OMB Control No. 1024-0018
expiration date 03/31/2022

**United States Department of the Interior**
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

## 1. Name of Property

Historic name: __Warren County Community Center_____
Other names/site number: ____N/A_____
Name of related multiple property listing**:**
_____N/A_____
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing

## 2. Location

Street & number: __111 West Franklin Street_____
City or town: _Warrenton_____ State: _North Carolina_____ County: __Warren_____
Not For Publication: n/a Vicinity: n/a

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this _X__ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property __X_ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.
I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

**___national ___statewide _X__local**

Applicable National Register Criteria:

**_X_A ___B ___C ___D**

_____

**Signature of certifying official/Title: State Historic Preservation Officer Date**

_____

**State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

_____

**Signature of commenting official: Date**

_____

**Title : State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

_____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

## 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

| | |
|---|---|
| Private: | [X] |
| Public – Local | [ ] |
| Public – State | [ ] |
| Public – Federal | [ ] |

**Category of Property**

(Check only **one** box.)

| | |
|---|---|
| Building(s) | [X] |
| District | [ ] |
| Site | [ ] |
| Structure | [ ] |
| Object | [ ] |

Warren County Community Center | Warren County, NC
Name of Property | County and State

**Number of Resources within Property**
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0 | buildings |
| 0 | 0 | sites |
| 0 | 0 | structures |
| 0 | 0 | objects |
| 1 | 0 | Total |

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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**6. Function or Use**
**Historic Functions**
(Enter categories from instructions.)
SOCIAL
EDUCATION: library

**Current Functions**
(Enter categories from instructions.)
SOCIAL

## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)
Colonial Revival

### Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)
Principal exterior materials of the property:
Foundation: Brick
Walls: Brick
Roof: Asphalt Shingle

## Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with **a summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

**Summary Paragraph**
The Warren County Community Center is located on the south side of West Franklin Street in Warrenton, North Carolina. It stands just south of the commercial core of the town and east of the largest twentieth-century historically African American residential area in Warrenton. The one-story, Colonial Revival-style building, constructed in part with Works Progress Administration funds in 1935-1936, stands on a raised basement and features a brick exterior, six-over-six wood-sash windows, and a flat cornice. The symmetrical, hip-roofed façade includes projecting gabled wings on the east and west ends, flanking a shed-roofed porch that shelters three pairs of French doors. The wings project asymmetrically on the rear elevation, flanking a two-story, flat-roofed wing that extends across the center section of the building. The interior retains its original floor plan along with wood floors, plaster walls, and beaded-board ceilings throughout much of the first floor and concrete floors in the basement.

**Site and Setting**
The Warren County Community Center is located in Warrenton, North Carolina, a town of approximately 850 residents and the county seat of Warren County. Warrenton is located near the center of the county and is the largest of its three municipalities (the others being Macon, roughly five miles to the northeast and Norlina four miles to the northwest). The Warren County Community Center stands on the south side of West Franklin Street, just one-tenth of a mile south of the Warren County Courthouse, and is included as a contributing resource in the Warrenton Historic District (NR1967; NR2024).

The intersection of West Franklin and South Front Streets historically served as the anchor of the African American community in Warrenton. The Warren County Community Center is located just east of the southeast corner of this intersection, adjoining a ca.1935 commercial building at the corner. The 1918 All Saints Episcopal Church is at the southwest corner. Collectively, these three buildings formed the center of Black life in the town. By the mid-twentieth century, this intersection was surrounded by Black churches, businesses, and homes. Today, a mix of commercial and residential development extends north from this intersection along South Front Street. More dense commercial development is located northeast of the intersection along East Franklin and South Main Streets. Vacant lots, mid-twentieth-century housing, small-scale commercial buildings, and a school are located south of the intersection. Industrial buildings to the west, many of which were demolished in the 2010s, historically separated downtown Warrenton from the twentieth-century African American residential development that extends west along West Franklin Street.

The community center building is roughly centered on its small, 0.12-acre parcel, with narrow strips of grassy lawn to the north, east, and south. The west side of the building stands very close to the adjacent commercial building, separated by a concrete walkway. A concrete sidewalk extends along the south side of West Franklin Street, adjacent to the concrete curb and gutter. Plantings in mulched beds are located along the north foundation of the building, flanking a wide center stair that extends from the sidewalk to the shed-roofed porch. A historical marker at the northeast corner of the property, placed in 2023, marks the site as part of the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail. An asphalt parking area, owned by the Town of Warrenton, is located on the adjacent parcel to the south.

**Building Exterior**

The one-story, hip-roofed building rests on a raised basement, making it nearly as tall as the two-story commercial building to its immediate west. The frame building features a brick veneer, a variation of a one-to-six common bond that features alternating header and stretcher brick in the sixth rows. The six-over-six wood-sash windows on the main story rest on painted concrete sills. Basement-level windows have been replaced with one-light or one-over-one wood-sash windows. The fiberglass-shingled roof features boxed eaves and is pierced by two plain, rectangular interior brick chimneys, each with a concrete cap. A wide, flat wood cornice extends around the building.

The front of the building features a five-bay core flanked by projecting front-pedimented wings. At the center of the upper façade are three pairs of fifteen-light, wood-framed French doors. The easternmost pair of doors is a later replacement that is slightly shorter than the original doors, necessitating a narrow band of wood at the top of the opening. A plaque between the westernmost pairs of doors reads, “Built by Works Progress Administration of North Carolina 1935-1937.”[1] To each side of the three pairs of doors there is a light fixture consisting of a bulb encased by a jar-like glass shade and single six-over-six wood-sash window.

These center five bays are sheltered by a shed-roofed porch that abuts the projecting side wings on the east and west ends of the façade. The porch has a poured concrete floor. The shed roof is supported by tapered square columns with simple concrete bases and wood caps and spanned by a wood railing measuring approximately three feet in height and installed in the 1960s or 1970s.[2] The porch is accessed by a broad staircase, equal to the width of the center three bays of the façade, which abuts the sidewalk that runs along West Franklin Street. Rising from the third of the twelve concrete steps are brick cheek

[1] While the plaque notes construction from 1935 to 1937, the cornerstone gives a date of 1936 and a November 20, 1936 newspaper article in *The Warren Record* notes the “Community Center opened here on November 9,” and that the building was open to the public daily. For these reasons, the building has been given a completion date of 1936.

[2] Shauna Williams, email communication with the author, February 26, 2025.

walls capped with smooth concrete. Metal pipe railings divide the stair into thirds and align with the square columns supporting the porch roof. A matching railing separates the front lawn from the concrete sidewalk abutting the northwest side of the building.

The pediments of the wings flanking the porch each feature a five-sided louvered wood vent and flat fascia that matches the cornice of the building. The west wing is slightly wider than the east wing and features two windows at each story: original six-over-six windows at the main story and one-over-one replacement windows at the basement. The east wing contains a single window at each story. Here, the basement window, originally six-over-six double-hung, has been shortened to a single-light awning window to prevent water infiltration, as the site slopes down from east to west. The lower portion of the original window openings have been infilled with brick and covered with stucco. East of the basement window, at the northeast corner of the building, is the cornerstone, which reads, "Community Center Built By W.P.A. & Citizens 1936."

The three-bay east elevation features at the main story two six-over-six wood-sash windows and, at the south end, an air conditioning unit supported by a metal platform on brackets. Each bay of the basement story contains a shortened one-light awning window, treated like those on the front of the east wing.

