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HICKORY HILL SCHOOL

From burn site to historic landmark

by Michael Paul Williams

You may know Hickory Hill School, whose burned-out shell was salvaged from a planned burn in front of the historic school building, as the most recent in the long line of civic and cultural treasures in South Richmond to be rehabilitated and repurposed for new purposes. This summer, in fact, Hickory Hill will be one of more than 5,000 schools built in the South between 1912 and 1932 — be one of more than 5,000 built as Rosenwald schools — in Virginia, and it will be one of the very last remaining Rosenwald schools in the state, along with a handful of others around the country, especially in the South. Hickory Hill was built in 1924, in Chesterfield County, to serve the African American community of Hickory Hill. The school was named for a nearby community-owned grove of trees. Hickory Hill is an example of the Rosenwald School movement, which was a response to the segregation of public schools in the South and the underfunding of African American schools. The Rosenwald Schools were funded through the Rosenwald Fund, established by Julius Rosenwald, a wealthy businessman and philanthropist. The fund provided grants to states, school boards, and communities to build and finance schools for African American children. The construction of Hickory Hill School was part of a larger effort to provide educational opportunities for African American children and to improve their access to quality education. The school was designed by the noted African American architect George W. Fuller and was built by local craftspeople. It was completed in 1926 and opened to students the following year. Hickory Hill School was part of a larger effort to improve the education of African American children in the South. The school was designed to provide a safe and comfortable learning environment for students, and it featured modern amenities and facilities for the time. However, due to the segregation policies of the time, Hickory Hill School was only attended by Black students, and it was the only school in rural Virginia offering high school-level work to African American students. The school was closed in 1986, and it remained vacant for many years. In 2014, the school was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and in 2018, it was announced that the school would be renovated and repurposed as a community center and cultural hub. The renovation of Hickory Hill School was a significant project, and it required the collaboration of multiple organizations and individuals. The project was led by the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, which served as the lead organization for the renovation. The project was supported by a variety of partners, including the Virginia General Assembly, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the City of Richmond, and the Commonwealth of Virginia. The project was completed in 2020, and the school opened to the public in 2021. Today, Hickory Hill School is a vibrant community hub, offering a range of programs and activities for residents of South Richmond. It is a testament to the power of community and the importance of preserving our history and heritage. Michael Paul Williams (540)-419-0485 twalawilliams@gmail.com