance.*
3. **Russell’s Chapel**

The former site of Russell’s Chapel was located at the intersection of Woodson Road and Highway 321 near the French Broad River. The original “New Port” courthouse, which served as the county seat from the 1790s to approximately 1900, was located nearby. The town center moved to accommodate the arrival of the railroad around the turn of the century. Thereafter, the original county seat area was designated “Oldtown.” The chapel used to sit down the road from the original courthouse.
Luther Thomas’s headstone is but one of the veteran’s markings identified at Russell’s Chapel. Note the degree of maintenance needed to prevent future masking of the stone.

Russell’s Chapel housed a local AME Zion congregation that has since merged with the local New Zion church. While the chapel no longer stands, the congregation’s cemetery still exists on a meandering hillside behind the former chapel site. The cemetery is believed to have been founded at the site prior to the church, perhaps established immediately following the Civil War. This can be deduced by the great presence of a particular type of fieldstone used by African-Americans during the 1890s to mark graves. Additionally, a large presence of a common nineteenth-century African-American burial plant surrounds those fieldstones.
Addie Gorman’s grave (1883-1904) is potentially the oldest burial plot at Russell’s Chapel. Note the intricate engraving work visible near the bottom the stone.
A large presence of green, leafy undergrowth, as seen here, is associated with early African-American cemeteries and burial plots. This type of vine covers a good portion of the rugged terrain at Russell’s Chapel.

The oldest identified stone dates back to 1904, further confirming the age of the cemetery. The former Russell’s Chapel site and its adjacent cemetery are important African-American heritage resources due to the presence of these nineteenth-century grave markings as well as the veteran gravesites. A Works Progress Administration outhouse also remains on the grounds to the left of the previous chapel site. The cemetery is somewhat overgrown and difficult to walk through due to the terrain, sparking the need for community preservation and maintenance intervention.
4. Swagerty Cemetery

This sign marks the gravel road leading to Swagerty Cemetery.

The peaceful, beautifully-situated Swagerty Cemetery is located high on a bluff off Chicory Road overlooking the French Broad River. This secluded site is locked with no public access. As a result, Swagerty is undisturbed and monitored by the diligence of Mrs. Hazel Robinson Johnson, a community elder and gatekeeper of the cemetery. The African-American cemetery is believed to have been established during the 1700s by the grandfather of Mrs. Johnson. Three to four veterans are resting here, and while the oldest marked gravestone dates back to 1888 (that of Febeon Williams Swagerty), the significant number of unmarked graves here lends itself to a high probability that several slaves were buried at this cemetery.
Pictured is Hazel Robinson Johnson, gatekeeper of Swagerty Cemetery.

Graduate researchers study the grounds alongside Johnson and Reverend Zora Roberts Robinson of New Zion AME Zion Church in Newport.
5. **Faubian Cemetery**

Picturesque Faubian Cemetery rests amidst the idyllic hills and pastures on Good Hope Road in Parrottsville, the third oldest town in Tennessee. Affectionately known as “Forbees” by locals, the cemetery was established by John Faubion (1776-1869). Bethel Church currently maintains the Faubian grounds, keeping it in well-groomed state of upkeep. This landscape is unique in a number of ways. An old fence line marked by posts and trees may serve as the demarcation line of black and white burial plots in this previously segregated cemetery. Burials are marked here as early as 1842 (that of Nancy Wall), and the presence of three folk art gravel-imbued gravestones contribute to the historical and cultural significance of this cemetery. Several twentieth-century veterans rest at this site, as well as the burial plot of a Civil War veteran. Although families continue to bury their dead at Fabian, the historic section and newer portion of the grounds are easily identifiable due to the presence of a discriminating circular drive.

Faubian Cemetery is located within the picturesque rural hills of Parrottsville. Note the differing spellings of the cemetery name and the cemetery founder’s name, as demonstrated below.
Pictured is the headstone of cemetery founder John Faubion (1776-1869) and his wife Leah (1777-1859).
The photographs featured above and below illustrate some of the folk art gravestones present at Faubion Cemetery.
This freehanded bench-life headstone, paired alongside folk art gravel-imbued African-American gravestones, adds to the distinctiveness, charm, and beauty of Faubion Cemetery.