The south elevation is seven bays wide, the westernmost two bays located under a pedimented gable that forms the rear of the west side wing. The easternmost bay, which is the rear of the east wing, is inset, its south wall aligning with the end of the hip-roofed main block of the building, while the west wing projects very slightly, aligning with a flat-roofed, central mass that corresponds to the front porch. The detailing on this elevation matches that of the façade, with six-over-six wood-sash windows on the main story; a wide, flat cornice; and a pedimented gable with five-sided louvered vent and wide, flat fascia at each end. In the recess at the southeast corner of the building created by the shorter east gabled wing, there are two basement entrances partially below grade, the earth held back by a low retaining wall covered with stucco. The entrances are sheltered by a single shed roof with metal roofing, exposed rafter tails, and square wood post supports that rest on the retaining wall. A single modern vinyl door is located on the rear of the east gabled wing and the east elevation of the main block. A number of basement-level openings on the south elevation have been infilled with brick over time, including an entrance near the west end of the elevation, at the rear of the west wing. A window to the east of this wing has been removed and the opening boarded, but the concrete sill remains visible. A basement entrance near the center of this elevation has been widened to accommodate an interior elevator.

The west elevation is three bays wide at the main story where it retains six-over-six wood-sash windows. The two bays of the basement are evenly spaced so that they do not align with the upper bays. Here, a north window opening was enlarged to accommodate an accessible entrance with a modern vinyl door, while the six-over-six window to the south is original.

**Building Interior**

On the main floor, the floor plan aligns with the building's overall form of a central core flanked by front-gabled wings. The primary meeting space is located at the center of the building, accessed via the three pairs of French doors on the façade. Service rooms including from west to east a men's bathroom, stairwell, storage room, and small kitchen extend along the south (rear) wall of the main block, within the flat-roofed rear wing. A library is located within the west wing of the building. The east wing contains a ladies' parlor and ladies' bathroom.

The meeting space retains wood floors, wide molded baseboards, plaster walls with a molded picture rail, and beaded-board ceilings. Doors and windows are trimmed with plain, flat-board surrounds. In some

areas, modern electrical conduit has been run over the walls and ceilings. A fireplace is centered on the east wall, projecting slightly into the room. The fireplace features stacked stretcher-course brick on the sides of the firebox and soldier-course brick above the firebox. It is topped by a simple wood mantelshelf. A hearth is cast concrete. Immediately north of the fireplace is a five-panel wood door that opens to the ladies' parlor. Five-panel wood doors along the south wall of the meeting space open to the service rooms; only the door to the men's bathroom has been replaced with a modern two-panel door. Two pairs of fifteen-light French doors on the west wall open to the library.

The library is less decorative than the meeting space. It retains wood floors, wide molded baseboards, plaster walls, and a beaded-board ceiling. In lieu of window surrounds, the plaster is rounded and extends into the window framing. The room appears much as it did when it was used as a library, retaining wood bookshelves on the south end of the room and a librarian's desk, card catalog, typing desk, and dictionary on a stand at the north end of the room.

The ladies' parlor on the east end of the building is finished similarly to the library with plaster walls, beaded-board ceiling, and rounded plaster in lieu of window surrounds. Original wood floors have been covered with linoleum. A fireplace on the west wall backs up to the fireplace in the meeting space, the two sharing a chimney. It features a wood mantelpiece with boxed pilasters supported by tall plinths that extend above the adjacent baseboards and a frieze of two inset molded panels. The pilasters support a molded shelf. The hearth is concrete. A five-panel door on the south wall of the ladies' parlor opens to the ladies' bathroom.

Most of the ancillary spaces (ladies' bathroom, kitchen, storage room, and stairwell) have linoleum covering the floor, wide molded baseboards, plaster walls, and beaded-board ceilings. The window on the south wall is set within a plastered surround. A two-panel door on the west wall of the kitchen opens to a shallow pantry. The storage room is being converted to an elevator lift to make the building fully accessible while retaining the original configuration of rooms. Portions of the original wood flooring have been removed to accommodate this change. The men's bathroom has been remodeled with modern fixtures, a rubber floor with rubber baseboards, drywall walls, and flat-board wood trim around the window, although its original beaded-board ceiling remains in place.

The stairwell, located near the center of the south wall, retains wood floors with a high molded baseboard, plaster walls, and a beaded-board ceiling. A six-over-six window on the south wall lights the stairwell and retains the original rounded plaster surround. The half-turn wood stairs retain a wood railing with square balusters and a square newel post at the bottom of the upper run, where the landing abuts the south wall.

The basement floor plan is similar to that of the main floor, with a meeting room under each of the front-gabled wings. However, the central space is partitioned into three rooms, a larger room to the west, into which the stair opens, and two smaller rooms to the east (see Floor Plan). The smaller, south room on the east side serves as a vestibule with an exterior door on its east wall and a six-over-six wood-sash window on its north wall that allows some natural light into the smaller meeting room to its north.

Throughout the basement, finishes are more utilitarian than those on the main floor. Floors are concrete throughout with tile installed in the northeast room of the center section and in the east and west wings. Tile in the southwest corner of the center section, where bathrooms were once located, has been removed. Plain, flat baseboards are located throughout. Flat-board door and window surrounds are located in the center meeting rooms and the east wing, with the west wing featuring the same curved plaster surrounds for doors and windows found in the library and ladies' parlor. Beaded-board ceilings remain, though many are damaged or deteriorated, and ductwork and electrical conduit run below the ceilings.

The larger, western section of the center space, which served as the main recreation area, contains freestanding bookshelves that originally stood in the library arranged along the north wall. The stairwell projects into this space, accessed by a four-light-over-two-panel wood door. The space immediately west side of the stairs, below the men's room upstairs, included original bathrooms with shower stalls. All of the bathroom fixtures and flooring, with the exception of a single toilet and sink, were removed about 2009.

The west wing basement includes a partial kitchen on the south and west walls. An entrance on the south elevation was infilled with concrete block (with a brick veneer on the exterior) when a window on the west elevation was converted to an accessible entrance. An interior concrete ramp with a metal railing leads to this later exterior door.

**Integrity Assessment**

The 1936 Warren County Community Center retains integrity of location, setting, design, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association. Located on its original site, the building retains its historic setting as part of the intersection at West Franklin and South Front Streets that served as the center of the African American community in Warrenton. The site maintains its original circulation patterns, shallow grassy front and side lawns, and wide front stair. The building retains integrity of design, workmanship, and materials, including original overall form, exterior brickwork and columns, and windows at the main floor. The interior largely retains its original floor plan, with only minor alterations to the basement meeting rooms and the removal of basement showers. Extant original finishes include wood flooring, plaster walls, beaded-board ceilings, wood doors, and original wood and plaster door and window surrounds. On the main floor, only the ladies' lounge and the service spaces along the south part of the building have twenty-first century flooring or finishes. In the basement, tile flooring associated with the original bathroom has been removed. Despite these minor material changes, the building as a whole retains sufficient integrity of design, materials, and workmanship to convey the property's historic feeling and association.

**Statement of Archaeological Potential**

The HPO received the following from Mandy G. Posgai, MA, Archaeologist with the NC Office of Sate Archaeology: The building, a one-story Colonial Revival-style building standing on a raised basement, was constructed in part with Works Progress Administration funds and completed in 1936. The Warren Community Center is a contributing resource in the Warrenton Historic District (NR1967; NR2024). The property is unlikely to contain intact and significant archaeological resources below the surface that either predate or contribute to the period of significance of the building due to the site's location and modern ground disturbance near the building. As a result, I do not recommend a statement of archaeological potential for this National Register eligible property.

