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- [Black Laws of Virginia Introduction](#) ▶
- [Black Laws of Virginia Excerpts](#) ▶
- [Essential Understandings: Supporting Documents](#) ▶
- [Relevant Passages from the Constitution](#) ▶
- [Relevant SC Cases and Legislation](#) ▶
- [Loudoun County SOLs](#) ▶
- [Bibliography](#) ▶

[Home](#) > [Black History](#) > [Essential Understandings](#)

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John Wesley Wanzer
from
*Essence of a People:
African Americans Who Made a
Difference in Loudoun County , Virginia*

Being a member of a large family taught John Wesley Wanzer the value of independence as well as interdependence—traits that remained with him throughout his life. He was the fifth of fourteen children born to Wesley and Mary Wanzer of Middleburg.

Wanzer attended Grant Elementary School, but left at an early age to work for the Dudley family. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he became employed in Will Mitchell's blacksmith shop so that he could learn a trade as well as have Sundays free. This was a very smart move because a few years later he was able to buy the blacksmith and wheelwright shop business. When disaster struck and the frame building burned to the ground, he did not give up. He built a new shop on the same land. This time the structure was made of stone and included a hardware store. For years, Wanzer's shop was the only one of its kind in Middleburg, and he was one of Loudoun County's most successful African American businessmen.

As Wanzer traveled around the county, he saw children attending schools in dire need of repair, and teachers spending part of their meager salary to buy supplies and books for students who could not afford them. The thing that bothered him most was seeing half-empty busloads of white children crisscrossing the county while African American students were provided no transportation at all. Although he and his wife, the former Frances Hall, had no children, Wanzer felt compelled to do something about the unequal treatment.

When the County-Wide League was organized, Wanzer was elected president. He held this position throughout the life of the organization. The mission of the County-Wide League was to attain equal educational opportunities for African American students in the public schools of Loudoun County. The membership was made up of parent-teacher associations throughout the county and anyone else interested in helping. Governed by a board of trustees, the County-Wide League presented requests to the school board which generally took no action.

In 1939, Wanzer and the other trustees negotiated the purchase of land on which to build a high school. Because they were not making progress with the school board, they asked Charles Houston, a Washington attorney, for advice. He mapped out a strategy and appeared with them at the school board meetings. He made the school board aware of their responsibilities and liability.



When the possibility of litigation became apparent, Houston helped the African American community organize a branch of the NAACP. Wanzer was opposed to litigation because he feared it would be too costly. In addition, his primarily white clientele was boycotting his business, and at least two other members of the League were being threatened with loss of employment. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. Houston sympathized but was determined not to give up, and the momentum of the community could not be stopped.

Realizing they could not win, the school board agreed to build a high school, provide courses that would enable the school to be accredited, and furnish bus transportation. In exchange, Wanzer and the other trustees of the County-Wide League signed over the land for one dollar. In 1941, Wanzer was one of the speakers at the dedication of Douglass High School.

The NAACP became the dominant voice of the African American community, and Wanzer was a member; but his true allegiance stayed with the County-Wide League. When the consolidated elementary school was built in the Mercer District in 1948, the county had planned to name it Mercer. Wanzer and others in the community campaigned to have the school named in honor of Benjamin Banneker. They prevailed.

John Wanzer was a trustee of the Aberdeen Lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. Throughout his life, he was active in the church. At Shiloh Baptist in Middleburg, he was chairman of the deacon board and superintendent of the Sunday school. He served as moderator of the Northern Virginia Baptist Sunday School Union and as corresponding secretary of the Northern Virginia Baptist Association.

Wanzer is remembered as one who had the strength of his convictions. His impact was impressive. During his lifetime, there was hardly an African American in Loudoun County who did not at least recognize his name.

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