The circular gravel drive pictured above demarcates the more historic (as seen to the right) and the newer (as seen to the left) divisions of the cemetery property.
CHURCHES

1. Gospel Tabernacle Church

Gospel Tabernacle Church, located on Warford Road in Oldtown, is a white, one-story frame building with a gabled roof and lower gabled entrance. The original structure measures 40’ x 25”, though an addition was constructed on the rear of the building circa 1970. The church was originally Oldtown School, and its architecture and dimensions are typical of other rural black schools. It served as an educational institution until at least the mid 1960s, since locals recall attending school there during that decade. Gospel Tabernacle Church needs critical maintenance. Water damage along the side of the building is causing substantial rot, threatening the integrity of the structure. The church is situated next to a steep hill, which is causing water to drain toward it. The concrete platform that was poured alongside the building with the obvious intent to direct water away from it is actually contributing to the problem by allowing water to collect there.
This steeped concrete mechanism was poured with the intent of facilitating water drainage. Unfortunately its presence is aggravating the problem, as seen by rotting weatherboards on the church buildings.

Pictured is a close-up of the damaged church siding.
As demonstrated by the photographs above and below, a new means of water drainage must be adopted at Gospel Tabernacle Church. Standing water is corroding the wooden siding of the building, significantly diminishing its soundness and integrity. Damaged boards should be maintained and documented through in-kind repair and replacement methods.
2. **Allen Chapel**

Allen Chapel Baptist Church is situated in a rural enclave of Parrottsville on 1920 Allen Chapel Road. Constructed in the 1880s, the first congregation met in 1884. A focal point in the community, the two-story structure was bricked over during the early 1990s. Community activities, including annual homecomings, draw crowds of hundreds to the church hill.

Pictured above are the front and right facades of two-story brick Allen Chapel Baptist Church, as viewed from Allen Chapel Road in Parrottsville.
Allen Chapel School, across the street from the church, is a white one-story frame building with two front doors. Constructed circa 1910, the school served the first through the eighth grades. Dr. Kenneth Olden, a renowned national medical researcher, attended Allen’s Chapel School from first through sixth grades. His teacher, Irene Stokely, is the namesake of the building, which currently serves as a church fellowship hall.

The former Allen Chapel School, now Irene Stokely Fellowship Hall, sits directly across the road from Allen Chapel Church.

The original school dimensions measure 24’ 2” x 32’ 2”. A later addition to the left side of the structure measures 11’ x 12’. The chimneys have been replaced, and faux pine paneling has been added. The building has a dropped ceiling in the main room, and original globe lighting remains in use. Locals insist that the building is a Rosenwald school. Although the school possesses a stage platform similar to that of Rosenwald schools, evidence, such as the presence of double doors and orientation of the windows, allows one to deduce that the structure existed before the start of the Rosenwald program.

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The foundation of the former Allen Chapel School is bowing. Care should be taken to repair the foundation before any more significant structural damage occurs.

Water damage on the ceiling inside the fellowship hall warrants attention. The building is mounted on mortar brick pillars, and the foundation is buckling under the weight. Repair of the building’s foundation is a critical preservation need. Additionally, the state is constructing a new highway to address the transportation issues from Pigeon Forge through Sevierville, Newport, Greeneville, and the Tri-Cities. The construction zone is visible from the Allen Chapel hill, potentially threatening the rural character of the area.

The source of the water damage on the ceiling inside Irene Stokely Fellowship Hall needs to be identified and addressed to prevent future preservation issues.
The building’s foundation is pulling away from its brick hoisting pillars, putting the old school building in a precarious predicament. This is a critical preservation need that should be addressed immediately so as to prevent further structural damage.