## 8. Statement of Significance

**Applicable National Register Criteria**
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- [x] A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- [ ] B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- [ ] C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- [ ] D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- [ ] A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- [ ] B. Removed from its original location
- [ ] C. A birthplace or grave
- [ ] D. A cemetery
- [ ] E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- [ ] F. A commemorative property
- [ ] G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

**Areas of Significance**
(Enter categories from instructions.)
ETHNIC HERITAGE: BLACK
CIVIL RIGHTS
EDUCATION
SOCIAL HISTORY

**Period of Significance**
1936-1969

**Significant Dates**

**Significant Person**
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)
N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**
N/A

**Architect/Builder**
unknown

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Warren County Community Center is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic Heritage: Black, Social History, Education, and Civil Rights as a facility that provided the county's Black residents with a sense of community, safety, and support during the Jim Crow era Completed in 1936, the Warren County Community Center served as a venue for Black residents to gather for social events and organizational meetings without the safety concerns of backlash from White residents. Resting areas and public bathrooms were provided for African Americans visiting government offices, utilizing professional services, or patronizing businesses in downtown Warrenton, where such facilities were not open to Black users. The building also housed a library for Black residents, who were excluded from the segregated Warren County Memorial Library. By the 1960s, the community center had become a center of the local Civil Rights movement as a meeting space for Civil Rights leaders including NAACP officials and local lawyers, as well as the gatherings they organized to discuss Civil Rights issues with the Black community. The period of significance for the Warren County Community Center begins in 1936, when the building was completed, and ends in 1969 with the integration of Warren County's public facilities.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

**Warrenton in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the overall population of Warren County stayed relatively static and the town of Warrenton remained largely integrated, both physically and socially, as it had been historically.[3] At the same time, the Reconstruction era brought social change, religious freedom, and educational opportunities for the formerly enslaved residents of Warren County. For the first time, Blacks were afforded the opportunity to gather freely and to form legally recognized organizations. Typically, African American churches and schools, the first permanent institutions to be established post-emancipation, became the centerpiece of the Black community. Scholars have long recognized churches to be the, "single most significant institutions in African-American life" in the post-Civil War era.[4]

Warren County continued to struggle economically in the late nineteenth century, although some reprieve was found following the establishment of a tobacco market in Warrenton in 1885. The first tobacco market in the region east of Henderson, North Carolina, it capitalized on the popularity of bright leaf tobacco and boosted the local economy, serving as a source of prosperity for local farmers and warehousemen.[5] Publicly funded improvements were made in Warrenton in the early twentieth century, including the construction of a new Warren County Courthouse in 1906 and a new municipal building in 1912.[6] By the 1920s, Warrenton boasted flourishing businesses and a tobacco industry, paved roads and sidewalks, and a telephone exchange. In addition, the town itself owned the three-mile Warrenton

[3] Heather Slane and Cheri Szcodronski, "Warrenton Historic District (Additional Documentation, Boundary Increase, and Boundary Decrease)," Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, 2024, 180.

[4] Carroll Van West, "Historic Rural African-American Churches in Tennessee," Multiple Property Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, 1998, Section E, page 2.

[5] Catherine Cockshutt [Bishir], "Warrenton Historic District," Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, 1976, Section 8, page 19.

[6] Cockshutt [Bishir], Section 8, page 20.

Railroad, a water filtration plant, sewer system, ice plant, power and light plant, and hotel.[7] Commercial buildings in the downtown core, most reconstructed after a series of late-nineteenth-century fires, housed drugstores, department stores, and other retail businesses, which thrived especially during the peak prosperity of the local tobacco market.

While Warrenton had the outward appearance of a successful, if not booming, economy, its prosperity was not shared by all of its residents. By the turn of the twentieth century, White Southerners had firmly put into place the system of Jim Crow segregation. As W.E.B. DuBois describes, the "veil descended," separating the White and African American populations and resulting in the development of clearly defined – and strongly enforced – White and Black spaces.[8] During the mid- to late nineteenth century, African American homes, churches, schools, and businesses usually were located throughout towns. By the early twentieth century, however, African Americans nationwide were commonly relegated to the town limits or beyond and forced onto undesirable land along railroad corridors, adjacent to industrial complexes, in low-lying wetlands, or along steep ravines. In Warrenton, "The Hill" neighborhood emerged in the early twentieth century and grew to become the largest traditionally African American neighborhood in the town and home to a number of Black-owned businesses.[9] Located southwest of downtown and initially outside of the town limits, it was physically separated from downtown by the Edmund White Cotton Gin (a contributing building in the Warrenton Historic District Boundary Increase, NR 2024) and White Building Supplies (no longer extant), industrial complexes that reinforced the Jim Crow-era separation of White and Black people.

Early twentieth-century churches constructed near the periphery of Warrenton, adjacent to Black residential enclaves, included the c.1868 Oak Chapel African Episcopal Church (219 East Macon Street) in east Warrenton, and the 1908 Second Baptist Church/Warrenton Missionary Baptist Church (114 South Bragg Street) and 1918 All Saints Episcopal Church (201 South Front Street), both in southwest Warrenton (all extant). While Black churches have always been a sanctuary for the community, they were especially important when Black citizens were limited in their freedom of movement, gathering, and civic activities by segregation policies and practices. During the difficulties of the Jim Crow era, churches stood as, "one of the few public spaces where African Americans could and would gather."[10]

As they had in the late nineteenth century, churches in the twentieth-century often doubled as schools or meeting places for activities related to Black politics, civil rights, education, and suffrage. Messages spoken by Black preachers were often those of courage, equality, persistence, and optimism. The African American church, owned and managed by Black leaders and congregants, "by its very existence and democratic structure imparted racial pride and dignity, providing parishioners of all classes the opportunity to participate in its meetings and rituals and to exercise roles denied them in the larger society."[11] It served as a public space for social and cultural rituals grounded in equality, as well as a meeting place and recruitment center for African American civic groups.[12]

Similarly, schools served as community meeting places and illustrated the significance placed on education by the Black community. As early as 1885, African American churches and schools were

[7] Slane and Szcodronski, 180; Cockshutt [Bishir], Section 8, page 20.

[8] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: IL: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1909, Reprint 2014 by Millennium Publications).

[9] Slane and Szcodronski, 186.

[10] West, Section E, page 2; Joe W. Trotter, "African American Fraternal Association in American History: An Introduction," *Social Science History* 28:3 (Fall 2004), 36.

[11] Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1999) as quoted by West, Section E, page 40.

[12] West, Section E, page 40.

established along West Franklin Street in The Hill, physically separated from the White churches and schools that existed north of downtown.[13] In the early twentieth century, new schools for Black students were constructed in the area including Hawkins Elementary School (extant at 410 West Franklin Street) in 1911 and the John R. Hawkins High School Complex (extant at 427 West Franklin Street), which was constructed around a Rosenwald Fund school that opened in 1925, but has since been demolished.

African Americans also formed social and fraternal groups. North Carolina historian Paul D. Escott notes, "blacks [sic] formed many groups, large and small, for pleasure, self-improvement, and mutual support."[14] Fraternal lodges and funeral homes commonly offered assistance to community members in need and, most importantly, provided that assistance with humanity, dignity, and respect. Black clubs, lodges, and societies were established throughout Warrenton in the early twentieth century, providing their members "with chances to speak, to lead, and to develop their abilities."[15] Among these is the Stone Square Lodge No. 10, Prince Hall Free and Accepted Masons, which was established as early as 1905, although the current structure, just west of the town limits at 214 West Franklin Street, was completed in the mid-twentieth century.

In Warrenton, several small businesses existed throughout The Hill, often adjacent or attached to the proprietor's dwelling, while a collection of Black-owned businesses on Franklin Street, just south of downtown, emerged as Warrenton's "Black Wall Street."[16] At the core of this commercial area was the Professional Building, located at the southeast corner of West Franklin and South Front Streets. Constructed about 1935, the two-story building housed a grocery store, café, beauty parlor, and barber on the ground floor. Doctor Thomas W. Haywood, Warrenton's first Black physician, and Dr. Harris, a dentist from Henderson, had offices at the second floor. The Warren County Agricultural Extension was also housed in this building, a Black farm agent having been appointed in August of 1935.[17] Meanwhile, during the early twentieth century, downtown businesses in Warrenton became largely segregated, the result of Jim Crow legislation and racist sentiment throughout the South. "Defeat, disenfranchisement, and the new legally mandated discrimination of the Jim Crow system eventually reduced three and a half decades of life in freedom to a nadir."[18]

In addition to the physical separation imposed upon them, Black residents throughout the South, including in Warren County, commonly suffered extreme discrimination and violence during the Jim Crow era. Historian Jeffrey Crow notes that, "denied the vote and physically separated from Whites residentially and in public accommodations, African Americans struggled to earn a living, to educate their children in underfunded and inferior facilities, and to contest the limits placed on their social, economic, and political lives."[19] Yet Black residents of Warren County exercised their right to organize and fought against the repression inflicted by their White neighbors.

