

# Historic Neely School Local Landmark Report



Rowan County, North Carolina



Prepared by the Rowan County Historic Landmarks Commission  
May 2016

## **I. General Information**

1. The Neely School
2. 215 Neelytown Road China Grove, NC 28023
3. Rowan County Tax Parcel: 482A004
4. The current owner is The Historic Neely School Foundation
5. Mary Neely Grissom, Executive Director  
The Historic Neely School Foundation  
PO Box 784  
China Grove, NC 28023
6. Appraised Value: \$21,781

## **II. Abstract**

1. The Rowan County Historic Landmarks Commission wishes to recognize the Neely School for historic designation because it is one of the few surviving African American, one room schools from the early 1900's in the state of North Carolina. The Oak Grove School in Washington Town Community (circa 1910) the McCray School in northern Alamance County (circa 1915) are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Neely School built in 1908, predates both of these schools.

2. The current Neely School building and the original school location where the outline of the building, has been marked with brick, are to be included in the designation. (See Attached Designation Map)

Two nature trails near the original foot print give visitors an experience similar to walking to school in the early 1900's. Land adjacent to the school's current location will be used to create a welcome center/ community center, playground and picnic shelter as well as a visitor's parking lot. The community center area is not to be included in the designation area.

### III. Historic Background

The school was established in 1908 by Julius Erastus Neely who was an AME Zion minister and farmer along with his wife, Katie McKenzie Neely who was a housekeeper. (US Census 1900). The date of the school which was determined by the decedents of Julius Neely has been questioned because the land was not purchased by Neely until 1908. However, the land was in the ownership of the greater Neely family. Therefore, Julius could have built the school before he became the official owner of the property. The Neelys had seven children: three daughters (Annie, Cassie Bell, Mary) and four sons (Jonas Winslow, Thomas, Henry Albert, Julian). (US Census 1910) The Neelys were determined to educate their children and the community's children who were prohibited from attending the community's Rowan County Public School because of segregation laws. The county school superintendent promised to provide one teacher for the school if the school was built. (Neely School Foundation Interviews) Donations from friends, both black and white, helped fund the construction of the school on Julius Neely's land. Julius Erastus Neely was the personification of the church's mission statement.

The AME Church history site states:

*“The Mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME Church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy.” (Dickerson 2014)*

Documentation of the historical background is a combination of oral history, deeds, census records and other public documents. Judy Stanley Cardwell was commissioned to complete the Neely Family Genealogy document that is referenced in the Bibliography. Lorena Cassie Bell Neely Blackwell who was one of the first students and later a teacher at the school provided the names of the school's teachers and many of the student names. Additional student names were provided by people who attended the school. (Neely School Foundation Interviews) The list of teachers and student names is attached. (See pages 16 and 17)

The Rowan Salisbury School system was asked to provide any documentation they had on the school. Neely school would have been a part of the Rowan County School System prior to the consolidation of the Salisbury and Rowan Schools. The current system has no information on Neely school. A letter from Rowan Salisbury Schools has been attached. (See page 18) The letter from RSS is not to be used as documentation for the date of the school. The date mentioned in the letter was taken from the letter that was written by the commission to the school system.

Segregation laws prevented African American students from attending the established school in China Grove. There is no evidence that would indicate that a public Black school was available to the students. At the time, most schools for African American students were privately owned schools.

Little is known about the school's curriculum. However, it should be assumed that students received basic instruction in reading, writing, math and possibly science and history. As a rule, Black schools if they were provided with materials from the public system received old books that had been discarded by the white schools. Very little public information about the school or the community is available. Most likely, the school was a gathering place for community activities after school hours, but information about those events is not available. Typically, books and newspapers at the time, included very little information about Black communities. Because of racial violence, the African American community was very protective of their schools. Information about activities was shared by word of mouth.

