

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: HISTORIC SCHOOLS IN WASHINGTON, D.C:
PRESERVING A RICH HERITAGE

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Directed By: Professor Donald W. Linebaugh, PhD

Struggles for racial equality in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere have often taken place in the public school arena, even after school segregation was abolished. Public schools anchored their communities, turned children into citizens, acted as a social equalizer by assimilating generations of immigrants, and ultimately integrated African Americans into full membership in American society. Given how much public schools contributed to the cohesiveness of the nation, and Washington, D.C. in particular, it is alarming to see how neglected historic schools have become. This study is an attempt to raise awareness of the rich history of these structures and to offer recommendations on how to deal with their use and care so these irreplaceable resources can remain part of the communities they served. Once historic resources are gone, they can never be replaced and too often the preservation of important school buildings succumbs to short term goals and financial crises. More consistent policies are required that recognize and respect the important heritage of Washington, D.C.'s historic schools.

HISTORIC SCHOOLS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.:
PRESERVING A RICH HERITAGE
HISP 700 Final Project

By

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Introduction

Promote then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened.

George Washington Farewell Address, 1796

In 2006, the *Washington Post* published an article about the disposition of the Franklin School (Figure 1) at 13th and K streets northwest, which had become eligible to be sold after being declared surplus city property.¹ The article discusses at length the conflict between then Mayor Anthony A. Williams, the D.C. Council, and the D.C. attorney general's office regarding the legal ramifications of selling the school to a developer. Nowhere in the article is it mentioned that the Franklin School, a National Historic Landmark and 1869 masterpiece by the architect Adolf Cluss, was once the finest school in the city, a showcase for the capital of a reunited nation. This is how a contemporary described the Franklin School:

“The Franklin School, in its elevated and prominent location, grand proportions, and architectural characteristics, became at once one of the sites of the capital city. General Francis A. Walker [a prominent educator ed.] said that whenever he passed that noble American public school-house he turned to look and felt like lifting his hat in token of respect; and even today, more than a quarter of a century after its dedication, the intelligent guide in making the rounds of the capital city to show to tourists its chief attractions, as he drives along Franklin park halts and points with pride to the Franklin [S]chool.”²

Unfortunately, framing the discussion about historic schools in strictly economic terms

¹ Labbe, Theola S. “Legality of Deal to Turn Shelter Into Hotel Questioned.” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2006. Proquest, www.proquest.com, retrieved April 8, 2008.

² Wilson, 142.

is a great disservice to the citizens of Washington, D.C., who, lacking information about the importance of historic buildings like the Franklin School, are denied the opportunity to participate in discussions of their future. The lack of historic context and appropriate procedures can lead to situations such as this one, reported in the *Washington Post*:

Preservationist Jerry Maronek has had to move quickly in his efforts to save a classic, century-old school building in downtown Washington. Tipped off in late December that a demolition permit was being sought for a school at 10th and H streets NW, he and other D.C. Preservation League members rushed to prepare a detailed landmark application in less than 48 hours. Maronek then raced downtown on December 22 to file the papers before the demolition permit was signed.³

The school in question, the Webster School (Figure 2) built in 1882, is a prime example of the simple brick school once common in Washington, D.C. neighborhoods. It served its immigrant community well and in the 1920s became a so-called Americanization school where foreign born children were taught the English language, and American geography and history to hasten their assimilation into American culture. None of this was considered when the demolition permit was issued, but fortunately in this case the demolition was halted and the school was nominated to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. This case shows the challenges of dealing with historic schools in Washington, D.C. in general and the *ad-hoc* nature of deliberations about the fate of buildings no longer needed for their intended purpose. It often takes a crisis or impending demolition to mobilize the historic preservation community (in this case the D.C. Preservation League) to act, and not always successfully.

³ Wheeler, Linda. "Group Wants Historic School Spared." *Washington Post*, February 25, 1999. Proquest, www.proquest.com, retrieved April 10, 2008.