[13] Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, "Warrenton, Warren County, North Carolina," 1885, 1891, and 1896, *NCLive*.org.

[14] Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley Wadelington, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina,* Second Edition (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2011), 96.

[15] Crow, Escott, and Wadelington, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 96-97.

[16] Magnolia Clanton during Personal Interview with Collin Bullock, Magnolia Clanton, Felton B. David, Jr., Joyce B. Long, Shauna Singletary Williams, and Yarbrough Williams (Warren County Residents) by Heather Slane, July 31, 2024, Warren County Memorial Library, Warrenton, North Carolina (hereafter referred to as "Interview with Local Residents, 2024").

[17] Magnolia Clandon during Interview with Local Residents, 2024; "County to Have a Negro Agent," *The Warren Record*, August 9, 1935, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/ accessed October 30, 2024.

[18] Crow, Escott, and Wadelington, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 108.

[19] Crow, Escott, and Wadelington, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 120.

**Establishment of the Warren County Community Center**

By the 1930s, segregation of business, educational, religious and social settings was the norm throughout the South. In Warren County, while African Americans made up the majority of the population, they lacked adequate schools and recreational facilities. The Federal Writers' Project, a division of the Federal Works Agency of the Works Progress Administration, summarized the findings of the 1930 federal census noting that, "the distribution [of Black residents in North Carolina] follows rather closely the old plantation regions. The highest percentage of Negroes [sic] is 65.2 percent in Warren, a coastal plain county on the Virginia border."[20] The 1939 publication summarized that throughout the state, "few recreational facilities were available for [African Americans]" and "only limited use of public libraries," further noting that "even educated [African Americans] frequently find it difficult to register and vote."[21]

The Great Depression exacerbated the divide between educational opportunities for Black and White students. Black classrooms throughout the state were significantly overcrowded and during this period only seven percent of Black students statewide—compared to seventeen percent of White students—attended high school. Nathan Carter Newbold, director of the Division of Negro Education in North Carolina from 1913 to 1950, characterized the problems with Black schools in the state as follows:

> "short, inadequate non-standard school terms for slightly more than half the children; no high schools within reasonable distance of many hundreds of children who are ready for high school; nearly a thousand teachers now in the service who have not had even a good high school education; and many classrooms crowded and congested beyond all hope of serving the children with any degree of satisfaction."[22]

By 1933, Warren County's Black residents recognized that improvements in education were only achievable if the many African American families and educators in the county worked together; as a result, plans were proposed to establish a countywide Parent Teacher Association (PTA). At the same time, there was a social need for meeting space for the PTA and other African American groups in the county, which had previously been meeting in school cafetoriums or local churches. Reverend Odell Greenleaf Harris recalls in his autobiography that the Warren County Memorial Library was for Whites only, with no comparable space for the county's Black residents.[23] At the same time, Mrs. Winnie B. Williams, a local educator and the oldest school teacher in the county at the time, was advocating for bathroom facilities in Warrenton that were open to Black residents. This confluence of local needs combined with the establishment of President Roosevelt's New Deal ultimately led to the formation of the Warren County Community Center Association (WCCCA).[24]

The group immediately set out to gain public support and funding for the project. They began by mailing postcards to one hundred citizens of the county. As a result, in December of 1933, ninety-six men and women met in support of the project, gathering at the John R. Hawkins High School. Professor Gillis E. Cheek, the first president of the community center's Board of Trustees, addressed the group, explaining that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) would fund sixty percent of the building and the site, if

[20] The Federal Writers' Project of the Federal Works Agency Work Project Administration, *North Carolina: The WPA Guide to the Old North State* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1939), 51.

[21] The Federal Writers' Project, *North Carolina: The WPA Guide to the Old North State*, 51.

[22] Crow, Escott, and Wadelington, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 136.

[23] Odell Greenleaf Harris, *It Can Be Done: The Autobiography of a Black Priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church who started under the bottom and moved up to the top*, Robert W. Prichard ed. (Alexandria, VA: The Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1985), 35.

[24] Lula R. Davis, "Organization of the Warren County Community Center and Library, Inc. and the County-Wide P.T.A.," 1959, located in the collections of the Warren County Community Center.

the group could meet the requirements of the program.[25] These requirements included expanding their initial idea for a community center to include a library facility within the building and raising forty percent of the funds necessary for construction.

For the next eighteen months, the WCCCA worked diligently to raise funds and to plan for the building and eventual use of the space. A group of fifteen community members from throughout the county were selected to serve as trustees, including twelve African American men and three White men.[26] In June of 1934, the current tract of land was acquired by the Warren County Negro Community Center Association, Inc. (the legal entity formed from the WCCCA), sold for one dollar by Ben C. Powell, a local White business owner.[27] In August 1934, the official charter for the Warren County Negro Community Center Association, Inc. was filed with the Secretary of State.[28] Those articles of incorporation provided the following objectives for the group:

> To construct, equip, and maintain buildings and recreational grounds; to receive and use gifts, grants, loans, devices and bequests; to own, maintain and operate vehicles; to hold and conduct meetings, lectures, and exhibits for the purpose of stimulating and developing the educational life of the negro [sic] citizens of the County of Warren; to provide and maintain a community center for the said citizens and to provide therein facilities for their comfort and convenience, and generally to perform all acts that may be necessary or expedient for the proper and successful prosecution of the objects and purposes for which said corporation was formed.[29]

The articles also included a provision that, if the organization were ever dissolved, the building and site would revert to the ownership of the Warren County Board of Education.

With the legal requirements for federal funding met, the WCCCA set about raising the necessary funds. Forty-two local PTAs sent representatives to a countywide meeting in October of 1934, held at Hawkins High School in Warrenton. At that meeting, the group expressed support for the community center project and pledged $2,500 to the project.[30] Funds were also contributed by individual citizens of the county. Collin Bullock recalls that his grandmother was among the initial donors to the project, noting that, "all the people in the neighborhood had given $3, $5, and that was a lot of money back then, in the 1930s."[31] Warren County's Black churches were also instrumental in the initial fundraising efforts and continued to provide funding for the building and its programs. Many held coin drives or other means of gathering financial support while serving as a conduit for information about the progress of the community center. Additionally, the PTA sponsored a fundraising competition between the county's larger communities (those with schools having four or more teachers), awarding prizes, donated by Warrenton businesses, for those that raised the most money.[32]

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[25] Davis, "Organization of the Warren County Community Center."

[26] Davis, "Organization of the Warren County Community Center"; Shauna Williams during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.

[27] Ben C. Powell to The Trustees of The Warren County Negro Community Center Association, Inc., Deed Book 138, Page 194, June 27, 1934, Warren County Register of Deeds, https://www.warrenrod.org/welcome.asp (hereafter WCRD).

[28] Certificate of Incorporation of The Trustees of the Warren County Negro Community Center Association, Inc., Deed Book 3, Page 226, July 2, 1934, WCRD.

[29] Certificate of Incorporation of The Trustees of the Warren County Negro Community Center Association, Inc., Deed Book 3, Page 226, July 2, 1934, WCRD.

[30] Davis, "Organization of the Warren County Community Center."

[31] Collin Bullock during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.

[32] "Raise $1,000.00 for Building," *The Warren Record*, November 8, 1935, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.

