

Section Two

The History of DC Public Schools from 1862 - 1945

The following summary of the history of DCPS was developed as part of the multiple property historic register application submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office by architectural historian, Tanya Beauchamp.

The history ends abruptly in 1945. However, a survey of the history and architecture of schools built between 1945 and 1967 is being funded by the State Historic Preservation Office. This is a critical piece of work since many of the schools recommended for replacement in the Master Plan were built during this period. When the history and surveys are done, a new edition of this report will be published.

Introduction

The history of public education in the District of Columbia followed the course of the city's growth itself. When the first organization to oversee public education was set up in 1804, the city had become home to the federal government only four years earlier in 1800. The settlement was sparse and represented only a shadow of the city that it became a century later. As the city developed and confidence in its future became more certain, the school system reflected this newfound security. By the end of the period under study, the school system had become a significant institution in the life of the city. Its importance is reflected in the substantial buildings that were constructed over the nearly 130 years of development.

In reviewing the history of the school system throughout this period, two historical themes are evident. The most important is the separation of the races into separate schools, a practice that endured in the District until the Supreme Court of the United States outlawed separate educational facilities in 1954. The allocation of funds between the white and the black schools was a serious point of contention that affected the location and design of and funding for each group's schools. The policy of racial separation can be seen in the surviving schools, built as "colored schools." Many District residents recall their attendance at a racially segregated school. Former black schools are regarded today both as a source of pride and as a reminder of past injustices.

The second historical theme is the separation of the sexes. During the early phase of the system's development, schools were exclusively male or female. A limited form of separation of the sexes endured well into the 20th century. Its vestiges can be seen in separate boys' and girls' entrances in many school buildings.

The role of the United States Congress in the affairs of the District of Columbia set its school buildings apart from those in other urban centers where funding was provided by the localities. Frequently, the District of Columbia school system thought itself in a neglected position because Congress was more likely to respond to

constituencies possessing the vote rather than to the residents of the District who were disenfranchised. In the mid-1860s for example, the city leaders appealed to the U. S. Congress for increased financial support for the public schools, citing the greater support accorded public education in new states and in the territories. The school system rose above these limitations and produced buildings that observers in other cities and other nations admired. The admiration was mutual. D. C. Public Schools administrators also participated in inspection tours in order to study schools in other cities, which inspired them to apply lessons learned to District schools.

The school construction program reflected the growth of the city's population. National emergencies caused upswings in population numbers, as did the natural growth of the federal bureaucracy in response to the nation's need for federal government services. In the early years of the city, small frame buildings and adapted structures served as the location for classes. During the Civil War, the city embarked upon an ambitious plan to erect modern schoolhouses in each school district to create a system of free public schools in Washington that would be unsurpassed in the nation. Seven innovative, architecturally distinctive buildings designed by German-born architect Adolf Cluss were completed between 1864 and 1875.

Under the commission system of municipal government, the Engineer Commissioner and his staff in the office of the Building Commissioner and his staff in the Office of the Building Inspector designed dozens of eight to twelve room red brick schoolhouses close to population centers. When a school became overcrowded, the customary response was to construct a new school building on an adjacent lot or within a few blocks of the older school. In other instances, small annexes were appended to the original buildings. By the early 20th century, the city's architects experimented with expandable school building designs. Many buildings were designed as a complete whole, but were constructed in sections as the population of the surrounding community expanded.

Aside from Congressional and national attention that the District's school buildings attracted, their location, design, construction, and maintenance were a concern of the communities in which they were located. Once an area in the District became settled and a sufficient number of children were present, the community's leaders organized to lobby the school board and the U. S. Congress for funds in order to construct a new school. This effort frequently was a protracted one, particularly for new black schools. Whereas the presence of a new white school was viewed as an enhancement to the real estate values in a community, the possible construction of a colored school in the same area was viewed as a threat to those values.

The 137 surviving public schools constructed prior to 1945 represent only a portion of the total number of school buildings that were constructed during that period. Throughout the history of the school system, older schools were replaced by newer ones. Some schools were demolished when commercial functions overwhelmed the surrounding residential areas. Many of the District's older schools survived because, in the face of overcrowded conditions for much of the pre-World War II period, every classroom was in an old or a new building, except for their allocation among nearby communities or according to racial groups.

The surviving District school buildings bear silent testimony not only to national trends in educational theory and aesthetic tastes, but to local conditions that favored small school buildings located within blocks of one another and provided separate facilities for white and black children. This also was based on the neighborhood school policy where students walked to school, went home for lunch, and returned. There were no cafeterias or buses and few, if any, working mothers. School buildings also reveal the efforts of citizens within a federal enclave to educate the next generation and to define the quality of life in their communities.

Early Years of the Public School System, 1804-1864

The initial legislation providing public schools for the federal city was passed on December 5, 1804.