*Figure 1. The Franklin School, 1876.
Photograph by Alexander Gardner. Charles Sumner Museum and Archives.*

The stated mission of District of Columbia Public Schools system (DCPS) is to educate the children of the District of Columbia and manage its facilities to achieve this goal. Management of surplus historic schools is clearly subordinate to its principal mission as the public is generally not sympathetic to spending scarce funds to maintain old school buildings. Enrollment in D.C. public schools has been decreasing for several decades putting pressure on school budgets: few new schools have been built and old schools are suffering from delayed maintenance. To deal with the increasing numbers of excess schools, the DCPS has tried to consolidate its facilities by closing schools and consolidating its facilities.



Figure 2. Webster School.
Photograph by author, February 2008.

Two studies commissioned in 2006 by the DCPS, the *Master Education Plan*⁴ and the *Facilities Master Plan*⁵, attempted to deal with the dual problems of low performance and excess capacity.

According to the Master Plan, the District of Columbia Public School system operates 147 schools with an average life of 63 years. Of these, 14 were built before 1910, 26 were built between 1910 and 1929, and 35 between 1930 and 1949; all these schools are potentially eligible for listing on the National Register. The *Master Facilities Plan* recommends that 3 to 4 million square feet of school space be consolidated by the end of 2009 with 33 schools to be closed or integrated into other institutions. New schools are

⁴ DCPS 2006 Master Education Plan available at <http://www.k12.dc.us/master.htm>.

⁵ DCPS 2006 Master Facilities Plan available at <http://www.k12.dc.us/facilities.htm>.

projected to be built with modern facilities, replacing old schools that are slated for demolition. The plan also proposes that some of the excess space be allocated to administrative offices rather than sold to private entities. This decision was prompted by public opposition to disposal of city property and the need for flexibility to allow buildings to be used as schools again when the number of school children increases in the future. However, the school system already has excess inventory that is currently unused and future plans for consolidation also include substantial personnel cuts. The combination of additional inventory and fewer administrative employees suggests that the school system will have to maintain empty facilities, protect them from being vandalized, and allocate funds for stabilization. If the past is any guide, this will be done reluctantly and only when the condition of the building is threatened. While respecting the mission of DCPS and understanding that historic preservation is a secondary concern, the public cannot afford to see its heritage destroyed by institutional indifference and neglect. Washington, D.C. is not only the capital of the United States, it is also one of the most important African American cities in the nation. Washington's African Americans were once the best educated in the country and many became prominent professionals with Howard University at the center of black intellectual life. Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston who argued *Brown v. Board of Education* at the United States Supreme Court were products of Washington's segregated public schools. The destruction of African American sites, including schools, amounts to a repudiation of history.

The purpose of this report is to raise awareness of potentially irreplaceable losses and to make recommendations about how the system can change to promote more transparency and find better solutions. Historic schools are public resources, built with public funds for

public purposes. Therefore, their preservation should involve the participation of the public and should not be the exclusive purview of the DCPS.

Methodology

This project germinated from a spreadsheet compiled by Mr. Hayden Wetzel and disseminated to members of the D.C. Preservation League. The spreadsheet documented all the public schools in Washington older than 50 years, their physical condition, ownership, and current function. I surveyed and took pictures of about 30 to 40 of the most endangered structures on the list and decided to use several for my case studies based on criteria of historic and architectural significance. The actual research was conducted at the Sumner Archives, the Library of Congress, and the University of Maryland libraries. The Annual Reports of the Board of Trustees from 1850 and later were invaluable, as were the vertical files at the Sumner archives. A binder containing the maintenance information for a majority of public schools and when they were closed or transferred was also of great help. I also researched the history of public schools in the United States and Washington and school architecture in general. The Sumner Archives was also invaluable for the research of individual schools and their history. The information so gathered helped me formulate my conclusions and recommendations.

Organization

This document is organized in six chapters. The first chapter traces the history of public school education in Washington, D.C. and the difficulty of African Americans to gain access to quality education. The second chapter discusses the evolution of school architecture in Washington, D.C. from simple frame buildings to the large schools of the 20th century. The third chapter analyzes several cases of adaptive reuse of historic schools. The fourth chapter

discusses several vacant schools and their historic or architectural significance. The chapter makes an implicit case for preservation and designation to the National Register or the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. Chapter five analyzes the current municipal policies for disposing of excess or surplus schools and their deficiencies. The final chapter draws conclusions and makes recommendations about changing the regulatory system to avoid demolition by neglect and encourage preservation.