Based on the number of teachers that are listed for the school, it can be assumed that the school was operational for about 20 years. It is reasonable to believe that the school closed when Black public schools were made available in China Grove by the Rowan County School System. Unfortunately, the current school system does not have records about that period.

The Neely School Foundation commissioned Judy Stanley Cardwell to complete the Neely Family Genealogy. This document has been reviewed by the RCHL. The document is very complete with numerous public records. However, there is no narrative about the family members. Information was also gathered by the foundation through family interviews that were recorded over a number of years.

**Chain of Ownership:**

*26 Sept 1908, Rowan County, NC. Deed from J. C. Heilig and J.G Heilig, Administrators of A. S. Heilig sold to Julius R. Neely and his wife Katie Neely 30 acres for \$310.00. The land lies in Locke Township and about seven miles South West of the city of Salisbury, NC.*

*13 Feb 1909, Rowan County, NC. Deed from S.J. Deal, Guardian of Gurney H. Smith and Hazel S. Smith, sold to Julius R. Neely and his wife Katie Neely for \$455.00 for 22.75acres. This tract of land is situated on the bank of Grant's Creek in Locke Township, Rowan County, NC.*

*20 April 1914, Stanly County, NC: Deed from J.F. Fry, Guardian and Commissioner sold to Julius R. Neely and his wife Katie Neely of Rowan County, NC for \$450.00, 22.75 acres. Fry is the Guardian of Ella Smith and Eddie Smith. The parcel of land is situated on the bank of Grant Creek in Locke Township, Rowan County, NC.*

*On August 4, 1951, deeded the land to Annie Pruity, for the duration of her natural life and after her death to his decedents: Thomas Neely, Leroy Neely, Cassie Blackwell. Henry Albert Neely, Mary J. Neely Ramseur, and Culian Neely*

*On February 24, 2014, the descendants of the 1951 deed transfer conveyed the property to the Historic Neely School Foundation.*

1. The one room school was built in 1908.
2. The school was moved 100 yards from its original location and placed on a new foundation on May 30, 2014 to preserve the structure which had been vandalized, as well as, subjected to moisture and insect damage over the years. The school was moved from a heavily wooded area of the property to an open area that is closer to the main road.

**IV. Assessment**

1. The Neely School is significant because of its purpose, age and cultural significance to Rowan County. Mr. Neely built the school on his land to educate his children and the children of the Neelytown community. Neelytown is an area of China Grove. The area was recognized as Neelytown. As with many rural areas, the name was commonly used because the tract of land was owned and occupied primarily by the Neely family. The school provided the only educational opportunity for African American children in the community. It is also important that the building and land have been continually owned by the decedents of Julius and Katie Neely until ownership was transferred to the Historic Neely School Foundation.

The school had great importance for the community. No public transportation was available for rural students. The school was within walking distance. It may have been a

two or three mile walk but it was the only educational opportunity that was available to the African American students in the area.

2. The following description of the property prior to restoration was written by Paul E. Fomberg, Senior Restoration Specialist, NC State Historic Preservation Office: “The exterior shell of building appears to be almost entirely intact, with the exception of the missing windows and the front door. Although the existing metal roof is probably not the original roof, it appears that the school building originally had a metal roof based on the spacing of the roofing lath and the sparse number of nail holes in the lath. The individual window sash that was salvaged may be part of an original window and appears to have been a six-lite sash window, which would be typical for that time period and can be easily reproduced. As we noted on site, the bell tower appears to have originally had three louvered vents. The interior beaded-board walls and ceiling in the school building are almost entirely intact, along with the blackboard that was painted on the back wall of the classroom and the hanging flue in the center of the room for a wood stove. Vandalism, including fires built inside of the building, and moisture/insect damage have resulted the loss of most of the flooring and the small raised platform for the teacher; however, the floor can be replaced with new or salvaged wood flooring. The vestibule/bell tower is missing some of the beaded-board sheathing, which also covered the ceiling, but that too can be replaced with matching new or salvaged beaded-board. Although the framing timbers and the siding were apparently sawn on site from Julius Neely’s farm, the beaded-board, the windows and doors, the louvered vents, and perhaps the flooring were probably purchased locally in China Grove or Salisbury, both railroad towns with access to a variety of manufactured building products.” ( Letter to the Neely family from Paul F. Fomberg re restoration notes)