*Impressed with a sense of the inseparable connection between the education of youth and the prevalence of pure morals, with the duty of all communities to place within the reach of the poor as well as the rich the inestimable blessings of knowledge, and with the high necessity of establishing at the seat of the General Government proper seminaries of learning, the Councils do pass as act to establish and endow a permanent institution for the education of youth in the city of Washington.*¹

This legislation provided the legal basis for the development of a public education system that has endured to the present.

On the centennial of the founding of the District of Columbia public school system, President of the Board of Commissioners Henry B. F. MacFarland reported on the highlights of the events that implemented the 1804 legislation. The school's first board of trustees was headed by the President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. The board met in the Supreme Court room at the Capitol. Although the City Council provided only a meager budget of \$1,500, the board's objectives were ambitious. The members aspired to create a primary and secondary school system as well as a university program.² Jefferson's example of involvement in the District's public school system was followed by succeeding Presidents throughout the first half of the 19th century.

¹ "Enactments Relative to Schools," Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools, 1846, p.28.

² Henry B. F. MacFarland in "Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Public Schools in the District of Columbia," *Report of the Board of Education*, 1904-05, p. 55.

The initial intent of the public schools' governing body was to provide for the education of children whose parents were unable to pay tuition at private schools. Thus, the public schools were regarded as "charity schools." With the benefit of hindsight, the system was characterized as "defective, in educating only a portion of the youthful population, and at the same time fostering upon it the badge of poverty."³ In the mid-1840s, a combined free and pay system was instituted for attendance at the public schools. However, because of the ill feelings caused by the knowledge of which pupils were free and which paid tuition, this system was replaced in 1848 by a system that was open freely to all white children in order of application. This system was described as "conducted essentially on the same principles as those in the larger towns of Massachusetts."⁴

Despite the high level of interest in the public schools, the system remained small and housed in makeshift quarters. As late as 1855, the school buildings were described as ill adapted for educational purposes and deficient in space. Many of the schools were located in old market houses, fraternal halls, church basements, and other structures that had been constructed for commercial or residential functions. The environment within which teachers and pupils spent a major portion of their day was thought to cause "weariness, languor, headache, nervous irritability" and to promote the "development of pulmonary and other diseases."⁵ The conditions of the school buildings were so inferior that the members of the board were mortified to show their schools to their counterparts from other cities.

The black schools developed in 1807 under the sponsorship of private citizens and religious groups. The schools were quartered in churches and in other buildings that had been built for non-educational purposes. The development of

black schools suffered a setback between 1831 and 1835 in response to the Nat Turner uprising and the related "Snow Riots." The now fearful whites withdrew their support of black institutions. Relations between the whites and blacks were so bleak that, in 1835, "most of the colored schoolhouses were burned or demolished, textbooks, apparatus, and furniture destroyed."⁶ Later, many of the black schools were revived and reinstated. In 1851, Myrtilla Minor established one of the city's first high schools for black women, located on the square bounded by 19th, 20th, N, and O Streets, N. W.

In 1862, Congress provided for the creation of public schools for black students. Control over the schools was placed under a "board of trustees for colored schools for Washington and Georgetown." Oversight of the board was delegated to the Department of the Interior. Despite Congressional actions, the funds provided for the schools were too limited to permit the establishment of a single school. In the absence of adequate funds from the public sector, the private sector continued to support black schools.

Following emancipation on January 1, 1863, new organizations in the District took up the cause of education of the black population. The National Freedman's Relief Association set up night schools to accommodate those who worked during the day. The association also built schoolhouses for day students. The association was joined by other relief organizations, many of which originated in New England.

The Civil War brought disruption to the public schools. The federal government appropriated several of the buildings for hospital purposes, forcing the school system to seek out alternative spaces. Ironically, the new spaces were regarded as superior to those usurped for wartime use.⁷ Even in a time of upheaval, the

³ "Historical Sketch of the Public Schools of Washington," *Report of the Trustees of the Public Schools*, 1850, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ *Report of the Trustees of the Public Schools*, 1855, p. 4.

⁶ Winfield S. Montgomery, "Historical Sketch of Education for the Colored Race in the District of Columbia, 1807-1905," *Report of the Board of Education*, 1904-05, p. 104.

⁷ *Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools*, 1862, p. 9.

future of the school system appeared brighter than before the war. The city council levied a new tax of five cents on the hundred dollars, “to be set apart for the erection of school buildings.”⁸ These funds allowed the trustees of the public schools to contemplate for the first time the construction of substantial school buildings.

A Sense of Permanency, 1864-1874

The post-Civil War era was marked by the construction of a distinctive group of major school buildings, unlike anything that had been built previously in Washington. This new physical presence was accompanied by the restructuring of the schools to create a graded system, high schools, and a normal school. The superintendent presided over the system. During this period, the school system inaugurated the “Washington policy of relatively small buildings [for the lower grades] convenient to the school population, but tributary to ...large buildings.”⁹ The small size of the school building was the result of the modest and widely scattered population of the District of Columbia. When the population became denser, the small elementary school had become entrenched in the sympathies of the local citizenry.