Chapter 1: Brief History of Public Schools in Washington, D.C.

Schools for all; good enough for the richest, cheap enough for the poorest.

Motto of the Board of Trustees under J. Ormond Wilson⁶

In 1805, just one year after Washington, D.C. got its charter, the City Council passed a law “for the establishment and superintendence of schools.”⁷ Later in the same year, an act establishing the administrative infrastructure for the school system and a board of elected trustees was passed. As President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson was instrumental in drafting the public education plan for the newly chartered City of Washington. Like all founding fathers, Jefferson firmly believed that only an educated citizenry can preserve the freedoms earned at great costs by the Revolution and while governor of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson had introduced Bill 79 (1779) *For the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*,⁸ an early ideal for universal public education. The bill called for free education for all children for three years and scholarships for top students who could not afford further education. The plan was never implemented and although defeated, Jefferson remained interested in education and championed the City of Washington plan—he was a trustee and the first president of the board, although he was unable to carry out his duties owing to his main duties as President.

The source of funding for schools was an attempt at public finance, similar to the experience of New England states: “taxes on slaves and dogs and of licenses for carriages and hacks, ordinaries and taverns retailing wines and spirituous liquors, billiard tables,

⁶ Wilson, 136.

⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁸ Kinsman, 23.

theatrical and other amusements, hawkers and peddlers, as the trustees might decide to be necessary for the education of the poor of the city, not to exceed the sum of \$1,500 per annum.” Funds were also solicited from charitable donations, of which Thomas Jefferson was the largest contributor at \$200.⁹

Initially, two one-room schools were established, and poor children attended for two years free of charge learning reading, writing, arithmetic and the Bible. Black children were not included in the legislation and had to wait until 1862 when slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia. In 1811, the first Lancasterian school (Figure 3) was founded in Washington, D.C. Started in England by Joseph Lancaster, the Lancasterian system consisted of older students (called monitors) teaching a large group of younger students, usually charity students; the monitors in turn were supervised by a principal. The



*Figure 3. Old Lancasterian School
This is not the actual 1811 school but of the era. (Source: DCPS Photo Gallery, www.k12.dc.us)*

⁹ Wilson., 122.

Lancasterian system was more efficient and less expensive and therefore less financially taxing to a school system constantly in need of funds.¹⁰ The monitors kept order through a system of rewards and punishment. The system survived well into the 19th century.

The ideal of free education confronted the harsh realities of trying to fund it. The early plan to tax services and vices was supplanted by a lottery to benefit schools and later was replaced by a tax on assessable property on the New England model. However, as the population did not increase considerably, the tax was not sufficient to finance the public schools and the scramble for funds continued. As late as 1846, the total number of students in public schools (both paying and free) totaled 668.¹¹

On April 16, 1862 slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia and the last obstacle to educate black children was removed. By an act of Congress, public schools for black children were finally established with a separate board of trustees that functioned parallel to the board of trustees for white schools. An additional tax was levied to pay for new schools but the huge influx of population brought by the Civil War left the system unable to cope. In 1870, The Board of Trustees reported that 6,233 white children and 2,689 black children attended public schools compared to only 2,048 total in 1853.¹² A special levy was imposed to pay for new schools and funds were appropriated to acquire land and build new schools.

Between 1871 and 1873 during the territorial form of government, the powerful Board

¹⁰ From the 1815 Board of Trustees Report: “[T]he Treasurer has only \$47 in his hands to meet all the current demands for the support of the schools in the city, and many old accounts remain unpaid...Mr. Wallis, the late teacher of the Eastern Free School, has taught one year and received only one quarter’s salary.” quoted by Samuel At Lee, 13.

¹¹ Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools to the City Councils, August 24, 1846, 23.