3. The school is a one story 14’5”by 29’5”rectangle with an 8’6” by 8” vestibule with a bell tower. The roof, floor, door, walls and siding have been replaced or repaired as recommended by Mr. Fomberg, using materials that were typical during the time of the original construction. The original school bell which had been stolen was replaced with a bell from the period. The interior of the building has been decorated with antique desks and antique school books. The structural repairs are noticeable but do not distract from the integrity of the building.

4. The following email was provided to the commission by Alfred Wilson who was the contractor for the Neely school move and restoration

*“...The Windows we replaced are, for all practical purposes, identical to the ones Mr. Neely installed originally. The few interior boards that were replaced were replaced with boards from the Blackmer house and date to the same period as the school. They may have been bought originally from the same lumber mill. The only component that was replaced was the floor and that was put back with the same type flooring that was there so just give it 75 years or so and no one will be able to discern. Thank you for your help on this significant project.”* Email from Alfred C. Wilson to Betsy Cunningham (2016)

5. The Rowan County Historic Landmark Commission would like to designate the interior and exterior of the school house along with the original site of the school. Limiting the designation area will protect the integrity of the structure and archeological integrity of the original school site, while allowing the development of the planned community center. (See Attached Designation Map)

## V. Supporting Documentation (attached)

1. Photos
2. Floor Plan
3. Site Plan
4. GIS Map of Designation Area
5. Letter from Paul E. Fomberg
6. List of Teachers and Students
7. Letter from Rowan Salisbury Schools

## VI. Bibliography

The Historic Neely School (n.d.) retrieved from <http://alfredcwilson.com/commercialrestoration/49-neelyt>

Blackwell, Bell Neely, Lorena Cassie. Interviewed by Neely School Foundation Members on multiple dates..

Dickerson, D.C. (2014) *Our History* retrieved from <http://ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/>

Fomberg, P. E. Letter to Betsy Cunningham Date. September 22, 2016.

Fomberg, P. E. Letter to the Historic Neely Foundation. Date February 2015.

Fomberg, P.E. (2015, September) *Rowan County's Neely School Celebrates the Completion of Rehabilitation Project*. Retrieved from <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs132/1107842220607/archive/1122436651950.html>

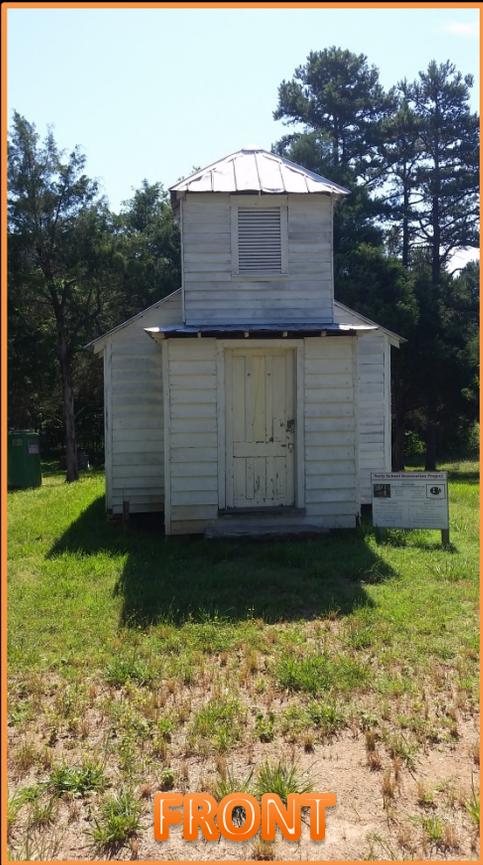
Groh, J. (2015. August 2) Restored Neely School Keeps a Family's Legacy Alive. *Salisbury Post*. Retrieved From: <http://www.salisburypost.com/2015/08/02/restored-neely-school-opens/>

