
**DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**

DECISION

**MILITARY ROAD SCHOOL
(1375 Missouri Avenue, NW)
Case No. 98-3**

After careful consideration of the designation application and supporting materials, including testimony given in a public hearing on July 23, 1998, the Historic Preservation Review Board hereby designates the Military Road School at 1375 Missouri Avenue, NW, a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and recommends its listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

General Characteristics

The Military Road School is a free-standing, 2-1/2-story red brick public school building situated on the north side of Missouri Avenue (formerly Military Road), NW, about a block and a half west of Georgia Avenue. The main building block is a long rectangle parallel to the street, with a central entrance porch and rear stair projection creating a shallow cross in plan. The hipped roof is slate, with an octagonal cupola, gently flared slope, and wide overhanging eaves supported on scrolled rafters. Above the entrance porch, which is supported on six wooden Doric columns, is a Palladian window set within an arched stucco surround. Smaller windows to the side of this central feature are enhanced by decorative stucco panels and limestone trim. There is also a series of carved swags on the stone lintel above the main entrance doors.

The flanking classroom wings are denoted by the large banks of multi-paned windows, with paneled brick spandrels. There are two classrooms on each floor flanking the central stair hall, and because the building is one room deep, the classrooms are bounded by exterior walls on three sides. Interestingly, however, each classroom has windows on only two sides--those to the right of the entrance at the front and side, and those to the left of the entrance at the side and rear. This reversed window arrangement would have maintained the standard classroom layout with daylight coming from the left--as would be preferable for the majority of right-handed writers. On the exterior, this lends an unusual asymmetry to both front and rear facades, where recessed brick panels on one side balance the window banks on the other.

The building is set on a high basement, which contained boys' and girls' playrooms, with side entrances to the adjacent playgrounds. The site is now surrounded by a high chain link fence, and there is a mobile classroom and metal fire stair attached to the rear. There is also some deterioration and need for repair, but overall the building retains a high degree of integrity, with its original form and materials largely intact.

Historical Background

For the city's first half century, the education of black Washingtonians was left to private means, even though by taxation the city's free black population simultaneously contributed to the support of the public schools from which they were for the most part excluded. In 1807, the first schoolhouse for black children was built by three former slaves. During the following decades a host of private schools, run by churches, relief societies, missionaries, and individual teachers, both black and white, provided the substitute for public education. The demand for these schools was so extensive that at the end of the war, it could be reported that various relief organizations ran 40

schools with 72 teachers educating nearly 4,000 students. Nonetheless, while many of these schools strove to provide free education, most suffered from a shortage of resources, and many failed for lack of funds.

By 1862, Congress passed an act requiring that 10% of the taxes collected from persons of color in Washington and Georgetown be set apart for the purpose of initiating a public system of primary schools for the education of their children. The administration of this fund was initially given to the existing public school Board of Trustees, but almost immediately thereafter Congress established a separate Board of Trustees of Colored Schools for Washington and Georgetown. For two years this inadequate source of funding permitted the hiring of only a single teacher, and no building construction. By 1864, Congress provided that a share of *all* school funds raised in the District be at the disposal of the Trustees of Colored Schools, proportional to the representation of the race in the total population. This provision was evidently more a matter of law than practice, and it continued to occasion further interposition by Congress, but at least it represented for the disadvantaged minority the hopeful beginnings of a permanent and stable system of public education. The 1871-72 Annual Report of the Superintendent of Colored Schools of Washington and Georgetown reflects this aspiration:

It is seen that there have been schools in the District for the instruction of colored children during the last sixty-nine years. This time covers two distinct general periods: the pay and the free-school period. The former embraces more than a half century. Though its main work in this community has been finished and, in part, recorded, its spirit still largely controls the present. The courage and success evinced by the colored population during this period, in its great and persistent struggles with poverty and oppression, in securing for itself and posterity the benefits of education, fully tested the capabilities of the race both to acquire and to control. The latter period, which began in 1862, is current, and . . . writes progress upon each succeeding year.