¹² Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools from 1854 and 1870.

of Public Works and its architect, Adolf Cluss, embarked on an ambitious program of public improvements that almost bankrupted the city. During this time many public buildings, including modern public schools were built, streets were graded, and the city was beautified with parks and trees. In 1874 Congress took over the debts and the financial affairs of the city and abolished Home Rule. The school system underwent several reorganizations with the black and white schools operating separately in a segregated system. Having its own superintendent gave the black school system a lot of control over its own schools. The independence of the black superintendent was curtailed in the early 1900s and culminated with the Organic Act of 1906, when Congress again restructured the schools and sublimated school authority to the Board of Education. The superintendents for white and African American schools were consolidated under a single superintendent, with two assistant superintendents in charge of the two systems. Many African Americans in the District were disappointed by the change which they considered an infringement on their freedom to control their own schools. School segregation lasted until 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Bolling v. Sharpe* that school segregation was unconstitutional. Washington public schools started the long and tortuous process of school integration.

Despite integration, the Washington, D.C. public schools have been chronically underfunded and underperforming. The crisis was severe enough that in 1995 the U.S. Congress mandated a Financial Control Board to take over the public schools, a situation that persisted until 2000. Only recently has the District of Columbia government made a commitment to improve the schools and increase the quality of public education.

The Education of African American Children

The first school for free black children was opened in Washington by three freedmen as it was against the law to teach enslaved people to read and write. No more than 25 or 30 private schools existed in the District before 1862.¹³ Some of the schools were founded by northerners, the most notable of whom was Myrtilla Miner, a Quaker from New York state. She opened her school in 1851 to prepare young black girls to become teachers; six of her pupils went on to open schools of their own. There was a lot of opposition to Miner's school and she had to move several times to escape threats on her life. She barely escaped with her life when in 1857 her house was set on fire. This was not the first time that protests erupted against the schooling of black children. After the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia, black schoolhouses were demolished, books and furniture destroyed and it was only the intervention of President Andrew Jackson that restored order.¹⁴

Slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia in 1862. It is estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 slaves, came to the District of Columbia to escape their conditions; most of these refugees from the South had never had any schooling. In 1864 Congress mandated that the same amount per capita be provided for the education of African Americans and white children. Schools were funded by taxes on assessable property and a separate Board of Trustees for black schools under the supervision of the Secretary of the Interior was appointed. Taxes collected, however, were not sufficient to support the black school system. To redress the problem, Congress mandated the District of Columbia to allocate a portion of

¹³ Dodge, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, 5.

all real estate taxes collected for the education of black children. There was a lot of resistance to the change and ultimately Congress had to change the administrative system to force the change.

The dual system—separate black and white school systems each reporting to a superintendent—lasted through several administrative reorganizations. African Americans felt that being under the supervision of the Department of the Interior allowed them independence and control over the school system. Although supervision was transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Board of Commissioners in 1874, the black school system maintained its relative independence until the 1906 Organic Act when the management of the schools was given to a Superintendent with two assistant superintendents reporting to him: one for white schools and one for black schools. The African American community was not happy with this change—they felt that the needs of the black schools would be subordinate to the white schools and that equality of education would be even more difficult to attain.

The history of public schools in Washington, D.C. followed the growth of the city itself from a backward southern village to the capital of a powerful nation. The themes that are weaved with this history are equal education for all (first for girls then for African Americans) and the constant struggle with Congress to fund the city's needs. As non-voting citizens, Washingtonians received scant attention from Congress and constant meddling in its affairs leaving residents feeling powerless and resentful.

Chapter 2: School Architecture in Washington, D.C.

No nobler field for effort exists for an architect than to design a public school building.

The American School Board Journal, January 1926

In 1806, two schools, each one story high and measuring 50 feet long by 20 feet wide, were erected in Washington. The Eastern Free School was located at Third and D streets southwest and the Western Free School was located at 17th and I streets northwest. The two schools were supplemented with schools held in basements of churches and one even operated in Thomas Jefferson's former stable at 14th and G streets northwest.¹⁵ Because of slow population growth and insufficient funds for school construction classes continued to be held in rented buildings where teachers, themselves barely out of school, taught all pupils in one room. In 1812, Congress authorized lotteries to benefit a "school fund" that was used to build and maintain schools in Washington, D.C. The system of selling lottery tickets to fund schools was used until the 1880s with fourteen drawings held between 1812 and 1888.¹⁶

Mayor W.W. Seaton, who was elected in 1840, made public education a priority during his administration. By the time he came to office, public education was held in low regard because of its association with "pauper" or "charity" students as affluent students attended private schools. It was evident that funding sources were insufficient for a quality public education. Seaton proposed the New England system of taxing assessable property and the abolition of tuition for wealthy students. It was not until 1858 that the charter of the city was amended to allow levying of property taxes to finance public schools. Seaton also tried to

¹⁵ "Early Schools of District Had Precarious Existence", *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1913. ProQuest, www.proquest.com, retrieved 20 March 2008.

