

**FLAT GAP HIGH SCHOOL SITE No. 097-0395**  
**United States Department of the Interior National Park Service**  
**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM**

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**Organization** Flat Gap Community Center Committee Date: September 2008  
**Street & Number:** 2860 South Fork Rd telephone  
**City or Town** Pound  
**State VA Zip Code** 24279

Flat Gap School Community Center, in northern Wise County, was constructed as a High School in 1935-1936 by the Virginia School Board of Education. Because it was built in a sparsely populated rural area, it is smaller in scale than most high schools of its day, measuring about 150 feet by 65 feet. A planned gymnasium/auditorium wing was never constructed. The structure of the school consists of a stone foundation and one-foot-thick walls of locally quarried sandstone. The outward surfaces of the stone blocks are roughly cut in rustic fashion. The exterior wall surfaces are indented at the top of the foundation, a few feet above the ground, forming a water table.

The building has a three-part plan, with a front gabled mid-section and setback, side-gable wings. Along with the three-part plan, rusticated stonework with water table, and molded cornice with gable returns, the round-arched principal entrance with granite voussoirs and keystone comprise the classical architectural references. The original roofing of small, pressed, galvanized tin shingles remains in good condition. Inside are four classrooms and an office space. The school maintains a remarkably high degree of historic integrity. A comparison of current and 1938 photographs reveals no discernable modifications to date.

Along a small drainage in front of the school were built a stone retaining wall and stone piers for a footbridge, when the school was constructed. Though largely obscured today by accumulated soil and foliage, they are considered to be significant, contributing structures. A modern picnic shelter is the only noncontributing resource on the property.

### **Location and Setting**

Flat Gap, in a mountainous region near the very southwestern corner of Virginia, is a tiny community surrounded by coalmines. Today, most of the coal extraction consists of surface mining operations. Heavily scarred mountaintops are commonplace in the area, but none are visible in the vicinity of the school. The property and surrounding context remain intact and undeveloped, with wooded slopes and grassy open expanses. The school is located on the south side of county Road 671, about 1/2 mile east of the intersection with Route 672. "Flat Gap School" is indicated as a noteworthy landmark on USGS topographic maps. There is also a United States Geologic Survey benchmark, with the number B 318, at the school, indicating its elevation above sea level is 1714 feet. Peaks around the school property reach heights above 2300 feet. On the north side of the school, across a small drainage, was a playground and basketball court reached via a footbridge. This open space is now a parking lot.

### **School Exterior**

The exterior walls are constructed of coursed, sharply squared stones all cut to the same height, but in random lengths, the longer ones being 2-3 feet across and the shortest 4-5 inches. They present a random color pattern in a wide palette of natural shades of pink, orange, tan, and gray. The gray mortar joints are impeccably finished with almost perfectly straight and uniform, robust, round-beaded pointing. The side elevation gable fields are flat surfaces with tan cement, and small, rectangular, louvered vents made of wood. The front gable field is finished with stonework and has an identical louvered vent. The crawlspace beneath the building is vented on each elevation through gaps in the foundation. Each vent is screened with a cast-iron grille with the letters V S B E, Virginia State Board of Education.

The school has windows on the front and rear elevations only. Each classroom has a bank of five, six-over-six double-hung sash, separated by thick wood mullions. The two front offices in the central pavilion each have a pair of identical six-over-six sash. All of the windows are in original condition.

The rear elevation of the school appears unfinished because the gymnasium/auditorium wing was never constructed, leaving a 25-foot deep by 50-foot-long cavity in the building, with exterior walls of cement rather than stone. Within the back wall are two six-over-six windows, positioned some distance apart, and a door served by a fairly new handicap ramp. Although the uncompleted section detracts somewhat from the building's charm, it is relatively well concealed by its location in the back of the school.

### **School Interior**

A short hall runs from the front entrance back to the central corridor. The 15-foot-wide central corridor runs lengthwise from one side entrance to the other, dividing the building in half. The corridor walls are treated with vertical-board, wainscoting to a height of about 4 1/2 feet, and plaster walls up to the ceiling. The wainscot is painted dark brown. All of the interior and exterior doors, except for the back door, have lighted transoms. The principal entrance has a round-arched lighted transom. At the front-center of the building, on each side of the principal entrance were small rooms that were used for an office and library. One of the rooms was later divided into two bathrooms. Originally, there was no indoor plumbing. The first bathrooms were outdoor privies, and drinking water was supplied by a well and brought inside in buckets.

The flooring throughout the building is of 2-inch-wide oak boards, covered and preserved with linoleum and carpeting since the school became a community center in the 1970s. The walls and high ceilings are finished with painted plaster. Each classroom is lighted by a bank of five operable. The rooms have weighted windows and they retain the original blackboards on one end wall and the wall opposite the windows. The other end wall has a cloak closet and a smaller teacher's closet, and one section of shelves. Each room has a flue hole leading to one of four brick chimneys on the roof, for its own coal and wood-burning stove. The two chimneys on the front side of the roof served two stoves each – two classrooms and two offices – while the chimneys on the backside accommodated only one stove apiece.

