

The excitement among the alumni of J.J. Jones High School, which closed its doors in 1966, was evident even before the ribbon was cut on an exhibit featuring the school at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.

The exhibit was unveiled Saturday at noon during this weekend's bi-annual reunion, which draws Jones alumni from across the country.

The display features notable moments in the school's history, including notes about how students devoted their time and effort to build a gymnasium for the school — the only black school in the county during its time. It also features items donated by school alumni, including displays about music, arts and sports, but it also doesn't shy away from the region's history, with a prominent display on the Jim Crow laws of the era.

Jones served black students locally from 1936 to 1966, when it ceased to exist due to integration.

And while the spirit of family is evident in the sense of community among former students and graduates, Saturday's unveiling was especially important to Mount Airy resident Linwood Jones, who would have graduated from the school in 1968, and attended until its doors closed in 1966.

Jones is the grandson of John J. Jones, the school's founder and principal for 16 years, and the son of Leonidas H. Jones, its second longest-serving principal.

"It's really hard to put into words," Linwood Jones said quietly when talking about what the exhibit means to him. "The exhibit shows the struggle my father and grandfather went through for our education, but everyone in the Surry County community helped make this a reality.

"For me to see this in here is like bringing back my grandfather and father for the education of our community."

Jones' grandfather, J.J. Jones, who was born a slave in Rockingham County, died when his son — and Jones' father — was just 13.

"His dream was to come back home and see this high school become a reality," he said quietly. "My family placed a high value on education, and this would be very special to them both."

Edwards said the display was long deserved, and sprang from a close relationship the museum has with the Jones Alumni Association.

"This is something that has long been on our minds and in our plans," he said. "The stories coming out of the Jones school era are really remarkable. They tell a story about our local history that a lot of people aren't aware of. This is a way for us to showcase a little bit of that story for the larger community."

"During the 30 years it was in operation as a segregated school, remarkable things happened there. Like many small town high schools, it really engendered that sense of community and identity, and you can see it today through their very active alumni association."

And as the group cut the ribbon on the exhibit a tapestry on display said it all.

"We have crossed the bay, the future lies ahead."