¹⁶ Wilson, 125.

pass reforms pioneered by the New England educator Horace Mann who advocated better and more sanitary school buildings, state aid for schools, normal schools to train teachers, and a centralized management system. Another contemporary reformer, the educator and architect Henry Barnard, was influential in changing perceptions about school architecture and learning. He associated good school construction, including proper ventilation and heating, good lighting, large classrooms and comfortable desks, with a quality education. Bernard's book *School Architecture*, first published in 1838 and improved over the years, was a pattern book, treatise on education, and how-to manual in one. It is of interest to note that his linkage between superior school architecture and learning has remained part of the discourse to this day.

The ideas of Mann and Barnard had a noticeable effect on Washington, D.C.'s administrators; the school system was divided into four districts in the 1850s with a centralized Board of Trustees; one two-room school was erected in each of the four districts, furniture and equipment were upgraded and grades were introduced. Congress, however, was unwilling to provide funds for additional school construction despite repeated pleas from the board of trustees. As late as 1857, classes were still held in church basements and rented houses. In 1858 after years of unsuccessfully lobbying the federal government for funds, the city amended its charter to tax real estate to support free public education. A portion of the taxes was reserved to buy land and build new schools.

As the Civil War ravaged the country, construction continued on the United States Capitol and new modern schools despite shortages of labor and materials.

The end of the Civil War began a new era in school construction. The public became committed to public education and demanded better schools. In addition, the federal

government wanted to project its power and showcase Washington, D.C. as the capital of a great Republic. The population of the District almost doubled from 1860 to 1870 owing to an influx of freed slaves from the south as well as northerners. The need for services and infrastructure became acute.

In 1862, an architectural and engineering firm was retained to develop plans for the Wallach School, a new multi-class school that would occupy an entire square in the Capitol Hill district (Figure 6). The choice of the firm was fortuitous. Adolf Cluss, a German socialist was a firm believer in universal education, secular schools, and professional training for teachers. Cluss was familiar with Barnard's theories, but was inclined towards more functional designs, industrial materials, and modern heating and ventilation. The Wallach School was designed as a ten-room building with separate rooms for boys and girls, and a large auditorium for community events. The school was dedicated on July 4, 1864 with great fanfare and pomp. In 1870 Cluss was appointed Chief of Bureau of Buildings for the City of Washington and from 1871 to 1874 he served as Inspector of Buildings on the powerful Board of Public Works under Alexander "Boss" Shepherd during the territorial government.¹⁷

Washington, D.C. had suffered greatly from the effects of the Civil War. An increase in the District population from 75,080 in 1860 to 131,700 in 1870 (Appendix 1)—including many Southern blacks—severely stressed municipal services. When the Civil War ended, Washington's infrastructure showed the ill effects of disinvestment and neglect from Congress. Washington was such an embarrassment to Congress (not in small measure due to its own failure to finance the city's development) that as late as 1868 Congress was

¹⁷ Lessof and Mauch, 171

considering a motion to move the capital to a Midwestern city.¹⁸ Clearly, the city had to take action to prevent this. Spending on infrastructure, public buildings and schools started during the administration of Mayor Richard Wallach (1861-1868) and continued during the territorial government under the stewardship of Alexander Shepherd who vowed to transform Washington into a capital worthy of a newly reunited nation. As Inspector of Buildings, Cluss put his imprimatur on the architecture of Washington, D.C. building schools, public buildings, and infrastructure.¹⁹

The construction of the Franklin School in 1869 (Figure 1) reflected the new commitment to public education in the city and the nation at large. Built on a prominent site at 13th and K streets northwest near the White House, the Franklin School was to be the flagship school of the new school system.

