

## History of Branch School

Africa, not a place one would consider local, but once a small school district in the rural community of Williamstown Township was called Africa.

In 1863, during the end of the Civil War, a small white school building was constructed on the north side of the Red Cedar River. Since most of the people in the district were abolitionists the school was named "Africa." Even the road running in front of the school (presently Sherwood Road) was once named Africa.

The Africa School was a one-room wooden structure standing on a 1/2 acre of cleared land with a lone wild cherry tree growing nearby. Later the school would be renamed "Branch School" to honor a local farmer named N. C. Branch.

Mr. Branch and his wife, Laura, came to the area from Ohio in 1846. He was a short, thick man with whiskers and sharp black eyes. A good farmer; he cleared the dense forest making fertile fields and planted grain. Mr. Branch and his wife had eleven children but in 1858 blood dysentery entered their home and left five children dead within ten days. The children's maternal grandmother died of shock seven days later. At Foote Cemetery, a short distance from the school, a row of weather beaten tombstones silently relates this sad event.

Mr. Branch was an upstanding man in the community who raised thoroughbred cattle and fine wool sheep. He was a deacon at the Congregational Church in Williamston and contributed liberally to the building of a new church. His son-in-law persuaded him to raise trotting horses and soon his fine fields were made into pastures and a half-mile racing track. His love of horses, however, led to his financial downfall and eventual death. In 1897, a passing train on a crossing near the county farm killed Mr. Branch when he lost control of his favorite horse during a ride.

In 1961, ninety-eight years after its construction, the little old school house ceased being used as a school. As the years passed vandalism and weather damage eventually degraded the building. Shorn of its bell and its cupola, the old school was scheduled for demolition in 1973. But a small group of energetic local residents, inspired by the engaging history of the school and the memories of happy hours spent there as children, approached the Township Board to request permission to assume the responsibility of restoration and maintenance of the building. The group became incorporated as the Friends of Historic Williamstown and became dedicated to the preservation and restoration of historic sites located in the township.

Currently, two local Boy Scout troops are involved in painting the structure and installing a parking area; the Red Cedar Garden Club is landscaping the grounds; and a group of parishioners from a small non-denominational church is renting the building twice a week for gospel services. The Friends frequently hold potlucks at the school and a home tour sponsored by the Friends will be periodically scheduled and include a display of the area's history.

Once again singing, laughter, learning and the old fashioned joy of friends gathering fill this little corner of the countryside.