Neely Family Genealogy, Judy Stanley Cardwell, 330-D Vista Circle, Winston Salem, N.C. 27106 [judyocard@windstream.net](mailto:judyocard@windstream.net) ( Commissioned by the Neely School Foundation)

North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office News Letter. *Worth Saving* Retrieved From <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs132/1107842220607/archive/1122436651950.html>

U.S. Census Bureau (1900)

U.S. Census Bureau (1910)





**AS SEEN FROM NEELYTOWN  
ROAD**

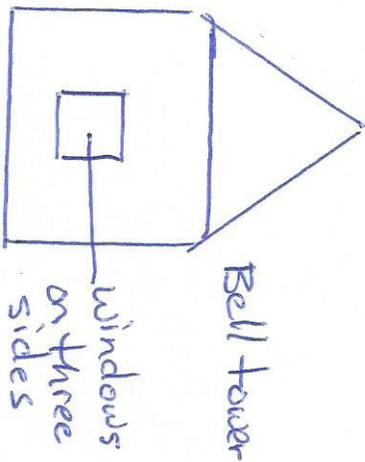
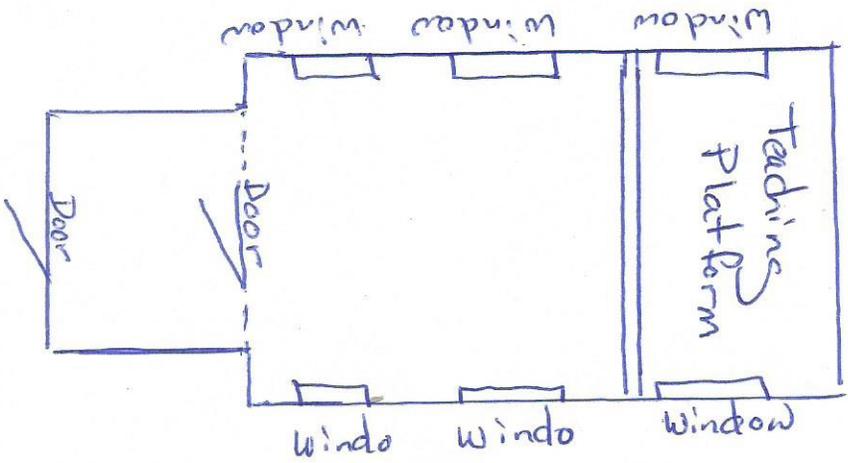


**Before**



**After**

# Floor Plan Neely School



# SKETCH ADDENDUM

Borrower or Owner

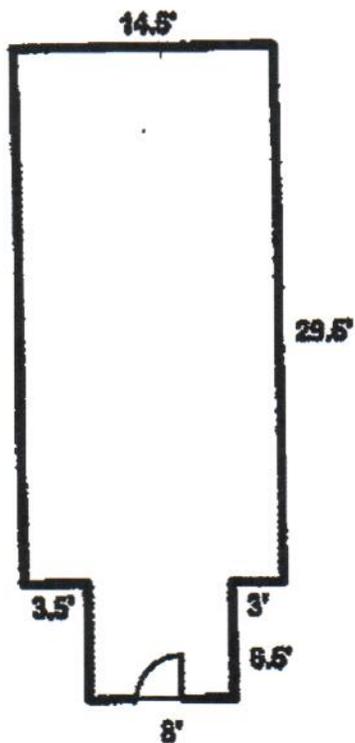
Property Address **Neelytown Road**

City **China Grove**

County **Rowan**

State **NC**

Client **Historic Neely School Foundation**



# Site Plan for overall development



Historic Neely School Foundation Inc.  
 Mary Neely Critson President/CIO.  
 Graphic Depictions: Ida Balorok,  
 architectural designer Rural Initiative  
 Partnership