The Franklin School was a brick-masonry building comprised of three structurally independent bays linked by stairs and corridors. Boys and girls were taught separately in the end units which had separate entrances. The center bay was reserved for a library, administrative offices, Office of the Superintendent, and the Board of Trustees. Cluss created spacious classrooms with views of Franklin Park and used the best materials to create a visually stunning structure. Borrowing from Mann and Barnard, Cluss understood that learning is encouraged by beautiful surroundings, good ventilation, and no distractions from the outside. J. Ormond Wilson, superintendent of the Washington public schools between 1870 and 1885, wrote:

¹⁸ I Bryan, Wilhelmus Bogart. "A History of the National Capital, Volume II: 1815-1878". New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, pg. 567.

¹⁹ Some of Cluss' buildings still standing include the Smithsonian Arts and Industries building on the National Mall, Eastern Market on Capitol Hill, the Masonic Temple at F and 9th Street NW and Calvary Baptist Church at 777 Eighth St NW.

It [the Franklin School] richly repaid its cost in lifting the public school system to its proper place in the estimation of the public. The pernicious idea of charity schools for poor children, on which the system was founded and which hitherto clung to its seemingly insuperable tenacity, disappeared at once and forever.”²⁰

The Franklin School was so popular that enrollment outstripped the available space from the beginning. In 1873 it housed the first normal school (in addition to regular school) to train professional teachers.

Cluss went on to build six more schools in Washington, each built on modern principles and adapted to its particular location. Generally, these schools were multiclass, aesthetically designed to encourage learning, promote the idea of public school education for all, and elevate the teaching profession.²¹ The six schools included:

- William Seaton School (Figure 4), I Street between 2nd and 3rd Streets Northwest (1871, demolished 1969);
- William Cranch School, 12th and G Streets Southeast (1871, demolished);
- Charles Sumner School, 17th and M Streets Northwest (1872, now the Sumner School and Archives of the District of Columbia Public Schools);
- Thomas Jefferson School (Figure 5), 524 Virginia Avenue, Southwest (1872, burned in 1882, demolished 1860);
- William Curtis School, Wisconsin Avenue and O Street Northwest (1875, demolished 1950); and
- Joseph Henry School, 7th and P Streets Northwest (1880, demolished).

When the District of Columbia lost its home rule in 1874 all the school systems (Washington City, Washington County, Georgetown and the black schools) merged under a single board with both white and black members. However, as previously mentioned, the black schools and white schools operated independently with separate superintendents.

²⁰ Wilson, 143.

²¹ Lessoff and Mauch, 150.



Figure 4. Seaton School, 1876.
Source: DCPS Photo Gallery, www.k12.dc.us



Figure 5. Old Jefferson School, 1876
Source: DCPS Photo Gallery, www.k12.dc.us



Figure 6. The Wallach School, Seventh and D Streets SE, 1864
Source: Twentieth Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools of the City of Washington, 1865

The Organic Act of 1878 made the takeover of the District of Columbia by the federal government permanent; the Act provided for a municipal system consisting of three commissioners, with the Engineer Commissioner responsible for all public works and public buildings. An Inspector of Buildings, under the supervision of the Engineer Commissioner, was appointed to supervise the construction of municipal buildings. School building progressed from the individualized designs of Adolf Cluss to a more generic and consistent style that could be reused with minimal adaptations. The Office of Inspector of Buildings prepared and supervised much of the new construction in the District of Columbia during this

decade. The schools were almost always built of brick in the Romanesque Revival style.²² Although simply designed with efficiency in mind, they often had a central pavilion topped with towers with conical roofs and symmetrical identical wings. The exterior brick was decorated with belt courses, string courses, molded brick, corbelling and stone trim around the windows. The early schools built by the Inspector of Building office were four-rooms structures with a cloakroom arranged around a hallway and a playroom. The growth in population in the late 1880s and early 1890s required that larger schools be built. Eight-room, two-story schools became the norm and when a school could no longer accommodate the neighborhood population, a new school was erected within a few blocks.

The eight-room school (Figure 7) was more complex in its construction: it had separate entrances for boys and girls, four classrooms on each floors clustered around a center hallway. As the population continued to grow and land became more expensive, larger schools were built—twelve-, sixteen- and even twenty-room buildings.