In addition to raising funds, the Black citizens of the county also donated time and physical labor to the construction of the building. On June 14, 1935, *The Warren Record* published a report on the project, noting that a site had been secured "across from the Warrenton Service Station" and a brickyard had been established by local residents to supply building material.[33] Mary Wortham, an African American landowner on Warrenton-Norlina Road in rural Warren County, donated soil from her property for brickmaking.[34] Labor for the manufacture of brick was supplied by local residents, as well as by the Colored Orphanage in Oxford, North Carolina, with "two to four boys working here each week without charge."[35] In his autobiography, Reverend Odell Greenleaf Harris, a native of Warren County who was assigned to All Saints Episcopal Church in Warrenton from 1933 to 1937, recalls working with Black residents of the county, "digging the soil for the bricks."[36]

On July 4, 1935, a countywide picnic was held on the Wortham property at which the public was invited to view the brickmaking operation and to contribute to the building fund.[37] The following week, *The Warren Record* reported that around 3,000 people had attended the event and $475 had been raised from the "sale of Brunswick stew, ice cream, sandwiches, candies, baseball games and voluntary contributions."[38] The exact quantity of bricks made and the value of the construction materials is not known. In June 1935, ahead of the picnic, *The Warren Record* reported that there were 175,000 bricks in the kiln on Warrenton-Norlina Road ready to be fired for the project.[39] However, an article published on July 12, 1935, noted 115,000 bricks being "baked."[40] By November 1935, a notice in the Carolina Watchman indicated, "the [African Americans] went to work and made 80,000 bricks by hand as their contribution to the project," valuing the contribution of brick at $1,200.[41]

By November of 1935, having raised over $1,000 and prepared brick for the project, *The Warren Record* reported that the WCCCA was applying for assistance from the Public Works Administration (PWA) for the construction of a community center, "for members of their race who come to Warrenton and have no place to leave their children or go when they are sick or desire rest room comforts." A week later, the newspaper reported that the funding request had been approved by the WPA.[42] Though the architect is not known, Harris's autobiography notes that an architect drew the plans, which included "space for a library, rooms for group meetings, toilets, office space, a large room for community gatherings, and two rooms available for rent to some kind of business."[43] In addition to financial assistance from the PWA, labor was expected to be furnished through the Emergency Relief Administration (ERA), a federal relief organization that was renovating the Warren County Courthouse in 1935.[44] In November of 1935, the newspaper reported that residents hoped that "labor for the project will be furnished by the PWA but that

[33] "Negroes to Have a Building Here," *The Warren Record*, June 14, 1935, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.
[34] Harris, *It Can Be Done,* 35; "Negroes to Have a Building Here."
[35] "Negroes to Have a Building Here."
[36] Harris, *It Can Be Done,* 35.
[37] "Negroes to Have a Building Here."
[38] "Negroes Raise Nearly $500.00 at July 4th Rally," *The Warren Record*, July 12, 1935, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.
[39] "Negroes to Have a Building Here."
[40] "Negroes Raise Nearly $500.00 at July 4th Rally."
[41] "Make Bricks by Hand for Community Center," *Carolina Watchman (Salisbury, NC)*, November 15, 1935, https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn84026488/1935-11-15/ed-1/seq-8/, accessed October 30, 2024.
[42] "Raise $1,000.00 for Building;" "PWA Approves Project for Negro Community Center," *The Warren Record*, November 15, 1935, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.
[43] Harris, *It Can Be Done,* 35.
[44] "Negroes to Have a Building Here"; "ERA Laborers at Work on Court House," *The Warren Record*, June 14, 1935, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.

in the event the government is unable to help them in their efforts that members of this race will build it themselves."[45] The building was completed with WPA labor and the *(Raleigh) News and Observer* reported in 1936 that the project "furnished approximately 225 man months of labor for the county's unemployed."[46]

On July 6, 1936, as the building was nearing completion, the Warrenton Town Commissioners appropriated $50 to the community center after White members of the Board of Directors pointed out the efforts already expended by members of the Black community.[47] The building was completed in the fall of 1936 and dedicated on October 30 of that year. The dedication, led by G. E. Cheek, included music provided by the local schools and speakers ranging from representatives of the WPA to James E. Shepard, president of North Carolina College for Negroes (later North Carolina Central University).[48] A letter announcing the dedication of the two-story, state-of-the-art, brick building read in part:

> Without doubt, the history of Negro achievement in Warren County is rich, monumental and extends far into the remote past; but tradition gives no example, history shows no record nor do we know of a finer spirit of loyalty and cooperation than that shown by the keen-witted, broad-minded, public-spirited citizenry of the County constructing the best and finest Community Center building for Negroes in North Carolina.[49]

**Serving the Educational and Social Needs of Warren County's African Americans**

The building was completed in November 1936 and was opened to the public from 9 am to 5:30 pm daily, though the fundraising efforts were not finished.[50] *The Warren Record* reported a request from the WCCCA for "continued to help in our final drive for money to settle remaining bills and aid in buying necessary equipment."[51] The needed equipment the newspaper referred to included materials for the community center library. Plans were underway for a book drive, "to equip their building with reading matter and other material necessary to better serve members of their race."[52] A "book shower" was held in the building on November 27, with the campaign to collect books and magazines extending through December of 1936.[53]

The library became a central part of the community center's mission, due in part to the strong connection to, and mutual support of, the countywide PTA. Black residents throughout the county recognized the importance of education as a means of uplift. These efforts support historian Jeffrey Crow's statement that statewide, "through all their activities, secular and religious, ran a strong stream of racial uplift—the self-improvement and advancement of a once-enslaved race."[54] Local resident Jereann King Johnson explains that, at the local level, Black residents who were denied the use of the Warren County Memorial

[45] "Raise $1,000.00 for Building."

[46] "WPA Accomplishments in North Carolina," *The [Raleigh] News and Observer,* October 20, 1936, https://www.newspapers.com, accessed April 3, 2024; "To Dedicate Negro Center," *The Warren Record*, October 23, 1936, Included in "Warren County Community Center, Inc.," Application for the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail, 2022, North Carolina African American Heritage Commission.

[47] "Town Board Donate $50 for Negro Center," *The Warren Record*, July 10, 1936, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.

[48] "To Dedicate Negro Center."

[49] "To Dedicate Negro Center."

[50] "Negro Leaders Seek Material for Community Center," *The Warren Record*, November 20, 1936, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.

[51] "To Dedicate Negro Center."

[52] "Negro Leaders Seek Material for Community Center"

[53] To Dedicate Negro Center"; "Negro Leaders Seek Material for Community Center."

[54] Crow, Escott, and Wadelington, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 96.

Library felt "access to a library for Black people was really critical. Here is a place that holds this intellectual currency, you know books. That was really important."[55]

The library continued to serve a vital role in the community throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, a bookmobile was established, facilitating monthly deliveries of books to homes and schools.[56] In the 1960s, the library created a reference shelf with catalogs from more than twenty-five colleges, "with special emphasis on North Carolina colleges and Nationally known Negro colleges."[57] These materials included information that helped "local high school students inform themselves about the wide variety of loans and scholarships available to prospective college students," as well as information on college vocational programs and the programs offered by the North Carolina Industrial Education Centers, a precursor to the community college system in North Carolina.[58]

In addition to providing books and research materials through its library, the community center occasionally hosted Black authors. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps visited in 1960, invited by Ms. Anna Cook, Supervisor of the Warren County [Negro] Teachers. Lifelong resident Jennie Franklin recalls, "she brought them here in her interest of promoting reading and of course they came and shared books they had written."[59] Actor Earle Hyman, who spent his early childhood in Warrenton, remembers visits to the community center during his youth and credits the library, from which he checked out a book of the works of William Shakespeare, for his interest in acting. "I read all of the plays and [was] absolutely fascinated, drawn to them, he explains. "Somehow I knew they were meant to be played, to be acted."[60]

The community center accommodated meetings of all types for both youth and adults. Groups utilizing the meeting spaces included the Warren County Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and the Neighborhood Youth Corps. The Warren County Agricultural Extension Office was located in the adjacent Professional Building, but their staff used the Community Center for meetings of the 4-H club. The Extension office also hosted meetings of the Home Demonstration Club at the community center, utilizing a basement kitchen where they "taught women about canning and sewing."[61] Classes on cooking, quilting, parenting, farming, finances, and etiquette were also offered. "We were taught how to save money," recalls local resident Margaret Bullock, "[how to] use coupons when they go to the grocery store, buy on sale."[62] In the 1950s, the women of the Home Demonstration

[55] Personal Interview with Jereann King Johnson (local resident) by Shauna Williams, October 25, 2021, Summarized in "Warren County Community Center, Inc.," Application for the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail, 2022, North Carolina African American Heritage Commission.

