Summit School (1898–1925) was the first public school for Black children in Newport, Tennessee. By the 1920s it was crowded and needed repairs. Summit only extended to the eighth grade, and African Americans wanted high school education for their children. Local citizens reached out to the Julius Rosenwald Fund for assistance. Booker T. Washington, an African American educator from Alabama, had convinced Julius Rosenwald, the wealthy chief executive of Sears, Roebuck and Co., to support the design and construction of schools for Black youth in the segregated South. From 1914 to 1932, Tennessee African American communities built 354 schools, nine teachers homes, and 10 industrial education shops. The Rosenwald Fund provided $291,250; African Americans contributed $296,388, and whites $28,027. The bulk of construction funds came from tax revenues of $1,354,157.

In 1924, with funding in part from the Julius Rosenwald Fund and in part from the local community, construction began on the “Newport Consolidated School.” Due to the rules of the Rosenwald Fund, Newport Consolidated School had to meet standards of site size, length of school year, and sanitary measures, and certain requirements including having new blackboards and desks for each classroom.

John William Rice, a local Black entrepreneur and teacher, purchased a 3-acre lot on Mulberry Avenue for the new school. Rice also operated Newport’s brick-making business, and donated the bricks for the school. Local Black craftsmen donated their labor and were responsible for most of the construction.
Tanner became a community center with all sorts of public programs from faculty and students supported by an active PTA. Events included readings, songs, poetry, and scripture; primers plays; spelling contests; music concerts; and talent shows judged by faculty from Morristown College. Glee club and 4H club were popular. Students would decorate for the junior and senior proms and commencement exercises. Tanner had strong football and girls and boys basketball teams. The girls basketball team from 1936, for example, competed in a tournament in Johnson City and came back with three trophies. Newspapers identified D. Swaggerty, Marshall, and P. Thomas as "outstanding players" for the 1935 football team. The 1938 football team compiled seven wins against a single loss.

County students swelled the school classrooms. Dr. Branch converted a hallway into his office and another classroom to better serve his students. His efforts did not meet the overwhelming needs. In 1942, the African American community involved the NAACP to help write a petition calling for a new high school and gymnasium. In 1948 a new classroom wing opened at Tanner, and the school board funded a new gymnasium in 1954.

Tanner Training School, undated photograph. Anna Ruth Nicholas Mack, Tanner Class of 1945, remembered her years at Tanner as "some of the happiest days of my life."

Dr. Dennis K. Branch is marked as #4, the man standing on the far left.

Undated class photograph with names.

Betty Jean Smith Robinson graduation photo, Class of 1947.

Photographs of students outside of Tanner School in the 1940s. The boys are listed as Andrew, Horace Woods, Jr. and Robert Williams. Photograph of the girls (unnamed) is labeled September 1947.

In 1929, a second Rosenwald Fund grant expanded the school with a new library and classroom, and the first high school teacher was hired for the 1930 school year. Dudley S. Tanner, the state Rosenwald agent for Black schools, pushed for the expansion, working with Ben W. Hooper of the Cocke County Board of Education and Dr. Dennis K. Branch, the Newport Consolidated School principal. To acknowledge Tanner's support, local African Americans dedicated the building in his honor as the “Tanner Training School” in the 1930s.

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By the time the new gymnasium/auditorium was constructed in 1955, Tanner had almost 300 students. The time they spent at Tanner, whether long or brief, was impactful on the many students who walked through the arched doorways. Enrollment continued to grow, leading to the last change to the school in about 1960, when a new two-story front was constructed, giving Tanner the distinctive look it retains today.
A Distinguished Faculty Committed to Excellence

May Frazier Swagerty Leeper was Tanner School’s first teacher. The charitable “Miss May” descended from grandparents who had been enslaved, and she “devoted her life to the education and improvement” of her students.

Leon Pope of Knoxville has been identified as the first principal of Newport Consolidated School in 1924. Two years later, the city board of education hired Dr. Dennis K. Branch as principal. Branch understood opportunity and excellence. He had worked as a bootblack in a barbershop, a letter carrier, and a Pullman porter before completing his medical degree at the University of West Tennessee in Memphis. He served as principal until 1930, when he committed to a full-time medical practice in Newport. In 1931, he was the first African American to run for office of the board of directors of Newport’s chamber of commerce.