The completion of the Wallach School in 1864 signaled the “dawn of a new era” in the history of the school system. Located at Seventh Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, S. E., the Wallach School was designed by the firm of Cluss and Kammerhueber. Ten oblong classrooms accommodated 600 pupils. A large hall was located on the third floor. The high ceilings, brick decoration, and disguised ductwork and plumbing made the building a novelty in the city. The board of trustees commended the architects for the care in

preparing the plans for their vigilant superintendence.¹⁰

During the dedication ceremony for the Wallach School, Mayor Richard Wallach, the school’s namesake, lauded the “symmetrical and beautiful structure” that marked the “commencement of a new era of school-house architecture in our midst.”¹¹ The appearance of the school was considered to have an educational function as well. As Dr. F. S. Walsh of the subboard of trustees for the Third District noted, “it is our duty to educate the taste while imparting other instruction; and when we remember how many of our early tastes and impressions were formed in the school-house and surroundings, we cannot do wrong in having it as attractive as possible.”¹²

The success of the Wallach School was followed in 1869 with the completion of the Franklin School at Thirteenth and K Streets, N. W., opposite Franklin Square. Cluss and Kammerhueber designed it in pressed brick and bluestone trim. In 1871, Adolf Cluss designed the red brick Seaton School at Second and I Streets NW for male students. At its dedication, J. Ormond Wilson, superintendent of public schools, remarked that Seaton was evidence of the school system’s determination to make its public schools “worthy of the Capital of the Great Republic.”¹³ Another notable school building of this period was the Jefferson School, also designed by Cluss, at Sixth and D Streets, S. W.

The Congressional provision for black students of 1862 was followed by additional

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ “Report of the Supervising Principals,” *Report of the Board of Education*, 1904-05.

¹⁰ *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools*, 1865, p.17

¹¹ “Dedication of the Wallach School Building,” *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools*, 1865, p. 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹³ J. Ormond Wilson, “Introductory Remarks at the Dedication of the Seaton Public School Building,” *Report of the Board of Trustees of the City of Washington*, 1871, p. 98.

legislation that provided for a fairer distribution of funds. The first public schoolhouse for black students was a frame structure built in 1865 at Second and C Street, SE.¹⁴ This modest beginning was followed by the construction of several substantial school buildings for black students. In 1867, the brick John F. Cook School was built at Fourth and O Streets, NW. In the following year, the brick Stevens School was erected at Twenty-first and K Streets, NW. The crowning glory of the black schools of this period was the Sumner School, constructed 1871-72, after designs prepared by Cluss. The Sumner School was fashioned of pressed brick and gray Ohio sandstone in the “spirit of a modernized Norman style.”¹⁵ Coincident with the construction of the Sumner School was the completion of the Lincoln School at Second and C Streets SE and the Lovejoy School at Twelfth and D Streets NE.

In the county of Washington, small one-room and two-room frame buildings were constructed along major thoroughfares that cut through the rural landscape. These schools served the many freedmen who were employed on small trucking and dairy farms and who lived close to work. Typically, an acre or half-acre of land was sufficient for each school.

The black high school developed during this period. In 1870, a preparatory high school was created for advanced students in the various grammar schools. At first it was located in a church basement. Later, it was housed in existing schools. The first graduation of a black high school class was held at the Charles Sumner School in 1877.

Toward A Modern School System, 1874-1900

The year 1874 was an important one for the District and for the city’s school system. In that year, the territorial form of government was

abolished and replaced with a temporary board of commissioners. This board oversaw the phasing out of the old system and the development of a permanent system of municipal government. The Organic Act of June 11, 1878 proved for the city to be governed by three District Commissioners, one of which was the Engineer Commissioner, a member of the Army Corps of Engineers. The Engineer Commissioner was responsible for the construction of public works and public buildings in the District, including school buildings.

Also in 1874, the separate school systems were merged into a single entity, bringing together the four governing boards of the schools of Washington City, Georgetown, Washington County, and the black schools of Washington. The schools operated under a single board composed of both white and black members. However, the black schools continued to function under an independent black superintendent and the white schools under a white superintendent. Three years later, in 1878, Congress passed legislation making permanent the commission form of government. In the process, however, much of the authority of the school trustees was passed to the commissioners.

The pioneering achievements of the previous decade encouraged euphoric expectations for the future on the part of the school system’s board of trustees. In its 1875-76 report, the board reported that the District could:

*Boast a number of school buildings so convenient in location and so well adapted to their purpose in nearly all conceivable particulars, as to win the admiring commendation of judicious visitors familiar with the most renowned buildings of like nature. Some of the oldest and most refined European nations do not disdain to copy them. Ample acknowledgment of the superiority of these buildings was made during the Centennial year.*¹⁶

¹⁴ Winfield S. Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Annual Report of the Board of Public Schools*, 1965, p. 17.

¹⁶ Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools in the District of Columbia, 1875-76, p. 3.

The board, however, reported that there were not enough of these admirable schools to meet the needs of the growing population.