### **Summary**

Flat Gap High School, in the far southwestern Virginia county of Wise, was designed by architect Thomas M. Pepper, and constructed in 1936-7. It was among the first high schools built in the county. Before its construction, the old Flat Gap High School, located about 2 miles from the present school site, was a makeshift facility consisting of three one- room buildings used for classrooms, one of which was previously an old storehouse building.

Although, like the other county schools from the period, the newer building no longer functions as an educational facility, it stands today as a well-preserved survival, a highly significant vestige of the educational and social history of the Flat Gap community and the architectural history of the region. The school also fulfilled an important role in the civic and social lives of generations of students their families.

Accounts of student and community life at Flat Gap School provide strong evidence of its educational and social importance. In 1945, high school students were transferred to Pound High School, some ten miles distant. The Flat Gap facility became an elementary school, with grades 1-7, but remained the only public building available for community use in the Flat Gap area. To this day, it continues to be used for a wide range of social functions, community activities, and athletic events. The school building meets National Register criteria under Criterion C in the area of Architecture, at the local level, for its unusual classically- derived, yet rustic, design and construction.

### **Historical Background**

In December of 1933, a delegation from at least four local schools in northern Wise County petitioned the county school board for a high school that would serve their area, to be built with federal Civil Works Administration (CWA) funds and labor. As part of the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal, the CWA was one of several relief agencies that provided temporary work to unemployed men and women during the Great Depression. The agency brought work to over 4 million Americans, beginning in November of 1933. They undertook substantial public construction projects in many parts of the country. However, the CWA remained in operation for only five months.

In March 1934, the federal government terminated the program due to its tremendous costs.<sup>3</sup> This explains why, on March 12th, 1934, the Wise County School Board made a resolution to complete the project with other sources of labor and funding other than the CWA.<sup>4</sup> The CWA was soon replaced by the Works Progress Administration, created in May, 1935, but there is no evidence that any New Deal agency played a role in Flat Gap School's construction.

The land for the school was previously owned by Owen Bolling. The Bolling's were a large family, well established in the area. It is not clear whether Mr. Bolling sold or donated the land, but Wise County School Board records from January 8, 1935 show that he granted to the school board "an adequate and suitable site of 2 acres". Nevertheless, from February through June of 1935, a number of sites for the new school were considered. In June, however, bonds were issued to match federal funds for the erection of a new high school in the Flat Gap district, for an estimated cost of \$27, 500. In August of 1935, \$5000 from the Liquor Control Act Fund was put toward constructing the school. By January of 1936, the school was insured for \$5000.<sup>5</sup>

Under the leadership of Chid Wright, a former high school basketball star from the nearby town of Pound, and a coach named Earl Mullins, Flat Gap High School became well known throughout the 1930s for their men's basketball team, which set an astounding record of 100 consecutive wins. They were among the best teams in southwestern Virginia for many years. At the time, basketball was played outside on dirt courts. In the mid-1930s, several of the players listed in box scores in the local newspaper, the Coalfield Progress, came from the Sturgill and Bolling families. The top players in 1936 and 1937 included Lawrence and Raliegh Bolling, Oley and Darrell Roberts, Burliegh Sturgill and Eugene Riddle. This team won the state championship in 1937, beating their opponents that year by typically wide margins.

In 1939, Lee Horne was appointed principal of Flat Gap High School at a salary of \$150 a month for 9 months. In addition, that year, the school board authorized the first attempts to pipe water into the building.

### **Flat Gap School 1941-1961: Oral Histories**

Interviews with several former students of Flat Gap School were conducted by Kaye Shortt in August of 2008. Those interviewed and the dates they attended the school are: Shirley Cox, 1941-44, Glen Shortt 1945-51, Allen Hounshell 1946-53, Anna Greene 1947-51, Gaye Moore 1952-59, and Tony Shortt 1954-61. Mrs. Cox is the only informant who attended high school at Flat Gap. The others attended from grades 1 through 7 and continued their educations at Pound High School. The group's recollections about the school and student life are compiled below.

Shirley Cox, who lived about three miles from the school and had to walk or catch a ride with one of the teachers, attended the Flat Gap School from 1941, when she was in the 8th grade, until 1944. The courses she took included English, Biology, Chemistry, Math, and History. She remembered her high school teachers, Earl Bolling, Tollie Boggs Violet Bolling, Ivory Stallard, and Virginia Roberson. The principal was Mr. Lee Horne. The school was a wonderful place and was so clean and nice. There was a closeness of the students and teachers and never fighting and disagreements.

