

# A School by Any Other Name

By Cris Crissman, Ph.D.

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 44:2 (spring 2005).

On my playground, Daniel Boone once chased and probably “kilt a bar.” At least that’s the story I heard when I went to school at Boone Trail High School (now grades pre-K–12) in Harnett County.

Daniel Boone may not have been much of a speller, and he may have never traveled near Mamers, North Carolina, but he has always been one of my favorite larger-than-life heroes because of that early connection or link.

A name can become a living link for us to someone or something from our time or another time. How about your school? Where did it get its name? Let’s look at the possibilities.

Chances are your school is named for a person, place, or idea. If it’s a person, then that person could be famous in your community (Fred A. Anderson Elementary in Pamlico County), the state (Jay M. Robinson Middle School in Mecklenburg County), or even the country and world (Booker T. Washington Elementary in Bladen County).

If it’s a place, then your school could be named for a body of water (Tuckaseegee Elementary in Mecklenburg County), a beach (Wrightsville Beach Elementary in New Hanover County), a mountain (Beech Mountain Elementary in Avery County), or even a man-made wonder (Hiwassee Dam Elementary/Middle in Cherokee County).

Bryant Gibson from Mrs. Rose Throckmorton’s fourth-grade class at Rural Hall Elementary researched his school and town name and found that the name came about for a distinctive reason. The local postmaster in this once-rural part of Forsyth County had a hall in his home so big that the local residents could drive their horses and wagons through it to pick up their mail. Hence, “Rural Hall” became the name of the community and school.

Or your school’s name could be directional and relative to its location in your county. There are four Northwest Elementary Schools in our state and several other county-specific “northwests,” such as Northwest Cabarrus Middle School in Cabarrus County.

Finally, your school could be named for a lofty idea or ideal, such as First Flight Elementary in Dare County, Freedom High in Burke County, or Independence High in Mecklenburg County.

“What’s in a name?” Shakespeare asked. “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Schools are important civic or community symbols. Every school system has a policy for naming schools. Wake County names them for locations. Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools may name one for “special features of the site, its location, or in honor or memory of people” (Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools Newsletter, September 16, 2002). This school system encourages a lot of community participation in the naming of its schools, and sometimes as many as 150 names are suggested.

Mel and Zora Rashkis Elementary School in the Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools system opened its doors for the 2003–2004 year. Zora Rashkis had taught for years in the system and hosted a long-running cablevision show, *Meet the Teacher*, which showcased area teachers and other staff, students, programs, and issues in the school system. Both Mel and Zora Rashkis are known as leaders in volunteer organizations in their communities. It is not unusual to see the couple visiting their namesake school to volunteer or just to see how things are going (Rashkis Elementary Web Site, School History Section).

What *is* in the name of a school? A lot of pride and respect for a special place in the community. But, ultimately, what counts the most is not the name emblazoned above the school’s door or on the sign on the front lawn but the quality of the education within those walls.

Dr. Cris Crissman works at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. She is also a member of the Tar Heel Junior Historian Association Advisory Board. She thanks Rose Throckmorton and Linda McDermon at Rural Hall Elementary School for their assistance with her article.

***Follow-up for Tar Heel Junior Historians:***

- *How about your school? Do you know the story behind its name?*
- *What is your school board’s policy about naming schools?*
- *What is the significance of a school name?*
- *How do you think schools should be named?*
- *What considerations are important?*

*To research school names and more in North Carolina or in the United States, visit Search for Schools, a Web site where you can find information about all of the 124,000 (and growing) schools in our country. This Web site is part of the Students’ Classroom, provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov>). You will find other terrific tools here, such as Create a Graph. Check it out!*

*To learn more, you can also visit North Carolina’s individual school Web sites at: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/internet.resources/ncschools.html>.*

*If you enjoy the study of names, then you should add these words to your vocabulary:  
**toponymy**: the study of the place-names of a region*

***etymology**: the study of the history of words*

*Visit Merriam-Webster Online (<http://www.m-w.com>) to learn about these interesting words and others. There are even audio files so you can hear how to pronounce them.*

***Calls to Action:***

*Research your school's name and publish what you learn on your school's Web site. Some school boards allow parts of schools to be named, such as a gym or a media center, to honor an individual who has made an important contribution to the school. Does your school system have such a policy? Would this policy be good for your school? Consider the possibilities.*