The location of the Military Road School at this site is significant, since it is the successor to a frame public schoolhouse that was among the first handful of Civil War era schools built in 1864 and 1865 to serve the great influx of freedmen into the capital city. Many refugees sought protection under the watch of the military, and settlements grew quickly around the city's forts. Directly under the gaze of Fort Stevens, on donated land, this site became the location for one of the city's first half dozen public schools for African-Americans.

The outline of the original schoolhouse is shown on the construction plans for the present building, which replaced it in 1912. This more substantial building (designed in 1911) was among the first projects executed by the office of Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford. Early in his career, Ashford had been employed under Supervising Architect of the Treasury Alfred B. Mullett, and under John Smithmeyer, co-architect of the Library of Congress. He became the District's Assistant Inspector of Buildings in 1895, and Inspector in 1901. Ashford served as Municipal Architect from 1909, when the office was created, until 1921.

The office of Municipal Architect was responsible for preparing plans and supervising construction of all municipal buildings. The office was similar to those being established in other cities, and reflects the general attention being given during the City Beautiful era to elevating the standards of public architecture. The establishment of the Commission of Fine Arts in 1910 is a further example of this trend; with creation of the Commission, the design of public schools also passed review by the most respected members of the architectural profession.

The design of the building is not elaborate, and it was apparently to be expanded later with additional classrooms and an assembly hall to the rear, which were never built. Stylistic influences on the design include the Italian Renaissance, Classical Revival, and Arts and Crafts. Despite its modest size, ordinary materials, and limited embellishment, however, the building exemplifies the skill with which architects of the period created a dignified and often elegant public image using the simplest of means. This emphasis on quality of public architecture is also evident in the high standard of construction the building exhibits.

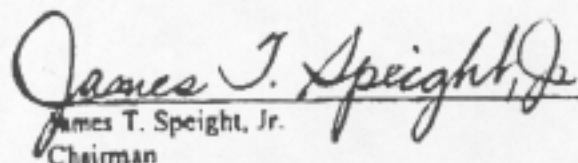
For many years the Military Road School served as the only school available to African-American students in a large area of upper Northwest. Oral testimony also documents that the School served as a symbolic social and community center for residents in the area. With public school desegregation, it was closed in 1954, and it has been used for various public and education activities since that time.

Designation

The Review Board hereby designates the Military Road School and its site as a historic landmark in the D.C. Inventory, and recommends its nomination to the National Register, for the following reasons:

- Built on the site of one of the city's first public schools built for freedmen, the Military Road School retains its historical connection with the struggle by African-Americans to secure the benefits of public education (HPRB Criteria A1 and A2; National Register Criterion A);
- Situated under the view of Fort Stevens, on the old military transport road, and now adjacent to the greensward of park lands connecting the Civil War forts, the school records the historic presence of Washington's African-American refugee settlements and their interdependence with the military landscape (HPRB Criteria A1 and A2; NR Criterion A);
- Designed by the office of Municipal Architect, and reviewed by the Commission of Fine Arts, the school was among the first of Washington's public school buildings to be produced under this newly instituted system of municipal design, thus reflecting the attempts to enhance the quality of public architecture throughout the city during the City Beautiful era (HPRB Criterion A3; NR Criterion C);
- The building is a fine representative example of a small neighborhood public school, which particularly reflects the influence of programmatic requirements on architectural design (HPRB Criterion A3; NR Criterion C);
- The building is a fine representative example the work of locally significant architect Snowden Ashford (HPRB Criterion A4; NR Criterion C); and,
- The property possesses sufficient integrity to convey the values and qualities for which it is judged significant, and sufficient time has passed since it was constructed to permit professional evaluation in its historic context (HPRB Criteria B and C; NR Criteria of Integrity).

In addition, the Review Board notes that the site may contain important archaeological evidence related to the original school occupying the site, although the likelihood of this evidence has not been evaluated; if present, such evidence could constitute an additional reason for designation (HPRB Criterion A5; NR Criterion D).


James T. Speight, Jr.
Chairman

July 23, 1998