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**Public School Buildings of Washington, D. C., 1862-1960**

consolidated in a single office and removed from the building regulation functions. Snowden Ashford, who had been appointed Building Inspector in 1901, was selected as the first Municipal Architect. 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 then fashionable collegiate Gothic and Elizabethan styles for public school buildings. The U. S. Commission of Fine Arts, established in 1910, took a broad view of its responsibilities and sought to extend City Beautiful aesthetics to the design of all public buildings in the national capital. Authorized to review District of Columbia school designs, the Commission opposed the Gothic and Elizabethan styles in favor of a uniform standard of school architecture based upon a traditional Colonial style. Ashford prevailed, designing Eastern (1921-23) and Dunbar High Schools (1914-16) in collegiate Gothic style. Central High School (1914-16) was designed by noted St. Louis school architect William B. Ittner also in collegiate Gothic style. Although the Wilson Normal School (1913) was designed in the collegiate Elizabethan style by Ashford over the Commission's protests, the members influenced the design of the Miner Normal School (1913), by Leon Dessez. The original Elizabethan style submission was changed to a robust Colonial Revival--one of the first in the city. During this period, the functions of the public schools expanded not only to educate students, but to assist them with developing skills useful in adult life, such as homemaking skills and military training. The O Street Vocational School (1912), supplemented the earlier Armstrong Manual Training Center (1902). At Dunbar and Central High Schools fine academic programs were developed preparing their graduates for admission to the most prestigious colleges and universities. Dunbar, succeeding the M Street High School, was known as the premier U. S. college preparatory school for African Americans and attracted students from all over the country.

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**IV. Property sub-type: The Office of the Municipal Architect, Albert L. Harris, 1921-34**

**Description.** The Renaissance and Colonial Revival buildings favored by Ashford's successor, Albert L. Harris are of red brick with limestone trim. Generally, they were larger buildings and were designed to be "extensible." Extensible buildings were designed as a complete composition, but were built in sections as funds were available and the surrounding 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 (Harrison, Wheatley, and Petworth). In other instances, compatible but not identical additions were appended to the original building (Brookland). Harris' extensible buildings fall into three groups: the Renaissance style rectangular block (Smothers, Kingsman, Cook), the Colonial Revival style

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classrooms on each floor, and an auditorium/gymnasium space in the basement. The additional rooms provided for kindergarten classes and for increased flexibility in the allocation of classroom spaces.

**Significance:** The period defined by the years 1897 to 1910 paralleled that of the architectural program of the federal government when a greater involvement in the design process by architects in private practice was instituted. Nearly every major architect in private practice in Washington, D. C., during this period designed at least one school building. Several architects and firms, e. g., Appleton P. Clark, Jr. and Marsh & Peter, designed several school buildings. The participation of private architects also reflected dissatisfaction with the nearly standardized red brick buildings produced by the Building Inspector's Office and a desire on the part of municipal officials to expand the design vocabulary. However, it appears that the floor plans for most buildings designed during this period were set by the Building Inspector's Office. The contributions of the private architects were focused on the exterior. These buildings also reflect the broader functions of the public schools. School buildings now required space for kindergarten classes through specially-designed rooms and community activities through the multi-purpose space of the auditorium/gymnasium. The siting of schools provided outside playground space to support vigorous physical exercises that complemented classroom instruction. The design of schools by private architects made it possible to design schools which were consistent with the more varied, high style design of new neighborhoods. These were often suburban in nature with detached houses in landscaped settings. Construction of the Armstrong (1900-02) and McKinley (1902) Manual Training Schools and Western High School (1898) demonstrate the expanded focus of the D. C. Public Schools as the Organic Act of 1906 laid the foundation for the twentieth century school system.

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**IV. Property sub-type: The Office of the Municipal Architect, Snowden Ashford, 1909-1921**

**Description:** The buildings designed during this period include the Renaissance, Elizabethan, and Gothic style buildings favored by Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford and the private architects with whom he contracted. They are of brick and are decorated with limestone and tile. The floor plans of the elementary schools are similar to those of the earlier period. The high schools and normal schools were innovative in both design and program, following the nationally acclaimed model of St. Louis architect William B. Ittner who designed Cardozo (Central) High School, the new flagship of the white schools.

**Significance:** The formation of the Municipal Architect's Office in 1909 paralleled the creation of city architecture offices in other cities. All design and construction supervision functions were

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rectangular block (Janney, Barnard), and the U-shaped courtyard (Murch). Nearly all school buildings of this period were provided with a first floor auditorium/gymnasium appendage that also served as a community facility. Some of the extensible buildings were designed with elaborate exterior and interior trim, while others were designed with sparse decorative elements.