**MORTON ENGINEERING**  
 STRUCTURAL/CIVIL  
 ENGINEERING CONSULTANTS  
 JAMES MORTON, P.E.  
 DAVID M. MORTON, P.E.  
 401 N. CLAYTON STREET, CHINA GROVE, NC 28621  
 (704) 775-2011  
 mortoneng.com

**HISTORIC NEELY SCHOOL**  
**CHINA GROVE, NC**  
**SITE PLAN**

1	15/20/14	REVISION
Date: 05/20/14		
Client:		
Drawn: DMM		
Scale: 1" = 50'		
Proj. No. 2012072		
Dwg. No. 2012-72		
Sheet 1 of 1		
<b>C-1</b>		

Historic Neely School Designation Map  
Portions of Rowan County Tax Parcels:  
482A004, 482A205  
March 2017

-  Old School Site
-  Approx. School Location
-  Roads
-  Parcels



0 50 100  
Feet

NEELYTOWN

235

215



Rowan County makes no warranty or other assertion as to the accuracy or completeness of the maps for any particular purpose and neither Rowan County nor it's agents or employees shall be liable for any claim alleged to have resulted from any use thereof.

Mary & Angelo, et. al.:

I enjoyed visiting the historic **Neely School** again last week, and I am happy to see that the building has been stabilized and is soon to be set on a new foundation. The oak lumber that was used in its construction was probably a contributing factor in its preservation after years of neglect and vandalism. I think that it is fitting that the school building has been relocated a short distance from its original location, which is now heavily wooded, to the former site of Julius and Katie Neely's home closer to Neelytown Road. I do not know how Mary and the other foundation members were able to track down all 60 descendants of Julius and Katie Neely, as well as getting them all to agree, in order to secure the purchase of the old school building and the land on which to relocate it

The exterior shell of building appears to be almost entirely intact, with the exception of the missing windows and the front door. Although the existing metal roof is probably not the original roof, it appears that the school building originally had a metal roof based on the spacing of the roofing lath and the sparse number of nail holes in the lath. The individual window sash that was salvaged may be part of an original window and appears to have been a six-lite sash window, which would be typical for that time period and can be easily reproduced. As we noted on site, the bell tower appears to have originally had three louvered vents. The interior beaded-board walls and ceiling in the school building are almost entirely intact, along with the blackboard that was painted on the back wall of the classroom and the hanging flue in the center of the room for a wood stove. Vandalism, including fires built inside of the building, and moisture/insect damage have resulted the loss of most of the flooring and the small raised platform for the teacher; however, the floor can be replaced with new or salvaged wood flooring. The vestibule/bell tower is missing some of the beaded-board sheathing, which also covered the ceiling, but that too can be replaced with matching new or salvaged beaded-board. Although the framing timbers and the siding were apparently sawn on site from Julius Neely's farm, the beaded-board, the windows and doors, the louvered vents, and perhaps the flooring were probably purchased locally in China Grove or Salisbury, both railroad towns with access to a variety of manufactured building products.

In looking through our database and our GIS website, it appears that very few one-room schools have survived across the state—especially African American schools from that era. Of the almost 2000 one-room school buildings that were in use in North Carolina from the 1910s through the 1950s, there appears to be only two (pre-Rosenwald Fund) one-room African-American schoolhouses listed in the National Register of Historic Places: the Oak Grove School <http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/FY2546.pdf> built about 1910 in the Washington Town community near Bethania in Forsyth County, and the diminutive McCray School <http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/AM0099.pdf> built about 1915 in northern Alamance County. The Oak Grove School (2637 Oak Grove Circle, Winston-Salem, 336-722-5138 ext. 234), which was restored in the late 1990s and is now owned by the YWCA of Winston-Salem, and the McCray School (Highway 62 North, Burlington, 336-270-6060) which was restored in the early 1990s and is owned by the Alamance-Burlington School System, might both be worth a visit by the members of the Historic Neely School Foundation. I think that the Neely School is particularly significant in that it was built by 1908—which is earlier than the other two schools—and that it was built by Julius Neely, an African-American minister and farmer, about 1908 on