Branch’s legacy is remembered with a 5K race named in his honor at the Tennessee Picnic Association celebration every two years.

Other principals included R. C. Martin in the 1930s, the Rev. W. C. Hargrove (1941–46), Mr. Miller, Mr. Hudson, Mr. Tippett, Mr. Crumbley, and the Rev. Joiner. The Rev. Isaac Rakestraw of Knoxville became principal of Tanner School in 1946 and supervised many improvements made to the school from that year into the 1950s.

Dr. Dennis Branch, from article September 1957 Ebony Magazine, “Negro Doctor to Southern Whites: Dr. Branch has served mountain town 43 years.”

Dr. Dennis K. Branch 5K Run during the 2021 Tennessee Picnic Association meeting. Courtesy: Tennessee Picnic Association Facebook page.
The Many Contributions of Tanner Alumni

The alumni of Tanner School impacted Cocke County, the state of Tennessee, and the nation. Six notable alumni are Private June Carr Jr., Roland Albert Dykes Jr., Roland “Trey” Dykes III, Dr. Kenneth Olden, Elynnne Swagerty, and Esther Houston Vassar.

John “June” Harold Carr Jr. (1934–1950)
CLASS OF 1952

John Harold Carr Jr. was a 16-year-old high school student at Tanner in June 1950 when the United States entered the Korean War. Eager to serve his country, Carr pretended to be 18 and enlisted in the U.S. Army. One of his sisters said that he “slipped off   with a friend” named William Earl Goodwin to sign up. The two boys were sent from Newport to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training, and then to Korea. Only five months later, Pvt. John Harold Carr Jr., 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, was killed in action in North Korea. According to the Newport Plain Talk, the Army recognized Carr with the Purple Heart, the Combat Infantryman Badge, and service medals from the United States, the United Nations, and the Republic of Korea. Carr was laid to rest in nearby Jaybird Cemetery, and a memorial to him stands in City Park.

Roland Albert Dykes Jr.
CLASS OF 1949

In 1987, Roland Albert Dykes Jr. became the first Black elected official in Newport when he was elected to the Board of Aldermen, and in 1998 he received the highest number of votes of the alderman candidates, he became vice-mayor. After the death of Mayor Jim Robinson in 1998, Dykes was sworn in as Newport’s first Black mayor and served until 2005. A Tanner alumnus, Dykes graduated with the Class of 1949. He attended Morristown College, where he lettered in football, basketball, baseball, and track. He worked with his father as a mason as early as 1949 on Cosby High School. His mason career moved him to different states, but he returned home, where he worked on many east Tennessee public buildings, including schools, colleges, churches, and hospitals, as well as local shopping centers and professional buildings. A past president of the Newport Kiwanis Club and a Masonic leader, Dykes was the president of the Tennessee Picnic Association for 30 years.

Roland “Trey” Dykes III
FRESHMAN YEAR AT TANNER, COCKE COUNTY HIGH CLASS OF 1969

Roland “Trey” Dykes III is the second African American mayor of Newport. His father, Roland Dykes Jr., was the first. Education has always been a priority for Dykes, who earned a business degree from the University of Tennessee in 1974 and later completed the M.B.A. program at Jacksonville State University as part of a corporate career that spanned over 35 years. Dykes was elected Newport mayor in 2018. He has served on the East Tennessean Development District as a minority member at large on the executive committee. Economic and workforce development have been his priorities—both for Newport and for the county as a whole.

He has been a member of the Newport Kiwanis Club and Kappa Alpha Psi, and president of the Tanner Preservation Alliance. He is also a lifelong member of Woodlawn United Methodist Church, where his great-grandfather, the Rev. Henry Sanford Roland Dykes, was the pastor.
In 2009, Swagerty was named Outstanding Alumna by ETSU. Courtesy: ETSU website.