**Significance:** Like Ashford, Albert L. Harris was a well-known figure in the city's architectural circles and supervised a design staff. Preferring the Renaissance and Colonial Revival styles, his relationship with the Commission of Fine Arts was amicable and productive. Upon his death in 1933, the Commission reported to Congress 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 stations. In 1920 Dr. Frank W. Ballou began his long career as Superintendent of D. C. Public Schools. School construction had been halted during World War I, while the school population had burgeoned. Many schools were inadequate and in poor condition. Part-time and doubled classes were common, with resulting adverse effects on educational programs and administration. In a period of extreme inflation, teachers' salaries remained low and the public schools were understaffed. An experimental junior high school had been introduced in 1919. Ballou developed this concept, taking grades 7 and 8 from the elementary schools and grade 9 from the high schools and constructing ten of these schools in the most overcrowded areas. Auditoriums, gymnasiums, expanded curriculum, and appropriate social conditions were part of the junior high program. The Teachers' Salary Act of 1924 and the Five-Year School Building Program Act of 1925 demonstrated Ballou's effectiveness in working with all parties. Fifteen new buildings, 28 classroom additions, 8 assembly hall / gymnasium additions, 26 enlarged

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playgrounds, 8 junior high schools, 4 junior high school additions, new technical and commercial high schools, and additions to 2 high schools were proposed to provide the best in schoolhouse planning and construction and educational accommodations. Harris approached this formidable task by developing a prototypical extensible Colonial Revival design which could be repeated in any possible situation and in various configurations on various sites as required. Detail was rich in historical precedent, creating the kind of harmonious urban architectural context which had been advocated by the Commission of Fine Arts. The design was embraced by both the public and the Board of Education and repeated many times over throughout the city.

**VI. Property sub-type: The Office of the Municipal Architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, 1934-46**

**Description:** The school buildings in this period include the Colonial Revival buildings designed

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by Wyeth and private architects during the 1930s and the Moderne buildings designed by Wyeth in the 1940s. The former were red brick with historically-derived limestone and painted wood detail, rubble stone basements, and hipped slate roofs with cupolas. The Adelaide Davis School, begun in 1944 and completed in 1946 followed the plan of the earlier schools, but its Moderne style with glass block corner windows, streamlined detail, flat roof and exposed architectural concrete adapted from John Earley designs were new. The Patterson School, with similar facade design, went further, violating the established two-story-only standard for elementary schools.

**Significance:** 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 École des Beaux-Arts educated Nathan C. Wyeth (1870-1963), one of this group, was named Municipal Architect. Wyeth worked with a large staff--110 in 1938. Like Harris, he was an architect of substantial reputation who worked well with the Commission of Fine Arts to design municipal buildings which would complement the buildings of the monumental core. Wyeth continued Harris' prototypical school design although the economic restraints of the Great Depression and increasing programmatic demands gradually eroded Harris' rich historical vocabulary. Wyeth's fine sense of proportion, massing, and siting evidenced his Beaux-Arts training. In the buildings he designed in the 1940s he turned to streamlined Moderne aesthetics with interior plans accommodating new educational imperatives. He is a transitional figure in public architecture, occupying a niche between Beaux-Arts formalism and International School functionalism. His work is thoughtful and creative in a time of extraordinary national crisis and change. His role in creating a sense of unity in the design of public buildings in the city during his tenure as Municipal Architect is of the utmost importance. During this period the movement for civil rights, home rule, and desegregation of the public schools gained momentum.

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**VII. Property sub-type: The Office of the Municipal Architect, Merrel A. Coe, 1946-1954**

**Description:** The buildings in this period were flat-roofed reinforced concrete structures with brick-faced concrete block and glass curtain wall construction. Architectural concrete in the style of John Earley, steel awning sash grouped in classroom bays, and other new materials enriched facades. Painted concrete block walls replaced plaster on the interiors. Design was functional, placing different activities in separate building blocks easily identified on the exterior. They often exhibited the architect's ingenuity in adapting the building type to difficult and park-related sites.