The building program of the last quarter of the nineteenth century was not as publicized as that of the previous decade, although the District continued to seek out innovative designs for its schools. This search now was conducted under the auspices of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia and, more specifically, the Engineer Commissioner and his deputies. In 1879, the Commissioners advertised for designs for a public school house. The premium was awarded to P. J. Lauritzen, a Washington architect.¹⁷

By 1878 the position of Inspector of Buildings was created and placed under the supervision of the Engineer Commissioner. The title of the position was derived from the responsibility for developing and enforcing building regulations. The Building Inspector additionally supervised the design and construction of new municipal public buildings as well as repairs to existing ones. The consolidation of local public buildings under a single management entity provided for a consistent design procurement process. Throughout the 1880s and much of the 1890s, the Building Inspector and his staff prepared the designs and specifications for public school buildings in the District of Columbia. During the 1880s, architect John B. Brady designed many of the school buildings under the supervision of Building Inspector Thomas B. Entwistle.

The steps involved in obtaining a school building commenced with the acquisition of a site. This step often was a difficult one because of conflicting demands of residents in the community in which the school was to be located. Once the site was acquired, the Office of the Building Inspector prepared architectural plans and specifications and submitted them to the District Commissioners for approval. During this period, Architect of the Capitol Edward

Clark was associated with municipal architecture as both a designer and as an inspector of designs. He frequently signed his name to the drawings, indicating that he either had designed the buildings or that the drawings had passed his inspection. Construction bids were solicited and the lowest bidder received the contract. The Building Inspector's staff supervised the construction of the building. When completed, the District Commissioners approved the name for the school.

Many of the school building designs produced by the Office of the Building Inspector during this period called for red brick and generally were designed in the Romanesque Revival style. In form and detail, they bespoke simplicity, efficiency, and durability. When completed, they blended in with the buildings of the surrounding community. The buildings were elaborated with picturesque elements, such as towers with conical roofs and finials. While some buildings were arranged with asymmetrical massing, most were designed with balanced massing, usually a central pavilion flanked by identical sections. They were embellished with brick pilasters and string courses, molded brick and belt courses, pressed metal cornices, and terra cotta trim. Brick corbelling at the cornice and stone trim around the windows provided other avenues for varying the facade treatment. Successful designs were replicated and were used for both white and black schools. The floor plan followed a fairly predictable pattern of four rooms with adjoining cloakrooms on each floor arranged around a central hallway and play areas in the basement.

The typical two-story, eight-room school buildings dotted the urban landscape of the District, providing for small facilities evenly placed every few blocks and serving a limited population of children. By the 1880s, the eight-room schoolhouse had become so entrenched in school building design that it was defended vigorously on many grounds. Its advantages included the efficiency of heating and ventilating and the economy of size in sections of the city where land was expensive. Its two staircases, one for boys and the other for girls, were located to facilitate escape in the event of fire or panic. Larger 12-room schools required

¹⁷ Minutes, Exclusive of Orders and Letters, of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, July 1, 1878 to April 1, 1893, p. 151.

heavier walls and more expensive heating apparatus. In 1889 the common red brick school building was described as a result of “years of study” in the field of schoolhouse architecture.

In 1881-82, the first high school building for white students, Washington High School, was constructed after designs Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark prepared. It was a large, three-story red brick building, but it provided limited space for athletics and social organizations. The white high school originated with a separate high school for girls, founded in 1876, and one for boys, founded in the following year. In the new school building, the two schools merged into Washington High School. In 1892-93, when adjunct high schools were created in order to meet the rising demand, Washington High School was renamed Central High School.

Some of the design elements of the typical red brick schoolhouse of the 1880s and 1890s were applied to the new M Street High School for black students designed in 1890 and completed in 1891. The exterior was elaborated with familiar elements, such as stone strips and corbelled brick at the cornice. However, the M Street High School building was designed on a scale that far exceeded the usual small elementary schools and featured Colonial Revival details and terra cotta trim in the gables.

The construction of the M Street High School building represented a significant advance from the makeshift accommodations previously provided black high school students. However, the building’s facilities paled by comparison with the Classical Revival style Western High School building (renamed the Ellington School of the Arts in 1974) completed in 1898 for white students in the western section of the city.

By the late 1890s, the familiar red brick school building came to characterize the building type in the city. Its unfashionable simplicity, once lauded for its excellence, was out-of-step with changing aesthetic standards. In 1897, the *Evening Star* voiced the opinion that the “great red brick boxes...are unattractive if

not positively ugly” and were “mere boxes of brick without any pretensions to beauty.”¹⁸ In response to this criticism, city and school officials sought ways to improve the quality of design.