Evelynne L. Swagerty
CLASS OF 1965

Evelynne Swagerty graduated from Tanner as valedictorian in May 1965, only a year before Tanner closed its doors. She attended East Tennessee State University on scholarship, where she found that campus living quarters remained segregated in fall 1965 even though classes at ETSU had been desegregated earlier. Swagerty became interested in medical-legal issues she witnessed in providing direct patient care. After earning her B.A. degree in Social Work in 1969, she attended graduate school at Smith College, where she earned her M.A. in Social Work and worked for Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. After nearly a decade of social work, Swagerty became interested in medical-legal issues she witnessed in providing direct patient care. She earned her J.D. in 1984 from Boston College Law School. Her incredibly successful legal career includes multiple government appointments in Massachusetts, along with service on both corporate and government committees addressing diversity, gender and racial bias, and children’s welfare.

Esther Houston Vassar
CLASS OF 1962

Esther Mae Houston Vassar was born and raised in Newport, and graduated with Tanner High School’s Class of 1962. As a Tanner student, Vassar excelled in math and science classes. Her senior year she won the national “Betsy Crocker American Homemaker of Tomorrow” scholarship contest. She was member of the all-tournament girls basketball team her junior and senior years.

After graduating from Tanner, Vassar achieved degrees from Howard University, the University of Virginia, and Harvard University’s Program for Senior Executives. As a professor at Hollins College in Virginia and at the University of North Carolina, she thought of her role as, “I’m working with people and trying to give them a positive self-image. It’s the least an educator can do.” Vassar emphasizes: “Never underestimate the importance of your life, your potential, and your influence on others.”

She became the assistant dean and advisor at Hollins, where she taught the first course in Black literature and was the first full-time counselor for Black students there. She served in the administrations of three Virginia governors and was the first Black woman appointed to chair the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. She received the NAACP Service Award (2002) and the 2003 Community Service Award from the Tidewater Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen Association.
Keeping Tanner School alive and in service to all of Cocke County has been a true community effort. It began with the efforts from alumni, supported by the East Tennessee Development District and then the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, to preserve and restore the building after a storm damaged the school on April 27, 2011.

The following year, the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation prepared a history and analysis of the school’s preservation options, which became a foundation for planning and more preservation advocacy by the citizens and officials of Cocke County. That year the community created the Tanner Preservation Alliance. They worked with officials to repair and then begin the school’s restoration.

Local government worked with the Cocke County Partnership, the Tanner Preservation Alliance and state Representative Jeremy Faison to convince state government to support the school’s restoration. Dedication of the project happened in April 2016.

In January 2021, Walters State Newport Center opened in the Tanner School building. It offers general education classes, continuing Tanner School’s legacy of education and community commitment.

Sponsored by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University
Special thanks to Carline Robinson, Tanner School Alumni, and the Tanner Preservation Alliance, as well as Mayor Roland Dykes III and the city of Newport, Tennessee.

All photos without credit lines courtesy of Carline Robinson and Tanner School Alumni.
For more than 80 years, the Tennessee Picnic has brought together friends and family for several days in early August to celebrate tradition and family roots.

By World War II, many local African Americans had left their native Cocke County to seek better education, job, and living conditions elsewhere. Some of the older citizens organized the Tennessee Picnic as a way to bring families together on a regular basis. Some of those spearheading the event were Dr. Dennis Branch, Charlie Brubash, John D. Snagerty, Floyd Garfield, George Mack, and Roland A. Dykes Sr., now all deceased.

Newport’s late Mayor Roland Dykes Jr. became involved in the Tennessee Picnic while still in high school. Following Branch’s death in 1964, the future mayor assumed the presidency of the association, serving more than 30 years until his death in 2005.

The Tennessee Picnic is held around August 8 to coordinate with the national observance of Emancipation Day. It has grown from a simple picnic to a weeklong celebration. Events include the “Miss Tennessee Picnic” pageant, day trips, church worship, genealogy and history tours, and the Dr. Dennis Branch 5K Run. Many families plan their individual reunions to coincide with the celebration. Recent years have seen the leadership and membership descend to the children and grandchildren of the original organizers.

Goals of the Tennessee Picnic:

- To foster community togetherness and family
- To sponsor programs that empower individuals to be self-sufficient
- To promote cultural awareness about Cocke County and its rich African American history
- To promote scholarship and continuing education
- To promote volunteerism among the membership for the community at large.

If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.”

DR. CARTER G. WOODSON