his property in an era when few African-Americans in the South owned property, for the education of his children and others in the Neelytown community in Rowan County. It is also significant that the school building has remained in the ownership of the Neely family until it was recently transferred to the Historic Neely School Foundation, Inc., which is comprised of descendants of Julius Neely.

I would encourage you to submit a Study List application for the Neely School, the first step towards listing the building in the National Register of Historic Places, once the building has been placed on its new permanent foundation. See <http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/slhowto.htm> for more information regarding the study list. Your staff contact for Study List applications and National Register listing is Ann Swallow, National Register Coordinator, [ann.swallow@ncdcr.gov](mailto:ann.swallow@ncdcr.gov) or 919-807-6587.

I hope that this information is helpful. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [paul.fomberg@ncdcr.gov](mailto:paul.fomberg@ncdcr.gov) or 919-807-6578. I hope that your application for a grant award through Preservation North Carolina is successful!

Best wishes,

**Paul E. Fomberg**

Senior Restoration Specialist

Restoration Branch

State Historic Preservation Office

NC Department of Cultural Resources

Ph: 919.807.6578 | Fx: 919.807.6599

[www.hpo.ncdcr.gov](http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov)



## Neely School Teachers



Florence Hall  
Eva Harris Russle  
Lillian Carson  
Florence Harris  
Effie White  
Ethel Rollins  
Catherine Kent

Mamie Todd  
Laura Moore  
Mabel Padeap  
Charlotte Plata  
Annie Lee Miller  
Lorena Cassie Bell Neely [Blackwell]  
Mary Janette Neely [Ramseur]

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### First Students

Annie Minerva Neely [Pruitt]      Lorena Cassie Bell Neely [Blackwell]  
Jonas Winslow Neely              Mary Janette Neely [Ramseur]  
Thomas Leroy Neely                Henry Albert Neely  
Julian Archie Neely

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### Students (1924 – 1948)

Blackwell, Julius	Finger, Johnny	Lindsey, Ojetta	Pickett, Maggie
Blackwell, Stokes	Finger, Kenneth	Nance, Jessie James	Pickett, Milton
Brooker, Emma Mae	Finger, Rosie	Nance, Sylvia Sue	Pickett, Roosevelt
Bush, Elizabeth Fagget	Finger, Theodore	Nance, Wade	Propst, Elizabeth
Bush, Genola	Finger, Verlin Jr.	Neely, Clara	Ramseur, Janie B.
Bush, Hattie Sue	Hall, Stella	Neely, Elizabeth	Ramseur, John
Bush, Ida Mae	Higgins, Andy	Neely, Harry	Ramseur, Julia
Bush, John Edward	Higgins, Bea	Neely, James H.	Ramseur, Louise
Bush, Juanita	Higgins, Everlene	Neely, Jonas	Ramseur, Margaret
Bush, Mae Bell	Higgins, Johnnie	Neely, Katie	Ramseur, Mary
Bush, Minnie	Higgins, Josephine	Neely, Mary	Ramseur, Muff
Bush, Odell	Higgins, Lottie	Neely, Mary J.	Ramseur, Pauline
Bush, Sam	Higgins, Louise	Neely, Mary L.	Ramseur, Red
Cook, Annie Mae	Higgins, Odell	Neely, Moses	Ramseur, Sadie
Cook, Ethel Lee	Higgins, Willie	Neely, Phyllis	Ramseur, Willie
Cook, Geneva	Hill, George	Neely, Robert	Shaver, Albert
Cook, Henry E.	Hill, Walter	Neely, Thomas	Shaver, Richard
Cook, James	Hill, Woodrow	Neely, William	Shaw, John
Cook, Joe C.	Hudson, Margret	Peterson Family	Smith, Henry Lee
Davis, Holland	Jones, James	Pickett, Becote	Smith, James
Dugjas, June	Jones, Liza	Pickett, Eugene	Smith, Nathaniel
Fagget, Josephine	Jones, Robert	Pickett, George	Smith, Rosie Mae
Fagget, Toy	Jones, Willie	Pickett, Lucy Ann	