[56] "A Community Fills a Void," *Dialogue Newsletter: Program Guide of the WVSP 90.9 FM Stereo Warrenton, NC,* Warrenton, NC, August 1976, Application for the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail, 2022, North Carolina African American Heritage Commission.

[57] "Library Prepares Reference Shelf," *The Warren Record*, August 21, 1964, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed November 30, 2024.

[58] "Library Prepares Reference Shelf."

[59] Personal interview with Jennie S. Franklin (local resident) by Shauna Williams and Magnolia Clanton, October 7, 2021, Summarized in "Warren County Community Center, Inc."

[60] Earl Hyman, "How Shakespeare Changed by Life," directed by Melinda Hall, March 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT1bv4sFcvc .

[61] Jennie A. Johnson Franklin, "Celebrating Black History Month: Growing Up and Living on The Hill," *The Warren Record*, February 4, 2021, https://www.warrenrecord.com/news/article_4c65a92e-6637-11eb-b57b-1fe393528a31.html accessed October 1, 2024; Magnolia Clanton during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.

[62] Personal interview with Margaret Bullock (local resident) by Shauna Williams, October 28, 2021, Summarized in "Warren County Community Center, Inc."

Club raised $700 to purchase furniture for the ladies' parlor.[63] A list of more than 400 names, along with the donations they provided, is located in the building's library.

The community center provided far more than a library and meeting rooms; it provided a safe space for the Black residents of the county during the Jim Crow era. Joyce Long recalls that in the early- to mid-1960s, she would spend time there while her mother worked at the Rosebud Beauty Shop next door. "That's where I would go to rest up after walking the streets of Warrenton, going to the 5-and-10 or to the movies and then I would come back and I would get my water, use the restroom, and just, you know, sit in the library, so that was my babysitter," she remembers. [64] During the same era, Yarbrough Williams, recalls coming into town from the rural part of the county, noting that his parents would sometimes leave the children at the community center while they shopped in downtown Warrenton.[65] In the late 1960s, when Collin Bullock was "old enough to come uptown on my own," he would stop at the community center to use the bathrooms.[66] Showers in the basement were available for anyone who needed them, including farmers who may have wanted to clean up before doing their shopping or visiting government offices. The basement also contained a recreational space with equipment provided in part by a 1936 book drive, hosted by the WCCCA, which collected "old broken toys, discarded tables, games, or anything which might be used in their recreation program."[67]

The community center was the formal and informal social center of the Black community in Warren County. Local resident Yarbrough Williams explains, "The community center was the only place you could go. I mean, it was the only place Black folk had to go. Nowhere else."[68] Social functions were not limited to organized groups, but also included parties, weddings, church functions, and Friday-night dances. Anyone who wanted to host an event could rent the main meeting room or one of the smaller basement rooms. The community center even hosted fundraisers for WVSP, the Black-owned radio station housed in the Professional Building next door. Local resident Margaret Bullock recalled, "We had live music and we would broadcast from the Community Center…all kinds of musicians stopped by."[69]

**Warren County in the Civil Rights Era**

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Black residents of Warren County, like Black citizens throughout the South, were subject to segregation and discrimination in housing, commerce, education, and politics. Eva Clayton, the first African American woman to represent North Carolina in the U. S. Congress (1992-2003), recalled segregated seating in downtown drugstores when she moved to Warrenton in 1961 with her husband, Civil Rights attorney T. T. Clayton. While she noted that "some of the women and I protested that," the protests do not appeared to have been covered in local newspapers, so their details, duration, or impact is not known.[70] Throughout the 1960s, Black citizens in Warren County pushed for the integration of schools, businesses, and public buildings, with the meetings to discuss these issues often held at the Warren County Community Center.

One of the earliest large-scale efforts took place in the summer of 1963 when the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization, launched the Citizenship Education Project "to encourage

[63] Magnolia Clanton during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.
[64] Joyce Long during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.
[65] Yarbrough Williams during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.
[66] Collin Bullock during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.
[67] "Negro Leaders Seek Material for Community Center."
[68] Yarbrough Williams during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.
[69] Personal Interview with Margaret Bullock, 2021.
[70] Personal Interview with the Honorable Eva Clayton, 2021.

more effective [African American] participation in civic affairs."[71] The project brought to Warrenton a multi-racial group of fourteen college students, some from as far away as England and Southern Rhodesia, to educate and register Black voters.[72] The volunteers were led by Reverend James Howard of Philadelphia, who was careful to note that, "We are not here to force the issue of segregation or integration."[73] Volunteers lived in rooms over Brown's Superette, a local Black-owned supermarket (no longer extant).[74]

Citizenship Education Project participant Judy Beil Vaughan commemorates the efforts of the volunteers in her book, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project*, in which she notes that meetings, organizing, workshops, and recreation all took place at the community center.[75] While the volunteers were not local, their work was guided by a steering committee comprising local leaders of the NAACP, clergy, and thirteen-year-old Thurletta Brown, the daughter of local funeral home operator Thurston Brown.[76] Eva Clayton, coordinator of the steering committee, recalled meeting at the community center during that project. "We gathered there to teach people how to register [to vote]."[77]

In addition to hosting thirty-two citizen workshops throughout Warren and Franklin Counties, volunteers with the program "participated in various aspects of community life—churches, work projects, recreation, home visiting and meetings of other organizations" spanning eight weeks during the summer of 1963.[78] Some taught Vacation Bible School at Shady Grove Baptist Church in Franklin County or Coley Springs Church in Warren County, while others helped clean up a total of eight properties, including cemeteries and churches, or made repairs at Little Zion Church in Franklin County.[79] In July of 1963, volunteers began making home visits and helping with farming in both counties.[80] Among services completed by volunteers was maintenance to the Warren County Community Center where, "there's some painting to be done."[81] Volunteers also set out to rid the building of surplus furniture and to generally "clean up", purportedly with the help of Warrenton youth, though a specific youth group was not identified by Vaughan.[82]

Skepticism from the White community, who were concerned that program leaders intended to force the issue of integration, was initially expressed in June of 1963 and addressed by Reverend Howard, who contended that the focus was solely on education of the Black citizenry.[83] Additional controversy in the White community arose when plans were announced for an interracial dance for program volunteers to be

[71] "Warren Negroes Seeking Increased Civic Participation," *The Warren Record*, June 28, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 31, 2024.

[72] NOTE: contemporary newspaper accounts reported that twelve students would be arriving in Warrenton, but Vaughn's 2013 book commemorating project indicates fourteen students and three adult leaders actually did arrive.

[73] "'Sit-Ins' May be in Tobacco Field," *The Warren Record*, July 5, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 31, 2024.

[74] Judy Bell Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project: The A.F.S.C. Citizenship Education Project in Warren and Franklin Counties, North Carolina, 1963* (Blurb Books, 2013), 8, https://www.blurb.com/books/4537246-a-quiet-little-civil-rights-project.

[75] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 50.

[76] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 9-10.

[77] "Warren Negroes Seeking Increased Civic Participation"; Personal Interview with the Honorable Eva Clayton (local resident, Civil Rights leader, and coordinator of the Citizenship Education Project steering committee) by Shauna Williams, October 23, 2021, Summarized in "Warren County Community Center, Inc."