Following the example of the federal government which opened a select number of federal government building projects to competition, the decision was made to invite private architects to prepare designs for school buildings under the supervision of the Office of the Building Inspector. The Hayes School at Fifth and K Streets, N. E., designed by Washington architect Charles E. Burden and completed in 1897, is one of the earliest buildings to be designed under this new system. Another early school building of this new system for design procurement was the William Benning Webb School, designed in 1899 by Glenn Brown and completed in 1901. While the exterior treatment of the Hayes and Webb schools was significantly different from the exteriors of previous school buildings, it was fashioned onto the common eight-room box form. Thus these early buildings designed by private architects can be regarded as transitional buildings, bridging two eras of schoolhouse design.

Entering the Twentieth Century: 1900-1945

The 20th century public school in the District of Columbia served a broader range of educational purposes than that of the previous century. The audience was more diverse, necessitating a separation of distinct groups of students into junior high schools. Programs were offered in Americanization, industrial education, and business education. Facilities were provided for dental and medical clinics, home gardening, and school banks. The diverse audience and educational programs affected the design of school buildings in the District of Columbia.

In 1900 the U. S. Congress enacted legislation that returned complete authority of

¹⁸ *Evening Star*, July 8, 1897.

the public schools to the Board of Education. The law also abolished a separate and independent superintendent of the black schools and placed both groups of schools under a single superintendent. One of the two assistant superintendents, under the superintendent, was in charge of white schools and the other of black schools. Thus, the autonomy enjoyed by the black school system was abridged.

In 1900 the entire school system was divided into eleven divisions. Divisions 1 through 6 included white schools in the City of Washington. Representing the County of Washington, Divisions 7 and 8 included both black and white schools. Divisions 9 through 11 embraced black schools in the City of Washington.

During the first decade of the 20th century, private architects frequently were hired to provide designs for public school buildings. The well-known firms and practitioners involved in this work included Marsh & Peter, Appleton P. Clark, Jr., Leon Dessez, Robert Stead, Waddy B. Wood, and Glenn Brown. As a group, the school buildings of this period differed from those designed by the Building Inspector because they exhibited a greater variety in styles and building materials.

The school buildings designed during this period reflected national advances in the technology of ventilation, heating, and lighting. No longer containing only classrooms, auditoria, and playrooms, high schools were now “temples of education” that included large gymnasias, swimming pools, lunchrooms, laboratories, and armories. Their design had become a science, involving consideration of the building plan, site, lighting, entrances, cloakrooms, playgrounds, and sanitary facilities. Schools became an important building type discussed in architectural journals. During the first decade of the 20th century, palatial schools, featuring large gymnasias and auditoria, were constructed in New York City, St. Louis, and Chicago.

The “Organic Law of 1906” clarified authority for the District of Columbia Public Schools and addressed certain needs of the school system. The 1906 Act set out the

responsibilities of the Board of Education, the District Commissioner, and the U. S. Congress and delegated executive authority to the Superintendent of Schools. Similar authority was delegated to the assistant superintendent of the black schools, under the direction of the superintendent. The act also provided for professional standards and salaries for teachers. An important provision of the 1906 Act was the appointment of a commission to study the buildings of the system. Composed of Superintendent of Schools William E. Chancellor, Supervising Architect of the Treasury James Knox Taylor, and Engineer Commissioner Jay J. Morrow, the Schoolhouse Commission made its report in 1908. The report covered recommendations for abandonment of old schools and the construction of new ones. Based on its inspection of schools in other cities ranging from New York City to Muskegon, Michigan, the Schoolhouse Commission suggested improvements to the interior layout for the new facilities.

In the area of new building design, the Schoolhouse Commission envisioned the consolidation of small facilities into much larger ones, typically four-to-eight room schools scattered around the city replaced by larger 16-to-24 room schools similar to those found in New York City, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. In fact, the commission singled out the new school buildings in St. Lois, designed by school architect William B. Ittner, for praise as among the finest in the nation. However, District of Columbia residents rejected these recommendations because they would require children to travel longer distances to get to school. The reaction also may have been due to a desire to avoid the appearance of teeming masses of students at any single school. In addition, the continued increase in school enrollment precluded attempts to abandon all older buildings.

Aside from the size and distribution of buildings, the Schoolhouse Commission recommended the construction of additional small manual training schools similar to the B. B. French School and for each elementary and high school to be provided with playgrounds, assembly rooms, and gymnasias. In order to

maintain a high quality of school facilities, the commission recommended that a school architect be appointed and that a schoolhouse commission be made permanent.

By 1906 the divisions of the school system had been adjusted to include up to 15 schools arranged geographically. Divisions 1 through 9 were assigned to white schools, while Divisions 10 to 13 were assigned to the black schools. The assignment of white and black schools to separate divisions continued up to the integration of the school system in 1954 when new jurisdictions were established.

In 1909 the U. S. Congress reorganized the Engineer Commissioner's building department. Under the supervision of the Engineer Commissioner, the position of Municipal Architect was created, the major responsibility of which was the preparation of plans for and the supervision of the construction of all municipal buildings. Under the Municipal Architect, six new assistants oversaw repairs and a new system of regular inspection for sanitary conditions and fire safety. The formation of the Municipal Architect's Office mirrored the creation of city architecture offices in other urban areas.

