

A chance for new lessons

\$470,000 renovation will turn the historic Marley Neck School into community center

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Back in 1927, Marley Neck School was built for \$4,300, making it the most expensive of the county's 23 Rosenwald Schools for African-American students - even if it still didn't have running water.

Hundreds of students were educated in the modest structure on Solley Road in Glen burnie before it was abandoned in 1954 with the dawn of integrated schools.

Now, more than 60 years later, Marley Neck alumni Yvonne Henry and Rosalie Gaither and a third friend, fellow Bates High School graduate Helen Johnson, are spearheading the drive with the local nonprofit Arundel Community Development Services to give the Marley Neck School a second chance.

Next week, a \$470,000 renovation will begin to reopen the school as a community center.

"We wanted to have before- and after-school care, hoping we can get some partnership from **Anne Arundel Community College**," Henry said. "You can have birthday parties and other functions. [It can be] a place for seniors to learn computers."

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 Yvonne Henry, Helen Johnson

(Sun photo by David Hobby)

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The former primary school was one of more than 5,300 nationwide that came to life in the rural South from 1917 to 1932 through matching funds from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, created by the philanthropist and early president of Sears, Roebuck and Co. Marley Neck was the only school in the county where African-Americans contributed more to the construction cost than the Rosenwald fund.

It is also one of only 10 Rosenwald schools remaining in Anne Arundel and was listed in 2002 on the National Register of Historic Places as one of America's most endangered places.

"This is all the more reason why the county and ACDS feel so strongly about preserving these buildings," said Arundel Community Development Services executive director Kathleen Koch. Her nonprofit group is also looking at rehabilitating a Rosenwald school in Galesville.

Henry and Gaither have fond memories of the school, and still laugh when they recall when they were teacher helpers and washed the drinking glasses and floor with the same bucket of water.

"We couldn't talk back to the teacher," said Henry, and the result was "the worst whipping I ever had in school."

Both women said they received an excellent education at Marley Neck.

Henry graduated from Bowie State College and taught for more than 25 years, and Gaither earned a bachelor's degree in business from the University of Maryland and a master's degree in business management from Notre Dame in Baltimore and worked in personnel at the National Security Agency.

Since 2002, Johnson, Henry and Gaither have hunted for financial resources to restore Marley Neck School. The women talked to leaders at the next-door Hall United Methodist Church, community members, legislators in **Annapolis** and the staff at Arundel Community Development Services.

They're still holding raffles and sponsoring bus trips to the Three Little Bakers, a dinner theater in Wilmington, Del.

"We've done all the leg work," said Johnson, who was encouraged to take on the restoration project by her late husband, Willie C. Johnson, a local activist.

She said the committee had almost given up hope, when \$200,000 came in the form of a community block grant with matching funds from the county Department of Public Works.

The county also provided a startup grant of \$70,000 to cover feasibility fees, and the church agreed to rent the building to the Friends of Marley Neck School for \$1 a year.

Rockville-based, family-owned Sterling Construction Services expects to be completed in six months, said director of corporate operations David M. Kelsey.

"There are always a lot of challenges with preservation and restoration," said Kelsey. "We're not just restoring it to the way it was; we're trying to save as much of the original material, including studs, that won't even show."

Trying to save 80 percent of a given wall presents a challenge with demolition and site preparation, Kelsey explained.

The original footprint will remain the same, except for the addition of a wheelchair ramp.

"When we're finished, said Kelsey, "it will look just like it did when you rolled down the street in the 1930s."

(Sun photo by David Hobby)

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