**Significance:** The fourth and last Municipal Architect, Merrel A. Coe, had a long career in the Office of the Municipal Architect, beginning in 1923 as an architectural draftsman under Albert

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I. Harris. Harris appointed Coe Chief of the Architectural Division in 1930. During World War II Coe served in the Naval Engineer Corps. Returning to his position in the Office of the Municipal Architect in October 1945, he succeeded Wyeth in August, 1946. As Municipal Architect, Coe is credited with moving school design toward a more functional, modern style. Except for the design of Spingarn High School there was no post-war return to the Colonial Revival. Coe admired the work of Paul R. Cret who was architect of several major buildings in the monumental core and who served on the Commission of Fine Arts from 1940-1945. Coe's modern classical style was influenced by Cret and was more formal than Wyeth's early 1940s Moderne style. In schools like Birney, Nalle, Simon, and Walker Jones--all completed in 1950--there is a dominantly formal entrance with bilaterally symmetrical facade composition. The schools of this period were often built on difficult sites shared with parks. Like earlier schools, they were extensible through the addition of wings or additional stories. Most were built in African American neighborhoods in an attempt to relieve overcrowding in Division 2 schools as Washington became a majority African American city and lawsuits leading to the Supreme Court decision desegregating public schools.

**VIII. The Office of Design and Engineering / Architects in Private Practice, 1954-1960**

**Description.** The buildings in this period were designed in the International Style and were typically flat-roofed reinforced concrete structures with brick-faced concrete block and glass curtain wall construction. Prefabricated panels of architectural concrete and colorful ceramic tile, aluminum sun screens enriched facades. Design was functional, placing different activities in separate building blocks easily identified on the exterior. Functional elements were often volumetrically massed. Entrances were human-scaled, relating the school to the community.

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These buildings often exhibited the architect's ingenuity in adapting the building type to difficult and park-related sites.

**Significance.** The Office of the Municipal Architect was eliminated in 1954 and its functions placed under the new Department of Buildings and Grounds with Coe now designated Supervising Architect of the Design and Engineering Section. A new cost-effective policy was adopted of contracting with private Architect-Engineers for designs, plans, and specifications formerly prepared by the Office of the Municipal Architect. Control of and responsibility for this work was still clearly with the Supervising Architect. After Coe retired, in 1956, the Commission of Fine Arts became increasingly concerned by the quality of school design produced under the new system. The work of the Office of Design and Engineering had now more clearly evolved from design to contract administration, planning, inspection, and

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supervision. Private architects-engineers were furnished design manuals. The respected Office of the Municipal Architect, like that of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury which it paralleled, was obsolete. After Coe's retirement there was no longer an attempt to coordinate school building design with that of the city's monumental core. Sensitive to the charge of "warehouse" schools, yet striving to accommodate large student populations, private architects used contemporary residential style and other design devices at the entrances to soften the effect of large classroom blocks in small-scale neighborhoods. Fieldstone garden walls, colorful glazed tile panels, aluminum sun-screens, projecting asymmetrical concrete entrance canopies, and at-grade entrances clearly demarcating student and public entrances were typically used. Unlike nineteenth century school design, few of these schools were consistent with the design of their residential neighborhoods which were usually older and often eclectic. They did, however, identify with their neighborhoods through scale and public facilities. Unification of the dual school system brought enormous problems in administration, supervision, teaching, and programs. Construction of new buildings and additions to older buildings to relieve overcrowding in neighborhood schools was a priority. The Amidon plan, introduced to improve the quality of education, received national attention.

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**G. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA:** The properties recommended for inclusion in the multiple property documentation form are located in all four quadrants of the District of Columbia.

**H. SUMMARY OF IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATION METHODS:**  
(Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.)

This multiple property listing for the Public School Buildings of Washington, D. C. has been prepared using data gathered and evaluation methods developed in a three-phase survey funded with D. C. Historic Preservation Office sub-grant assistance from the Historic Preservation Fund of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

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**D. C. Public Schools Survey, Phase I:** The initial phase consisted of a two-year survey of public school buildings constructed in the District of Columbia between 1864 and 1930. The sponsor of the project, the D. C. Public Schools, intended that the survey would lead to a publication in 1988 which would initiate the process of educating the public about the District's older school buildings and about their nomination potential. The survey method followed the evolution of the administration of the municipal architecture program, from the Office of the Building Inspector to the Municipal Architect's Office. These institutions represent a centralized administration for the design and construction of schoolhouses, firehouses, recreational facilities, police stations, and municipal hospitals. Understanding the centralized administration would aid with defining periods in the development of municipal architecture. An individual building could be evaluated according to how well it reflected its period. With only a handful of articles on the Municipal Architect's Office and annual reports of the District of Columbia Commissioners, it was difficult to gain insight into questions of administration and architectural design. The decision was made to trace a single building type from its beginning to an arbitrary concluding date well into the twentieth century. The schoolhouse emerged as a prime subject for study because it was an essential building type over the entire history of the city. It also was a building type that could be studied in a local context of the development of communities in the district and of Washington architecture. The local context also included unique factors that set the District's schools apart from those in other urban centers. On a national scale, District schools could be studied for their embodiment of national trends in architectural styles; educational facilities; technical systems for heating, ventilating, and lighting systems, and floor plans. The documentation effort was conducted as a thematic historic sites survey and the results integrated into the city-wide effort to identify properties worthy of historical designation.