At the inception of the Municipal Architect's Office, its first chief, Snowden Ashford, expressed uncertainty as to whether or not Congress intended that any of the design work for municipal buildings could be contracted to architects in private practice. As it turned out, private architects participated in the municipal design process according to the workload of the Municipal Architect's Office. (When the construction program had been administered by the Building Inspector's Office in the first decade of the century, about half of the work had been contracted out to private architects.) In 1910, with the creation of the Commission of Fine Arts, the District Commissioners asked that the new review body pass on the designs for new public school buildings in the District as well as other municipal buildings.

During the following two decades, the design of public school buildings in the District of Columbia was dominated by the two

Municipal Architects: Snowden Ashford who served until 1921 and his successor, Albert L. Harris, who served until his death in 1933. Born in 1866, Ashford had been engaged on major public building projects during the early years of his career. He was employed on federal government structures under Alfred B. Mullett, Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, and under John L. Smithmeyer, co-architect of the Library of Congress building. In 1895, Ashford became Assistant Inspector of Buildings in the Office of the Building Inspector. In 1901 he succeeded John Brady to become Inspector of Buildings and, in 1909, was appointed Municipal Architect. Ashford's successor, Albert L. Harris, previously had worked for the Washington architectural firm of Hornblower & Marshall. During the 1920s he was allied with Washington architect Arthur B. Heaton on the design of new buildings for George Washington University.

The Municipal Architects were well-known figures in the city's architectural circles and they supervised a design staff. While private architects continued to be involved in the design work associated with public schools, their design preferences were subservient to those of the Municipal Architect. Snowden Ashford preferred the Gothic and Elizabethan styles for public school buildings, while Albert L. Harris preferred the Renaissance and Colonial Revival styles.

During this period, the design of buildings covered the range of Renaissance, Elizabethan, Collegiate Gothic, and Colonial-Revival styles popular in other building types. The Collegiate Gothic style, as exemplified by the 1916 Cardozo High School (formerly Central High School), the Dunbar High School (demolished), and the 1923 Eastern High School, was considered especially appropriate for the larger school building. The style was "scholastic" in character and provided a large amount of window surface and a relatively small proportion devoted to wall surface.¹⁹ School

¹⁹ James O. Betelle, "Architectural Styles as Applied to School Buildings," *American School Board Journal*, Vol. 58, April 1919, p. 28.

buildings were constructed of brick of various hues, sometimes laid in a Flemish bond, with stone, terra cotta, and pebbledash trim. The floor plan for many of the elementary school buildings were similar to that of the late 19th century, made up of four classrooms with adjoining cloakrooms per floor.

By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the 12-room elementary school had become more common-six rooms on each floor and an auditorium/gymnasium in the basement that also could be used by the community. In subsequent years, the auditorium/gymnasium was moved into the first floor level and appended to the rear of the school. In the District of Columbia, a concern for economy dictated the combined functions of this single room. (In most elementary schools in other cities, separate assembly halls and gymnasias were provided.

The new plan provided for kindergarten classes and for increased flexibility in the allocation of classroom space. The floor plans reflected expanded functions for the public schools. Schools assisted students with developing skills useful in adult life, such as homemaking skills and military training, and thus provided special accommodations for these programs. School building design addressed the education of younger students and the use of school facilities by the general public. The siting of schools allowed for playground space outdoors to support vigorous physical exercise that complemented classroom instruction. By 1911, the Board of Education discussed the possibility of schools with from 16-20 rooms as a "proper size for a city as large as this one."

The formation of the Municipal Architect's Office under Snowden Ashford's leadership was not greeted with unanimous enthusiasm by the Board of Education. In 1910, an effort was made to create the position of "school architect," independent of Ashford's organization. Designs would be procured by the submission of competitive plans from three architects to the Superintendent of Schools. This proposal was never adopted.

During the early 20th century, the black school facilities improved, but remained in

highly segregated locations and reflected the location of much of the black population. The proposed site of the new Dunbar High School on the Howard University grounds or on First Street provoked protests from black residents who viewed the Howard site as too far from the center of the black residential areas. As the black and white population shifted throughout the city, black schools were converted into white schools.

World War I drew the attention of the city and building industry away from civilian construction projects at the same time that it caused a large increase in the city's population. The consequent greater number of school-age children and the slowdown of the school construction program resulted in greatly overcrowded facilities. After the war, the school construction program accelerated rapidly, producing a workload of crisis proportions. In order to facilitate the work, several private architectural firms were contracted with in 1921 to design elementary schools. The Municipal Architect's office took on the task of designing new junior high schools. The American Institute of Architects praised Municipal Architect Albert L. Harris for his plans for Washington's public school buildings and for his willingness to parcel out a portion of his work to private architects.

While Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford preferred the Elizabethan and Collegiate Gothic styles for school buildings, Harris favored the Colonial Revival style. The style was popular for school buildings around the country, particularly those on the East Coast with English-colonial traditions. Some architects were partial to the style because they believed that it held an irresistible charm and possessed an eternal rather than a momentary quality. The style was thought to command the attention of laymen on whose support the maintenance of the school depended. It also bespoke a domestic character that made school as comfortable as the home.²⁰

Experiments with extensible structures marked private school building design in the

²⁰ Ernest Sibley, "Why I Prefer the Colonial Style," *School Board Journal*, Vol. 66, January 1923, p. 66.

District in the 1920's. The increasing city population required new school buildings, but not necessarily the largest accommodations immediately. Extensible buildings were designed as a complete composition, but were built in sections as funds became available and the surround school population demanded additional space. The extensible building addressed the problem occasioned by additions appended to earlier school buildings. In previous periods, separate buildings were constructed adjacent to older buildings, such as the Langston-Slater complex, or new additions were designed in an identical style as the original building (Harris, Wheatley, and Petworth). In other instances, compatible but not identical additions were appended to the original building (Brookland).

An example of an extensible building, the Smothers School, initially consisted of one wing. When it was expanded, a central pavilion and equally balanced second wing were added. Another example is the Key School. When first built, Key was only one story high. When an addition to Key was built, a second story was constructed. Some expansible schools were never completed. Powell and Oyster schools consist of one wing and central pavilion; the second wing on the other side of the central pavilion never was built.

The extensible buildings of the 1920's fall into three groups; the Renaissance-style rectangular block (Smothers, Kingsman, Cook), the Colonial Revival style rectangular block (Janney, Barnard), and the U-shaped courtyard (Murch). The plan for the Renaissance and the Colonial Revival styles usually called for a 16-room school with a gymnasium and assembly hall arranged in the shape of a T. The gymnasium/auditorium was located in the stem. A central portion contained the main entrance, library, teachers' room, principal's office, and first aid rooms was flanked by two wings of eight classrooms each. The alternative U-shaped courtyard plan provided for the central portion and gymnasium/auditorium at the bottom and classroom wings on either side. Even though this plan required a larger land area, the advantages of this plan included the provision of an elementary school of no more than two stories.

By the early 1920s, members of Congress involved with the public schools urged that larger school buildings be constructed in order to replace the small schoolhouses scattered around the city. The multi-million dollar Five-Year Building Program was formulated in the mid-1920's to provide funds and a schedule for a multi-building construction program. The purpose of the program was to "provide in the District of Columbia a program of schoolhouse construction which shall exemplify the best in schoolhouse planning, schoolhouse construction, and education accommodations."

Through the Five-Year Building Program, these new schools replaced part-time and oversized classes, rented structures, portables, and other undesirable facilities that had accumulated since the war. These new school buildings were constructed in areas of the District undergoing development in the 1920's. As part of the program, Municipal Architect Harris abandoned permanently the eight-room, pinwheel type of building. The typical school building contained 16 to 20 classrooms.

The Great Depression interrupted the Five-Year Building Program. Funds to complete projects already underway or to initiate new projects were not readily available. At the same time the New Deal programs of the Roosevelt Administration brought large numbers of workers to the District, greatly increasing the school population and the urgent need for new schools. Construction of Taft Junior High School, designed by Harris in 1929, was delayed until 1932 when split funding was appropriated only to begin the project. The funds necessary to complete the school were not appropriated until the following year. Although the contract for construction of Stoddert Elementary School was awarded and construction begun in 1931, the contractor was forced by financial difficulties to stop work at 58% completion the following year. This work was later completed by the bonding company. In spite of these problems 27 new schools were completed during the 1930's.

Overcrowding continued to be a problem throughout the 1930s. As had happened during World War I, older buildings that had been slated for demolition were kept in service to

meet the escalating need for classrooms. Portable buildings and swing shifts remained an unfortunate aspect of the DCPS experience. The advent of World War II in 1941 found many of the earlier problems unresolved. Eliot Junior High School, completed in 1931, received its first addition in 1935. Portable classrooms placed on the site in that year were still in place when World War II began. Kramer Junior High School was under construction when the war began in 1941. Although urgently needed, occupancy was delayed as possible use of the school to house a government agency was debated. Finally, in 1943, the War Production Board ruled that the new building could be used as a school. Priorities of the war effort were evident in the omission of metal tips for chairs and showers. Kramer was over-crowded and on swing shifts from the very beginning. This situation was not relieved until 1948. Construction of the Davis Elementary School Annex was halted in 1942 due to the war. It was resumed in 1944 and completed in 1946. The first wartime project to be completed, Davis was a modern building with large bright classrooms, air-cooling systems, an indoor playground, and a green-tiled corridor. An eight-room addition, including an auditorium and gymnasium, was added in 1948.

Albert L. Harris died in February of 1933. The Commission of Fine Arts noted in its report to Congress the following year that by working with this very able architect it had had the opportunity to establish consistently high standards for the design of municipal buildings in the District of Columbia, including schoolhouses, fire and police stations, and gasoline service stations.