Mr. Earl Bolling bought a van with wooden benches in the back so the students could ride to school. On Friday evenings the students would perform with poetry reading and singing. Also, there was an active 4-H Club, and she became a leader and was able to travel to other areas representing Flat Gap School. There was a very good library with many books to read. During World War II, young men were needed in the workforce, since those that were of age had to go into the military. According to Mrs. Cox, this left few students in the high school. Because of the low number of students, the school lost its state accreditation and she had to go to Pound High School to graduate.

Flat Gap School was commonly referred to as the "stone schoolhouse" when it first opened as a high school. About 1945, the high school students were moved to Pound and Flat Gap School became an elementary school for grades 1- 7. During the 1945-1961 periods, the best remembered teachers were Mrs. Hattie Bolling, Mrs. Julia Bolling, Mr. C. O. Bolling, and Mr. William "Chid" Wright. In the beginning, the 1st three grades were taught by Mrs. Julia and the grades were lined up by rows in the room. Mrs. Hattie taught the fourth and fifth grades and again they were divided by rows. Mr. C. O. Bolling taught sixth and seventh grades, and later Mr. Chid Wright taught these grades and was also the principal. There were two smaller rooms between the classrooms that were used by the teachers as offices and

were used to sell candy and treats to the students. The rooms were heated by a coal-burning stove in the room—the older boys were paid a small fee to start fires each day in the stoves during the winter months. There were no inside toilets there were two toilets (boys) and (girls) outside. During recess the teachers would escort the girls to the toilets. The floors of the building were made of wood. To preserve the floors, each year a coat of oil was put on the floor. The oil provided a “sliding place” for students. This was frowned upon by the teachers, however some “slid”, and got by with it.

Mrs. Hattie would make soup with vegetables provided by the students and in the winter months would make hot chocolate. One of the fondest memories of all the students was when Mrs. Hattie Bolling would read books to them. Each morning she would read a passage from a book and when she finished that book she would choose another book and read from it. All of those that were interviewed said the school was a wonderful place and held fond memories to them. On one occasion, Mr. Wright treated the sixth and seventh graders to chili hotdogs and many of the students had never eaten a hotdog. Mr. Wright showed all of them how to put the hotdog together and how to hold it with one hand while biting from one of the ends.

The students at Flat Gap were a close-knit group (most of them were related) with mostly the same background. They did not have to compete to see who had the most expensive shoes or clothes because everyone was poor. They all had to carry lunch to school in a paper sack or a lard bucket.

Throughout much of its existence, the school building was used for a variety of activities after school and for Vacation Bible School in the summers. There were monthly farmer’s meetings at night at the school, with the county agent Mr. McCormick often coming to speak to the farmers of the community. They would talk of rotating crops, the merits of various fertilizers, and crop yields.

There was an active 4-H club at the school. On some occasions Mr. C. O. Bolling would show free movies and sometimes there were fundraisers like “Pie Suppers” and “Cake Walks”. And of course there were sports, most importantly basketball. Most of the boys interviewed talked of playing ball on dirt courts and then traveling to Eolia, Kentucky to play another team, and occasionally they would go to Pound and play ball on a real gym floor.

### **The Post-Public School Years**

Flat Gap School was used as a kindergarten in the 1970s until it closed for good as a school, and was soon adapted for use as a community center. Since then, it has been used for family reunions, weddings and wedding anniversaries, birthday parties, a summer activity center for children, community picnics and activities, political rallies, and etc. The school was found eligible by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in 1998. Efforts to nominate the school to the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic places were undertaken. The efforts were stalled, temporarily, but were finally resumed in the summer of 2008.

### **Endnotes**

1. VA School Building Service photographic collection, Library of Virginia. Available online at <http://ajax.lva.lib.va.us>
2. Each of these buildings were heated with a coal stove located in the room. Only one of the buildings remains today, occupied by a Primitive Baptist Church. A porch and inside bathroom have been added.
3. Numerous references about the Civil Works Administration are available on the World Wide Web.
4. Wise County School Board records.

5. Ibid.
6. Nothing else is known about the architect, Mr. Pepper. He does not appear in the book *The Virginia Architects 1835-1955*, and a lengthy Google search produced no results.
7. Mrs. Imogene Bolling Griffin, personal communication with Gayle Kilgore, October, 1997.
8. Book about Wise County High School Basketball history, unknown author, privately printed, unknown date. Several photocopied pages are in possession of Kaye Shortt.
9. Wise County School Board records for Flat Gap High School.
10. Kaye Shortt came to Pound as a high school history teacher in 1971. In 1974, she married Tony Shortt and moved to the South Fork of Pound, where she has served as director of the Flat Gap Community Center for several years. She and her family have been active with the center since the late 1970's.
9. Bibliographical References Cox , Shirley, and Glen Shortt , Allen Hounshell, Anna Greene, Gaye Moore, and Tony Shortt, former Flat Gap School students. Personal communication with Kaye Shortt, August 2008. Griffin, Imogene Bolling. Personal communication with Gayle Kilgore, October 1997. Wise County School Board records, 1933-1957.