[78] "Warren Negroes Seeking Increased Civic Participation"; Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 47.

[79] "'Sit-Ins' May be in Tobacco Field"; Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 32, 65.

[80] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 41.

[81] "'Sit-Ins' May be in Tobacco Field"; Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 32.

[82] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 32.

[83] "'Sit-Ins' May be in Tobacco Field."

held at the community center.[84] The discontent was further exacerbated when it was learned that a Civil Rights advocacy group was using the building as a venue to recruit young people for a planned boycott of White businesses in Warrenton.[85] While many youth were interested in direct-action protests, Citizenship Education Project leaders, having made commitments to avoiding Civil Rights-related demonstrations in the county, became concerned that the proposed boycott would derail their credibility and ultimately endanger the project.[86] When the NAACP learned of the boycott plans at a July 24, 1963, meeting, they negotiated a settlement that banned the advocacy group from meeting at the community center, ensuring continued focus on voter registration and multi-racial support for the non-confrontational Citizenship Education Project, which completed their work later that summer.[87]

Racial tensions came to a head in September of 1963 when African Americans in the county began the boycott. At a June 13, 1963, meeting between a negotiating committee of the NAACP and the mayor and local merchants, a petition prepared by the NAACP on behalf of the Black citizens was submitted. It read, in part, "In furtherance of democracy and the enjoyment of all its rights; this committee…requests to ascertain that all the rights, privileges and use of all facilities in Warrenton and Warren County be enjoyed by all citizens regardless of race, color, religion or national origin." Those who attended the June meeting had made note of unrest in other communities and agreed that Warrenton could set an example by making changes without protests of any form. When Mayor Miles failed to appoint the promised Biracial Committee by September, the boycott began. *The Warren Record* explained that the local Black populace was "sick and tired," and that "the harsh facts are that the powerful and privileged have been most unwilling in the past to give or grant the rights to Negroes unless legal, economic, or other pressures were employed."

A September 6, 1963, editorial in *The Warren Record* questioned the motives of the boycott, noting that, "Warrenton not only has considerable employment of Negroes in its stores, but a number of businesses operated by Negroes, [sic] which are also hurt by the general boycott of the town."[88] While the specific role of the community center in the planning and execution of the boycott is not known, the community center is mentioned in the same editorial as "a credit to the enterprise of the Negro [sic] race," and "supported in part by Warrenton business people," support that was, through the boycott, "repaid by an organized effort to hurt the town."[89]

The following week, *The Warren Record* reported a meeting of the town commissioners, mayor, and a delegation from the Warrenton Merchants Association, the latter pushing for a resolution to the boycott. Mayor Miles agreed to appoint a Biracial Committee within the week, but only if he received a written request from a majority of the members of the Merchants Association; he received the request within days. The delay in the formation of the committee was blamed on the fact that Warren County was largely rural and that town leaders believed the county commissioners should have been responsible for creating any necessary committee, but the county felt, since the businesses were largely located within Warrenton, that the town should be responsible.[90] A follow-up editorial praised the creation of the Biracial Committee, noting that, "white and colored citizens have got to live and work together in peace if we are

[84] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 48.

[85] NOTE: Vaughn identified the group as the NAACP Commandos, but no documentary evidence was identified that supports the presence of, or activities associated with, that group in Warrenton during this time period.

[86] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 53.

[87] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 50.

[88] "Why the Boycott?" *The Warren Record*, September 6, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 31, 2024.

[89] "Why the Boycott?"

[90] "Merchants Ask Miles for Group," *The Warren Record*, September 13, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.

ever going to build a better life in Warren County."[91] The praise also placed the primary responsibility on the African American residents who were "going to gain every single legal civil right for which he is fighting," warning that to do so at the expense of their relationships with White neighbors would be a Pyrrhic victory.[92] Newspapers did not report on the members of the committee, its meetings, or any direct results of the committee's formation, but the agreement to form a Biracial Committee seems to have put an end to the business boycott.

When the integration of local businesses appeared to have been largely accomplished in September of 1963, desegregation efforts shifted to focus on public facilities. In November of 1963, local residents and members of the Warren County chapter of the NAACP petitioned the county commissioners to remove the "White" and "Black" designations from public toilets in the Warren County Courthouse. Represented by T. T. Clayton, a partner in the first integrated law firm in Warren County, the group asserted that "the signs were discriminatory and objectionable to members of [their] race." After some discussion about the poor condition of the toilets designated for use by the Black population, which were accessed from the exterior of the building, the request was granted by the county commissioners and the courthouse bathrooms were redesignated for "men" and "women."[93] Clayton is known to have met with clients and colleagues at the community center, likely including the group he represented during these events, though a direct connection could not be found in the existing documentary record.[94]

The integration of schools in Warren County was just beginning in the fall of 1963. A petition to integrate the schools was filed with the Warren County Board of Education in August of 1963, though it was ultimately unsuccessful in bringing any meaningful change to school segregation. This in turn led to a lawsuit in November when the parents of 53 Black children in Warren County sued the Board of Education, demanding a plan for the desegregation of all county schools. The suit was filed by T. T. Clayton, along with Conrad O. Pearson of Durham and several Civil Rights attorneys from New York City.[95] As the community center was the only meeting space available for Black residents at that time, the building was almost certainly utilized by Clayton and his clients to plan and execute the lawsuit.[96]

In the spring of 1964, still without a resolution to the question of school integration, and in response to the Board of Education's decision to retain Principal Byers, despite the NAACP's call for him to be replaced, the NAACP called for a school boycott. The boycott, which "kept more than half of the Negro [sic] students out of schools in Warren County," for a week was coupled with a protest demonstration in Warrenton on Saturday, March 29, 1964.[97] The protest, Warrenton's first recorded physical demonstration, involved "large numbers of Negro [sic] boys and girls engaged in singing, handclapping, and sit-down tactics in the town's two drug stores, and in sitting in front of the drug stores, the Warren

[91] "Biracial Committee Needed," *The Warren Record*, September 13, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.

[92] "Biracial Committee Needed"

[93] "Race Signs to be Taken Down in Courthouse Here," *The Warren Record*, November 8, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.

[94] Vincent E. Jones (Warren County Manager), "Letter of Support for Warren County Community Center Civil Rights Trail Marker," February 11, 2022, Application for the North Carolina Civil Rights Trail, 2022, North Carolina African American Heritage Commission.

[95] "Attorney Drafting Answer," *The Warren Record*, September 13, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024; "Injunction Sought by Negroes," *The Warren Record*, November 8, 1963, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.

[96] Jones, "Letter of Support."

[97] "Pupils are Returning to School," *The Warren Record*, April 3, 1964, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.

Theatre and the Puritan Café, blocking the entrances."[98] Local police used tear gas to break up the protest and arrested fifty-six demonstrators on trespassing charges.[99] The following Monday and Tuesday, prayer services led by local Black preachers were held on the courthouse steps. A peaceful march took place that Wednesday afternoon, assisted by the police and highway patrol.[100] However, a second sit-in demonstration on Tuesday, March 31, resulted in the arrest of fifty-eight more demonstrators.[101] The school boycott ended on Wednesday, April 1, though the local newspaper reported that it was unclear whether the NAACP called off the boycott or whether it "wore itself out."[102]

In July 1964, *The Warren Record* reported that local businesses were complying with the Civil Rights Act signed by President Johnson. The local drug stores and the Puritan Cafe reported that they had desegregated, the former vowing to serve all customers at their counters. The Warren Theatre opened the main floor to Black patrons and called on White teenagers to cooperate with the decision. It was a tenuous compliance, however. The newspaper asserted that department stores were not specifically covered by the law unless they had a restaurant or lunch counter and pointed out that there was no mechanism for enforcement beyond "injunction suits brought in federal courts by individuals or the U. S. attorney general."[103]

