



Case Study 3

■ A Multi-Year Project with a Permanent Exhibition, Website, and Companion Booklet

Title: *Celebrating Simms: The Story of the Lucy F. Simms School*

Organizer: James Madison University

Location & Dates: Harrisonburg, Virginia, Fall 2015–ongoing

Total Budget: \$36,450*

**reflective of current printing only*

Project Team and Partners: Mollie Godfrey and Seán McCarthy, James Madison University; Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center; Harrisonburg and Rockingham County school systems; Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project

Visit the [Celebrating Simms website](#) for a full list of past and current contributors.

The Spark

The idea behind the Celebrating Simms project was sparked in the spring of 2015 as professor Mollie Godfrey and Robin Lyttle, the founder of the [Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project](#), collaborated for an African American Literature and Historical Recovery class project. The students in the class were sent off to engage with the community by researching and writing biographies for local African American soldiers who fought for the Union in the Civil War. After this project, the pair began to brainstorm other ways of getting JMU students involved in recovering local African American history and came up with the idea of doing a small, temporary exhibition on the topic of the Lucy F. Simms School. Mollie was connected with Seán McCarthy, who had extensive experience working on similar community engagement projects.

Community Context

Born enslaved in 1856, Lucy F. Simms received her degree from Virginia's Hampton Institute and eventually settled in Harrisonburg. Having taught over 1,800 students from three generations of families, the Lucy F. Simms School was built soon after her death to honor her legacy and served African-American students from across Rockingham County and beyond between 1938 and 1965. The original exhibition, which spans 150 years of history, tells the story of the school from the perspective of it as the heart of local community life.

Exhibition Purpose

Celebrating Simms: The Story of The Lucy F. Simms School is a large, permanent exhibition, website, and companion booklet that celebrates the history and role of education among the African American community in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Several community members had previously researched and written on the topic, and there was a strong desire within the community to see this work celebrated, expanded upon, and given a visible and accessible place in the wider Harrisonburg community. *Celebrating Simms* aimed to give voice to and build upon this work, foregrounding local African American voices and needs in both the design of the project and the shape and placement of the exhibition's narrative. In this effort, the project aligned with the methodology of the counter-story by privileging nonacademic voices to tell their own story rather than imposing one upon them. The project also raised important considerations about the practical difficulties of building trust between predominantly white institutions and historically black communities, and the relationship between this process of trust-building and the kinds of stories we tell together.

Godfrey, M., & McCarthy, S. (2017). Celebrating Simms: Complicating the "Single Story" in community-engagement projects. *Public*, 4(2). <https://public.imaginingamerica.org/journalcontent/2017/4/2/227/index.html>

Budget Details*

Item	Quantity	Unit Cost	Total Cost
Printing large panels, 2 runs	34	\$130	\$8,840
Printing small panels, 1 run	25	\$40	\$1,000
Fairfax exhibit	7	\$130	\$910
Graphic Design			\$1,500
Printing booklets (750)	3	\$1,400	\$4,200
Paid graduate student labor, events, equipment, incidentals			\$20,000
Thousands of hours of labor from Harrisonburg community members, K-12 teachers and students, James Madison University faculty, students, and library professionals			In-kind
Total			\$36,450

*reflective of current printing only

Exhibition Content & Design

The *Celebrating Simms* exhibition and companion website officially launched on April 25, 2016. In its early stages, this project was supposed to be a temporary installation of no more than thirty panels of text and photographs. Over the course of the year, it grew to become fifty-nine panels on permanent display in the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center in Harrisonburg, Virginia, as well as a book, website, and another version of the exhibition on display at Harrisonburg High School. In hindsight, it's not surprising that the project grew from its humble beginnings. The story of the Lucy F. Simms School, the peerless educator that gave the school its name, and the story of African American education in Rockingham County represent a rich collective history that deserves and needs to be celebrated.

The project consists of:

- **Physical exhibitions**, including *Celebrating Simms* in the [Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center](#), Harrisonburg High School, and all the high schools in surrounding Rockingham County (audiovisual versions available in Spanish and Arabic); an exhibition celebrating Simms teacher Mary Awkard Fairfax in the [Simms Continuing Education Center](#); and a mobile exhibition that has toured numerous local municipal libraries and schools in the region
- **A website** with materials related to the physical exhibitions, including: an [interactive timeline](#) and [map](#); a [digital archive](#) of hundreds of photographs and other historical artifacts; [oral histories](#) with former Simms students and teachers; [educational resources](#) that can be used by K-12 teachers; and video clips of interviews with teachers and students who attended the school, courtesy of Billo Harper
- **A companion booklet** that contains the images and text of the original *Celebrating Simms* exhibition
- **Oral histories** conducted by current high school students from Spotswood and Turner Ashby high schools in Rockingham County as part of their 2022-2023 African American History elective coursework

Marketing

The project has received media attention and has been discussed in several conference presentations, academic articles, reviews, and interviews. Details available [here](#).



Impact

Combined, the Harrisonburg High School and traveling exhibitions have reached over 14,000 regional library visitors, 6,000 high school students, 2,000 middle school students, and 19,500 James Madison University students. The website has 10,000+ unique visitors. *Celebrating Simms* has been a recipient of multiple university and regional grants, local and national awards, and extensive coverage in the local press.

Lessons Learned

- Always center community voices and the stories they want to tell.
- Make the project sustainable by creating exciting learning and professionalization opportunities for students.
- Funding for regional historical recovery projects is hard to come by, so finding creative ways to keep such projects going (classes, internships, student research, or a variety of small grants) is a must.