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In Va., honoring identity vs. history to the letter

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For decades during segregation, the Douglas School was a bulwark in the push to educate black Virginians - the one-story brick schoolhouse shielded students from some of the state's most insidious racism.

Now, the same building that once brought the Winchester area's black community together has caused a controversy pitting the NAACP against many of the school's African American alumni. The dispute? Should the school, thought to be named after black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, spell its name with one "s" or two?

The NAACP and Frederick Douglass's descendants want to know why a school ostensibly named for him is marred by a misspelling of his last name.

"We are humbled that you would choose to honor our ancestor," Kenneth B. Morris, Douglass's great-great-great grandson and president of the [Frederick Douglass Family Foundation](#) wrote to city officials. "However, we would implore you, and any other organizations that desire to honor this great man, to respect the name he selected for himself and spell it accurately."

But a number of Douglas alumni disagree. They're fighting to preserve the school's current spelling - and a piece of their identity.

"If you attend a school from kindergarten to 12th grade, you form a connection," said Charles Harris, who graduated from Douglas in 1963. "Our connection is with Douglas with one 's.' It's the identity of the school, and it's a part of who we are as a community."

The debate emerged after a group of Winchester residents suggested that the school, now a community center, replace its decaying signs.

The group split over how the name should be spelled on the new ones. The scope of that dispute has grown, attracting interest from black activists far from Winchester.

Douglass was a Maryland slave who escaped bondage and, through eloquent writings and oratory, became a leading abolitionist in the years leading up to the Civil War. He adopted the last name "Douglass" as an adult and died in 1895.

The Douglas School was built in 1927 to house black students from the Shenandoah Valley, who were barred from attending public schools. On the school's opening day, the

Winchester Star described the procession of "orderly and well-behaved colored people" who poured into the building.

As the fight to uphold segregation in Virginia grew more fierce - with the construction of government-supported "academies" for white students in some parts of the state - the Douglas community grew closer.

Prom was a countywide event, attended by parents and students alike. Black families, barred from the main seats of movie theaters, went to the school's auditorium to watch films projected on an auditorium wall.

For most of that time, the school's name - on diplomas, report cards and school board agendas - was Douglas. But occasionally, an extra "s" was added - on a graduation program and in newspaper articles.

More recently, [local history books](#) and even a [document](#) filed with the National Register of Historic Places refer to the school as the Douglass school or the Frederick Douglass School.

Some members of the NAACP's Winchester chapter say the principal changed the name from Douglass to Douglas in the 1940s, possibly after being pressured by white residents.

"We're talking about Virginia in the 1940s. It's very possible that he didn't want to rattle cages by associating the school with Frederick Douglass. The thought was, 'Well, white folks gave us the school,' " said Cynthia Butler, an NAACP member.

Others say that an "s" was cut from the name to distinguish it from other black schools named after Frederick Douglass, namely one in Leesburg.

No matter the spelling, Frederick Douglass is still at the core of the school's historical memory. A sign bearing his likeness and name (spelled correctly) sits just behind the building. And when the school became a community center after desegregation, the Winchester school district opened a new elementary school to carry on the legacy of the man and the institution. This time it is spelled clearly: "Frederick Douglass Elementary."

But members of the Douglas Alumni Association have steeped themselves in historical research, combing through documents at the local library in a bid to prove that "Douglas" is the most accurate spelling. The city's school board asked the library's archivist, Rebecca Ebert, for her ruling. In all of the school board minutes, the school was spelled Douglas, she wrote.

The board has since backed away from the debate. "While all of this swirls around, our focus is on securing funding for the programs housed in the center - whether it ends up

with one 's' or two," said Kevin J. McKew, executive director of Winchester public school system.

The building now houses an alternative high school program, Head Start classes and a Boys and Girls Club.

The youngest graduates of Douglas, which closed in 1966, are in their 60s. The debate over its name has highlighted a rift between those who were living in Winchester during segregation and those who were too young - or too new to the area - to remember that history.

"These folks from the NAACP weren't here when the school was in use. There are a lot of young people here who don't remember," said Sharon Harris, a Douglas graduate.

Many of the school's teachers and administrators have died, and those who care passionately about the school - and preserving the memory of segregation in Virginia - are worried that their hold on that chapter of local history could be slipping away.

As members of the Douglas Alumni Association see it, the fight for that legacy begins with the battle over a single letter.

Some members of the local NAACP chapter who are Douglas alumni, such as Franklin Washington, have wrestled with their allegiance in the debate.

"We always figured the school was named after Frederick Douglass, but we never made much of a fuss about the spelling," said Washington, 67. "Personally, I'm torn. I want the school to keep its identity, but I also think we need to be accurate."