

The following was taken from my favorite Prince William County book, “Yesterday’s Schools” by Lucy Walsh Phinney. The book can be purchased from the Prince William County Historical Commission.

The Bradley School
Manassas School District #6
White
1871-1930

When the Manassas School Board called upon local citizens to donate land and/or buildings for use as public schools, Thomas and Martha Jones, who owned land east of the Brentsville Road along a small creek called Piney Branch, gave one acre of land with, apparently, a small building on it, to the Trustees of the School Board for a free public school for white children of the area. The small building was evidently a log cabin, which had served the community for many years as a private school. During the Civil War, the Union troops used the log cabin school house as a barracks and damaged it enough that the Manassas School Board declared it to be unusable for a public school. Board minutes from December 1871 show that group agreed that the school house, built by subscriptions from the community and occupied by the Federal Army “during the late war,” was unfit and therefore they agreed to seek help from U. S. Congressmen from Virginia in collecting compensation for damages.

After a year, a new school house was built on the land donated by the Joneses. It was located on the Brentsville Road at the juncture of the proposed road to Sinclair’s Mill. The small, frame, one story, one-room building of weatherboard on a stone and brick foundation with a metal covered gable roof and a one story, shed roofed open porch across the front was heated by a wood burning pot-bellied stove.

The Manassas Public School records of March 4, 1872 show that the School Board “voted to employ Miss Sarah Elizabeth Johnson to teach Bradley School for two and one half months at twenty-five dollars per month to commence April 15, 1872.” This is the first mention of a teacher for the school but whether she was actually the first teacher or was finishing the unexpired term of someone else is unknown. Until the Bradley School expanded its school term from five months to seven and then to eight months, she alternated her teaching there with teaching at both the Bristoe and Cherry Hill Schools. Miss Johnson continued to teach at the Bradley School until January 12, 1913, a career of more than forty years! She was then sixty-eight years old and lived another four years in “retirement”.

Miss Johnson, whose home was Clover Hill Farm in Manassas, travelled to school in a spring wagon pulled by her horse, “Dolly”. She is remembered by her pupils as one who “ran a tight ship” and expected a lot from her students. Every morning she would stand at the top of the school steps and as each student entered the building, he or she was expected to say “Good morning, Miss Sally.” If they failed to do so, they had to go back down the steps and try again. Her diction was remembered as being perfect. A photograph taken in front of the schoolhouse during those early years shows Miss Johnson standing in the doorway with thirty-five students ranging in age from probably five years old to big teenagers. No wonder she had to “run a tight ship”. Mr. George C. Round, a Trustee of the School District, had this to say about the Bradley School under Miss Johnson: In contest with other schools of the county her pupils were splendidly grounded in fundamentals of common English, penmanship, reading, spelling, arithmetic, grammar and geography. Her school room was a model of exactness and order. In use of charts, library books and school building she excelled.

Miss Sally obviously cared about her students and they, in turn, looked back on those schooldays with fond memories. In 1910, Mr. Hugh H. Weedon of Weedon Fick Publishing Company of Pittsburg sent a donation of books for her school's library. Included in this wonderful gift was a thirty-two volume set of the writings of Dumas, a set of Dickens's works, a set of Shakespeare's works and a set of Historical Memories of Europe. During the years 1898 to 1909, at least three members of the Green family – Raymond, Lucille, and Mary Allie – attended the Bradley School. In the Green family there survives a souvenir booklet filled with poems and drawings, a gift from Miss Johnson at the end of the 1909 school year, "with best wishes from your teacher". The list of students in that booklet of 1909 shows that there were forty-two students that year, twenty-four girls and eighteen boys.

Miss Sarah Johnson was a pillar of her community. She not only was the schoolma'am for forty years, she was active in the United Daughters of the Confederacy as well as the Brethren Church. In addition, Sally, as she was often called, helped her mother, sister and brother run the family farm, Clover Hill, often taking in sick relatives or neighbors and nursing them back to health. She "still managed to find time to write letters to relatives, make gifts using 'the needle or shuttle' and do for others.... She was known far and near and loved by young and old."

Like most early schoolhouses, the Bradley School served several purposes in its community. In 1885, for example, it is known that Reverend Abraham Conner of the German Baptist Church preached there before he settled in the Cannon Branch area of Manassas.

By 1906, the little schoolhouse was at least forty-five years old and in need of both repair and enlarging. On August 23, 1906, the School Board authorized Trustee Payne to see that it was done.

In the early 1920s, enrollment began to decline. The teacher during the 1925-26 school year was Mrs. Ruth Ormonde Butler, age twenty-one and a recent high school graduate. She had only twenty-five students enrolled with eighteen attending on a daily average. Of those twenty-five, seventeen were in grades 1-4 but at year's end, two of them had dropped out and eight had failed. Eight students were in grades 5-7 but one dropped out during the year and one failed at the end of the term. Mrs. Butler was paid \$65 a month for the eight month term and paid \$20 monthly for room and board. It must have been hard at such a young age to live away from home during the school year. The yearend report also said that there were 225 books in the library at the little school, a drop from 300 which made up the library during Miss Johnson's years.

The following year the teacher was another young woman. Miss Virginia Estelle Polen. She was only eighteen years old and this was her first teaching experience. She was in charge of twenty-two children, the majority of whom were enrolled in the first four grades. The average attendance on a day was only fourteen however, below the accepted level of a minimum of sixteen. Miss Polen's salary was the same as Mrs. Butler's had been the previous year.

The next year, 1927-28, enrollment was up a little, with twenty-eight students. Twenty-two were in grades 1-4; six were in grades 5-7. That was the last year for the Bradley School and the last teacher was Miss Mary Harley who was also the last teacher of the Cannon Branch School.

On July 2, 1930, the Board recommended that the school be closed and the children be given a choice of taking a bus to Manassas or attending the Brentsville School. The little schoolhouse was rented as a residence to Archie Muddiman. Unfortunately, Mr. Muddiman, in November 1935, was in jail and the Board received a report that the building and grounds were being 'misused'. Mr. Muddiman was ordered to vacate the property within thirty days.

On Sept. 15, 1936, the school house was sold at auction to Mrs. Hannah O'Calloghan for \$200, which was deposited to the credit of the Manassas District School Fund. The building was willed to her grandchildren, Patrick Bradley and Patrick Holland ho rented it to the Bradley Forest Bible Church. It was then sold in 1986 to the Calvary Gospel Church which met there until the pastor moved on in 1992 when the building was again sold. It was purchased by Doreen McIntosh whose parents live next door. It is now rented to a church who uses it for storage purposes. Its owner is committed to its preservation as one of the oldest standing schoolhouses in the country.