The so-called Georgian style is flexible in its uses and gives the maximum of light and air. At the same time it is consonant with the architectural style used almost invariably during colonial days and even down to the 1860s in Maryland and Virginia. As a result of this decision the District buildings are simple, commodious, and of good proportion. So satisfactory is this type of architecture that it is being used throughout the country around Washington for schoolhouses, churches, banks, and residences. Appropriateness, dignity,

*simplicity, and permanence have thus been gained. Differences in use have given sufficient individuality to the structures.*²¹

Friction grew between the Commission and Congress over the expense of erecting cupolas on schoolhouses and that of adapting each school design to the unique variety of site requirements presented by differences in grade, street alignment, and other factors. After Congress demanded that the approved cupola design for Wilson High School be eliminated, the Commission commented that, “buildings may be designed without cupolas; but arbitrarily to strike a cupola off approved plans is detrimental to the architectural effect and a constant affront to those citizens who have to live near a mutilated building.”²² When finally constructed in 1935, a clock tower had replaced the cupola of the approved design.

The work of the office of the Municipal Architect was carried on after Harris’ death by a group of consultant architects who had been involved in the earlier designs. In 1934 Nathan C. Wyeth (1870-1963), one of this group, succeeded Harris as municipal architect. Wyeth had studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris (1890-1899). He began a distinguished career that included both public and private practice in 1899 as a designer in the Washington office of Carrère and Hastings. Here he worked on the designs for the ‘old’ Senate and House Office Buildings. In 1900 he joined the Office of the Supervising Architect in the Treasury Department and in 1904-05 was chief designer for the Architect of the Capitol where he again worked on the designs of the Senate and House office buildings. In 1905 he entered private practice here, working until 1908 in association with architect William Paul Cresson. His work included many prestigious private homes, the Battleship Maine Monument in Arlington Cemetery, the Tidal Basin Bridge, Key Bridge, the Old Emergency Hospital, and Columbia Hospital. During World War I he entered

²¹ Report of the Commission of Fine Arts, July 1, 1929, to December 31, 1934, pp. 79-80.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

military service, designing hospitals for the Office of the Surgeon General. Health problems resulting from his war service forced him to stop working. After recovering his health he again entered private practice (1924-34), this time with architect Francis P. Sullivan. He served as municipal architect from 1934 until his retirement in 1946.²³

Wyeth's school buildings included Coolidge (1934-37) and Wilson (1932-35) High Schools, Banneker (1939) and Jefferson (1939-40) Junior High Schools and Lafayette (1931, addition 1938) and Patterson (1945) Elementary Schools. As Municipal Architect, Wyeth designed the Municipal Building, Municipal Court, Police Court, Juvenile Court, Recorder of Deeds Building, the District of Columbia Armory, and a number of firehouses. He continued the close association with the Commission of Fine Arts that Harris had begun. His designs for schools favored the Colonial Revival style. His fine sense of proportion, massing, and siting evidenced his Beaux Arts training, although detail and vocabulary were streamlined in deference to municipal budget constraints, changing times and the influence of Modern aesthetics.

Although the system of school governance established by the Organic Act of 1906 remained in force for sixty years, it received constant criticism. Conflicts between the Congress, the Commissioners, the Board of Education, the Superintendent, and the citizens of the District of Columbia persisted throughout this period. The need for an autonomous school system responsive to the educational goals of the community was balanced against the need for a fiscally responsible, centralized administration of city services. Congressional interference was often politically motivated and was particularly difficult to accept. In the years from 1926 to 1936 support for an elected school board grew. The Federation of Citizens' Association was

among those groups lobbying for an elected Board.²⁴

The Prettyman bill of 1935 and the Blanton Amendment of 1936 proposed placing control of the Board completely in the hands of the Commissioners. African Americans, under the leadership of board member Charles Houston, strongly opposed this plan. Houston, dean of the Howard University Law School and mentor of the coming generation of civil rights lawyers, argued that the Commissioners would not give African Americans the same consideration to which they were accustomed under the existing system with proportionate representation on the Board of Education.

*There is not a single colored citizen in a position of major responsibility under the direct control of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia...Personally I am opposed to segregation because a minority group never has full equality of opportunity under a segregated system. But our Washington school system as now set up represents the nearest approach to equality of opportunity which this Country has seen and serves as a model for segregated systems the country over.*²⁵

In 1938 Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Advisory Commission on Education issued a report, which criticized Congressional control and recommended that an elected Board be established. In the absence of Home Rule, this recommendation could not be implemented. An adroit politician, Superintendent Frank Ballou capably managed the schools during the stormy period (1922-1943) in which he held office. He was succeeded by his assistant, Robert L. Haycock, who retired in 1946. During World War II all factions united behind the war effort, ending their controversies for the duration.

²³ Commission of Fine Arts, *Sixteenth Street Architecture*, Vol. 2, 1988, pp. 182-6.

²⁴ Steven J. Diner, *The Governance of Education in the District of Columbia: An Historical Analysis of Current Issues*, 1982.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 23-4.