The schools selected for this project span the time period from the earliest survivals of the 1860s to 1930. The latter date was selected because it incorporated a manageable number of school

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buildings. Moving the date forward to 1945 would have included more buildings than could be handled as part of a two-year, part-time effort. The time period between 1930 and 1945 witnessed a large increase in the number of residents necessary to handle the demands of the Great Depression and World War II. The population rise caused dozens of new schools to be constructed during this period. It was recommended that the District school buildings constructed during 1930 to 1945 should be studied at some time in the future in a manner comparable with those of the earlier period.

For each of the school buildings studied as part of the survey process, three types of documentation were compiled: written, visual, and photographic. Written documentation includes articles that appeared in the Evening Star and other Washington newspapers; articles

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that were published in architectural, trade, and historical journals; contract records of the Old Engineer Department; and citations in the reports of the school systems governing boards and special commissions. Visual records include surviving architectural drawings under the control of the D. C. Department of Public Works, old photographs of the school buildings available in the archives of the D. C. Public Schools, and notes made during an on-site physical inspection of the building. For each of the schools, new photographs were made. For most of the buildings, all four facades were photographed as were a typical classroom, typical corridor, and significant spaces, such as an auditorium, a gymnasium, and a library. The written and visual documentation was recorded on survey forms developed for this project. These forms and much of their supporting research are on file at the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives for use by researchers. Some of the D. C. Department of Public Works' architectural drawings have been copied and are available for study.

As part of the two-year study, a publication was proposed based on the survey. The publication was to serve several purposes. The first was to produce a record of the project so that a distillation of the survey information would be available to the largest possible audience. The audience is diverse, ranging from members of the public interested in school buildings to scholars engaged in research on Washington or school building architecture. The second purpose of this publication would address possible constituencies interested in the preservation of historic school buildings. In order for individual and groups of school buildings to make their way through the historic preservation review process, ideally they should receive the support of local residents as well as preservation specialists knowledgeable about the criteria for historical designation. Although D. C. Public Schools funding constraints prevented publication of this book, the material gathered has been useful to both public and scholars.

**D. C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS SURVEY, PHASE II:** Phase II followed the Phase I recommendation that the buildings constructed in the period 1930-1945 be studied at some future

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time. The sponsor of this phase, the Historical Society of Washington, D. C. (HSW), carried out the work from 10-01-97 through 09-30-98 as part of a larger HSW project entitled "Growing up in Washington." Phase II followed the same survey methods employed in Phase I and described above. In consultation with the DCSHPO staff, it was decided that using essentially the same survey forms developed in Phase I would assure consistency of the data. Unlike Phase I, this survey did not include inspection or photographing of interior spaces. It *did* include documentation of demolished buildings and initiation of a social history of the schools with an archival and oral history component. Archival photographs of schools exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 were copied as part of the project.

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**D. C. Public Schools Survey, Phase III:** This phase followed the Phase II format, extending the period of significance to buildings constructed between 1945 and 1960. The oral history project, historical bibliography, and social history components of Phase II demonstrated that this would be a necessary and profitable extension of the study. The survey form developed in Phase I and modified for Phase II was used for the sake of consistency although it was difficult to use in recording the modern buildings of the post-war period. It was found that the existing drawings of D. C. Public Schools had been copied on microfiche and were available on a limited basis in the Engineering Archives of the newly-organized Capitol Construction Services Administration. National Register nominations were prepared for five of the most endangered older schoolhouses. The nomination of the Thaddeus Stevens School was submitted earlier because of the urgency of the situation. Nominations of the Alexander Crummell, Military Road, William Syphax, and Daniel Webster Elementary Schools are submitted with this multiple property nomination. It is hoped that this multiple-property nomination document with criteria for judging significance and specific recommendations for protection will provide an objective guide for the preservation of endangered school buildings.

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U. S. Commission of Fine Arts

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