The steering committee behind the 1963 Citizenship Education Project recommended a second project to be undertaken in the summer of 1964. This project aimed to "continue the example of interracial living, hold more citizenship education projects, and to develop literacy programs." Few records of the group's actions exist and little is known of the project, however Judy Bell Vaughan, a member of the 1963 group of volunteers, felt that the climate resulting from Civil Rights events occurring nationwide in the summer of 1964 meant a much different experience for participants of this second project effort.[104]

With Warrenton businesses and public buildings fully integrated, at least as a matter of law, local leaders turned their attention to the fight for integrated schools, which were required by the Civil Rights Act. In May of 1965, the plan for school integration proposed by the Warren County Board of Education, which relied heavily on Freedom of Choice programs and included the assignment of eighty-six Black students to previously all-White schools, was rejected by the U. S. Commissioner of Education because "the plan submitted lacks the provisions which would be necessary to find it adequate" to accomplish the goals of the Civil Rights Act.[105] The local NAACP chapter agreed, petitioning the Board of Education to "abandon the farce of Freedom of Choice in school assignments and adopt a realistic program of racial integration in public schools in accordance with the needs and demands of present day living and in accordance with the requirements of the Constitution."[106] The Board of Education modified and resubmitted the

[98] "Over 100 Arrested in Demonstrations," *The Warren Record*, April 3, 1964, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.
[99] "Students are Back in School," *The Warren Record*, April 10, 1964, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.
[100] "Students are Back in School."
[101] "Over 100 Arrested in Demonstrations."
[102] "Students are Back in School."
[103] "Warrenton Drops Racial Bars; Civil Rights Bill Becomes Law," *The Warren Record*, July 10, 1964, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.
[104] Vaughan, *A Quiet Little Civil Rights Project,* 66.
[105] "Warren County Desegregation Plan is Denied in Washington," *The Warren Record*, May 28, 1965, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024; "Assign 86 Negroes to County White Schools," *The Warren Record*, May 28, 1965, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.
[106] "'Freedom of Choice' Plan is Protested by NAACP Chapter," *The Warren Record*, June 18, 1965, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.

integration plan, which was approved by the federal government in August of 1965, though school integration was not achieved in Warren County until the 1969-1970 school year.[107]

Throughout the 1960s, local African American lawyers T. T. Clayton and Frank Ballance, along with state and national leaders—including Floyd McKissick, Rev. Ben Chavis, and Rev. Leon White—led Warren County citizens to fight segregation and to obtain representation in local government. In many instances, they met at the community center. "We organized everything there," recalls local resident Dollie Burwell. "There was no where to meet, no where that we could strategize, but the community center. Not only that we felt safe, but it was the only place we had. We had state senators who came to meet with us. Floyd McKissick was always meeting with us there to strategize."[108] Only when meetings were particularly sensitive did leaders meet in Black-owned funeral homes or in the homes of Black residents.[109] As a result, the Warren County Community Center was the backdrop for many Civil Rights meetings and planning sessions, becoming a pivotal anchor point for the Civil Rights movement in Warren County.

**Warren County Community Center Since 1970**

The significance of the community center in Warren County's Black community cannot be overstated. It was the focal point of Black social life, recreation, and activism throughout the mid-twentieth century. However, as early as 1965, Rev. Gillis Cheek observed a shifting role of the community center, writing that, "Within the last thirty-three years, our county has gone through a complete revolution. Therefore, the program of the Community Center and Library needs a complete change to meet the needs of the new day."[110] He notes that the auditorium was rarely in use by that point, likely due to the fact that the consolidated schools built throughout the county in the 1950s often included gymtoriums, negating the role of the community center as the only available meeting space.

The Warren County Memorial Library was desegregated by the late 1960s, likely concurrent with school desegregation in 1969. While the library within the Warren County Community Center remained open into the 1990s, it gradually became obsolete, due to limited support from the Black community and non-existent state and local government funding that prevented the library from providing the collections and services available at the Warren County Memorial Library and resulted in its closure in 1994. Social programs, including Man Power and Upward Bound, as well as the neighborhood youth corps and programs that provided transportation for the elderly, utilized the building in the 1970s.[111] While many organizations began meeting in larger spaces provided by the town's schools, the building continued to host several groups, including the American Legion, the Warren County Political Action Council, and a local masons group, as well as private social events throughout the late twentieth century.[112]

In the twenty-first century, the Warren County Community Center continues to host meetings and social events for Warren County residents, White and Black alike, and is currently being renovated to provide elevator access to the main (upper) floor, as well as updated kitchen and bathroom facilities. Because government funding support is still lacking, "Gospel sings" and coin drives are held to fund building maintenance and repairs. The Board of the Warren County Community Center plans Black History Month

[107] "School Compliance Plan is Approved for Warren," *The Warren Record*, August 20, 1965, https://www.digitalnc.org/newspapers/the-warren-record-warrenton-n-c/, accessed October 30, 2024.
[108] Personal Interview with Dollie Burwell (local resident) by Shauna Williams, October 23, 2021, Summarized in "Warren County Community Center, Inc."
[109] Yarbrough Williams during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.
[110] Gillis E. Cheek, *Family Letters and Personal Reflections* (New York, NY: Vantage Press, 1971), 74.
[111] Magnolia Clanton during Interview with Local Residents, 2024; "A Community Fills a Void."
[112] Shauna Williams, email communication with the author, February 26, 2025.

programs and the "Top As" program, which incentivizes local high school students toward high attendance and grades, although these events are typically held at local churches or schools because the community center building lacks accessibility accommodations.

Many county residents, especially White residents, no longer remember the history of the building or its significance to the Black community in the mid-twentieth century. Yet the Warren County Community Center stands proudly at the south end of downtown Warrenton, a testament to the determination of the county's Black population to provide a safe place for the gathering and education of its members. Shauna Williams summarizes the legacy of the community center: "The grit, determination and the 'we're not going to take it' back in the day was just remarkable . . .. They worked hard. They did what they thought was right to do."[113]



[113] Shauna Williams during Interview with Local Residents, 2024.

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
____ previously listed in the National Register
_____previously determined eligible by the National Register
_____designated a National Historic Landmark
____ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
_____recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

**Primary location of additional data:**

__X_ State Historic Preservation Office
____ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other
Name of repository: _____

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** __WR0463_____

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**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property** _approx. 0.12 acres_____

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates**
Datum if other than WGS84:_____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

**1.** Latitude: 36.396903 Longitude: -78.156337

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The National Register boundary is shown by a black line on the accompanying map, drawn at a 1"=100' scale and aligning with the boundary of the tax parcel (#8874986746).

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The current tax parcel represents the acreage conveyed to the Warren County Negro Community Center Association, Inc., in 1934 and remains the acreage associated with the building today.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: __Heather M. Slane, Architectural Historian_____
organization: __hmwPreservation_____
street & number: __P. O. Box 355_____
city or town: __Durham_____ state: __NC_____ zip code: __27702__
e-mail__heather@hmwpreservation.com_____
telephone: __336.207.1502_____
date: ____March 1, 2025_____

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**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

**Photographs**

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

**Photo Log**

Name of Property: Warren County Community Center
City or Vicinity: Warrenton
County: Warren County State: North Carolina

Photographer: Heather Slane
Date Photographed: January 2024, April 2024, and July 2024
Location of Negatives: State Historic Preservation Office, Raleigh, North Carolina

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1. Building Exterior, facing south

2. Building Exterior, facing southeast

3. Building Exterior, facing northeast

4. Building Exterior, facing northwest

5. Building Exterior, facing southwest

6. Building Exterior, facing west

7. Meeting Room, facing southwest

8. Meeting Room, facing east

9. Library, facing southeast

10. Library, facing northwest

11. Stairwell, facing south

12. Basement level, facing southeast

13. Basement level, facing southwest

14. Basement level, facing northwest

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Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
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Tier 3 – 230 hours
Tier 4 – 280 hours

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