3. **New Zion AME Zion Church**

   The New Zion AME Zion Church, located at 302 White Oak Avenue in Newport, a tall brick structure with a white weatherboard gable. Two vertical brick pillar-like forms frame the front façade. Professing a congregation of approximately 80 in membership, the church was remodeled in 2000 and finished in 2002. Circa 1980s bathrooms are situated at the front entrance of the building, and paneling, paint, and carpet has been added. The lighting, pulpit railing, and windows remain original. The building is in fairly good condition, but the congregation should be mindful of the preservation of its remaining original architectural features so as to maintain their historicity.
New Zion AME Zion Church is located on White Oak Avenue in Newport. The building was last remodeled in 2000.

The congregation’s missionary department is very active in the Newport community. The church hosts donation dinners for the homeless and offers its fellowship hall for use by other local groups. Additionally, Reverend Zora Roberts Robinson does outreach and performs funeral services for other congregations. Thus, the New Zion AME Zion Church building is a dynamic pillar within Newport.
Restrooms have been added in place of the bell towers at New Zion AME Zion Church, as seen in the alcoves above. The building still possesses its original globe lighting (below left) and pulpit railing (below right).
4. Woodlawn United Methodist Church

Woodlawn United Methodist Church is located at 306 Woodlawn Avenue in Newport. Built in 1900, the building’s cornerstone enumerates the original “Woodlawn ME Church” trustees, some of which served as teachers at Tanner School. The church possesses a unique architectural plan, situated in a perpendicular axis layout. Seating not only exists directly in front of the pulpit, but also to its immediate right. An elaborate 1983 mural of a biblical scene is painted on the wall behind the pulpit. An extensive addition was later added behind the pulpit area. The church bell that has been removed from the tower and placed next to the front entrance in the yard is one of the few preservation concerns at this site.
The Woodlawn church bell rests to the left of the entrance steps. It should be properly stored indoors in order to ensure its preservation.

Woodlawn Church is a significant structure within the Newport community. Founded by several women (whose names appear on the cornerstone), the church demonstrates the role of women in establishing religious institutions in the area. The church also serves as an urban focal point for African-American Methodist followers.
Many of the names listed on the Woodlawn United Methodist Church cornerstone are those of women from the community.
Researchers examine the unique perpendicular axis layout of Woodlawn Church within the photograph above. An elaborate mural, as painted by an artist named Dykes in June 1983, is located on the wall behind the pulpit, as demonstrated in the photograph below.
PLACES

1. **Newport’s Tennessee Picnic**

   The “Tennessee Picnic” is an annual homecoming tradition established by the local African-American community during the late 1940s. The event honors the black families who are native to the Cocke County community that have since migrated into other parts of the nation. According to historian Robbie Jones, this festival attracts families from places as remote as Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles.\(^{37}\) The Tennessee Picnic takes place during the summer at the Newport City Park each year.

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Contributors

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Paul Hoffman (B.A. in History, Vanderbilt University) is working on his M.A. degree in historic preservation. After six years as an officer in the Navy, Paul worked for Republic, a historic restoration company based in Watertown, participating in preservation efforts on local landmarks including the Ryman Auditorium, the Belmont Mansion, and the Tennessee State Capitol. Paul is a native of Nashville.

Katherine Looney (B.A. in French, MTSU), is a first year graduate student in the public history program at MTSU. A product of the transient nature of the military, Looney claims "the Southeast" as home and is interested in counterculture and historic preservation. She has collaborated on a heritage resource assessment for the Pinewood community in Hickman County, TN and an Historic Structures Report for the Durham Chapel Rosenwald School in Bethpage, TN.

Katherine Merzbacher (B.A. in History, Middle Tennessee State University) is passionate about the preservation of historic buildings and sites in the Southeast. In conjunction with the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, Katherine has worked on several National Register of Historic Places nominations, preservation needs reports, and historic structure reports. She is currently finishing her M.A. degree in historic preservation and writing her thesis on the impact of the park and playground movements on the history and landscape design of Nashville's Centennial Park.