## Students that attended Neely School between 1924-1948

Blackwell, Julius  
Blackwell, Stokes  
Brooker, Emma Mae  
Bush, Elizabeth Fagget  
Bush, Genola  
Bush, Hattie Sue  
Bush, Ida Mae  
Bush, John Edward  
Bush, Juanita  
Bush, Mae Bell  
Bush, Minnie  
Bush, Odell  
Bush, Sam  
Cook, Annie Mae  
Cook, Ethel Lee  
Cook, Geneva  
Cook, Henry E.  
Cook, James  
Cook, Joe C.  
Davis, Holland  
Dugias, June  
Fagget, Josephine  
Fagget, Toy  
Finger, Johnny  
Finger, Kenneth  
Finger, Rosie  
Finger, Theodore  
Finger, Verlin Jr.  
Hall, Stella  
Higgins, Andy  
Higgins, Bea  
Higgins, Everlene  
Higgins, Johnnie  
Higgins, Josephine  
Higgins, Lottie  
Higgins, Louise  
Higgins, Odell  
Higgins, Willie  
Hill, George  
Hill, Walter  
Hill, Woodrow  
Hudson, Margret  
Jones, James  
Jones, Liza  
Jones, Robert

Jones, Willie  
Lindsey, Ojetta  
Nance, Jessie James  
Nance, Sylvia Sue  
Nance, Wade  
Neely, Clara  
Neely, Elizabeth  
Neely, Harry  
Neely, James H.  
Neely, Jonas  
Neely, Katie  
Neely, Mary  
Neely, Mary J.  
Neely, Mary L.  
Neely, Moses  
Neely, Phyllis  
Neely, Robert  
Neely, Thomas  
Neely, William  
Peterson Family  
Pickett, Becote  
Pickett, Eugene  
Pickett, George  
Pickett, Lucy Ann  
Pickett, Maggie  
Pickett, Milton  
Pickett, Roosevelt  
Propst, Elizabeth  
Ramseur, Janie B.  
Ramseur, John  
Ramseur, Julia  
Ramseur, Louise  
Ramseur, Margaret  
Ramseur, Mary  
Ramseur, Muff  
Ramseur, Pauline  
Ramseur, Red  
Ramseur, Sadie  
Ramseur, Willie  
Shaver, Albert  
Shaver, Richard  
Shaw, John  
Smith, Henry Lee  
Smith, James  
Smith, Nathaniel  
Smith, Rosie Mae

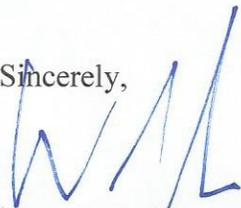
September 21, 2016

Karen C. Lilly-Bowyer  
Rowan County Historic Landmark Commission  
Salisbury, North Carolina 28145

Re: Neely School

We received your request for any documentation that Rowan Salisbury Schools may possess pertaining to the Neely School. It is our understanding that this structure was constructed in 1908 in the China Grove area, Rowan County. Our facility records staff went through our existing records searching for documents that would have referenced the Neely School. Unfortunately, they were unable to locate any school records that pertained to the 108 year old structure.

Sincerely,



W. Anthony Vann  
Assistant Superintendent  
Rowan Salisbury Schools

cc. File