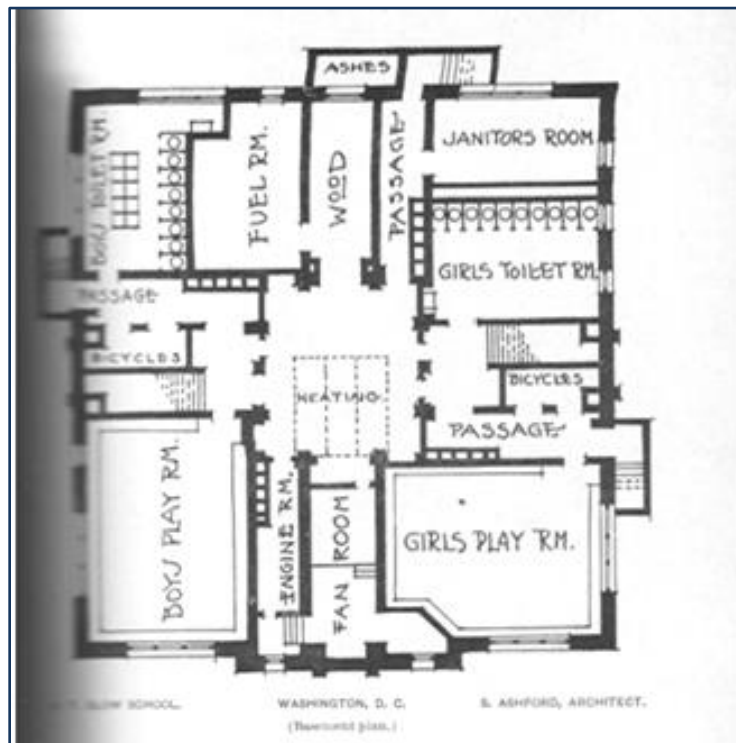
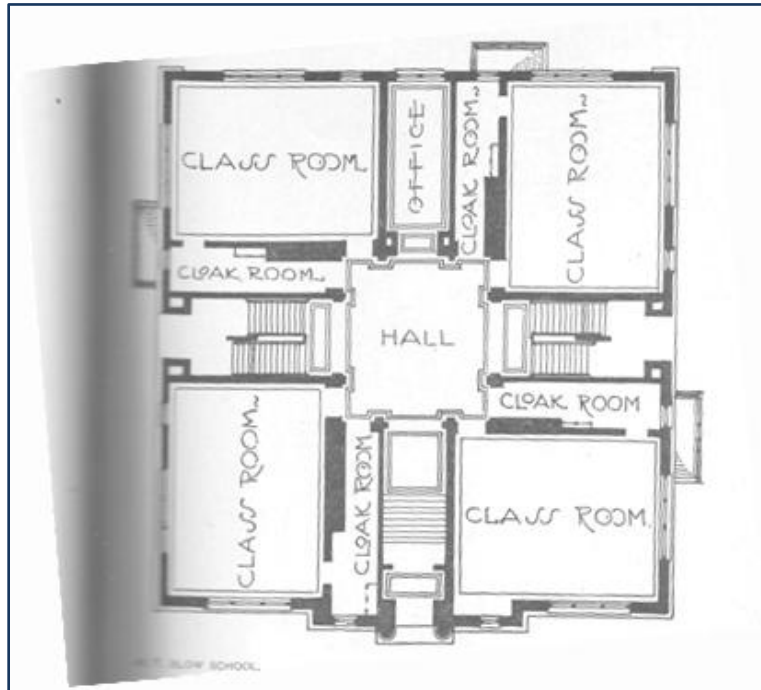
By the turn of the nineteenth century, the red brick school building was ubiquitous, a fixture in Washington, D.C. communities. Efficiency and modernity was, however, not universally accepted. An editor with the *Evening Star* complained in 1897 that:

*“[G]reat red brick boxes...are unattractive if not positively ugly, mere boxes of brick without any pretensions of beauty.”*²³

The Inspector of Buildings decided to open the process of school design to outside architects under the supervision of the Office of Building Inspector. Several schools were designed under this system, the Hayes School (discussed later in this paper) among them. At the same time, school designs had to respond to specialization brought about by more

²² Lee, 24.

²³ *Evening Star*, July 8, 1897, quoted by Lee, 26.



*Figure 7. H.T. Blow School, a typical 8-room schoolhouse
 First floor (bottom), second floor (top)
 Source: 1908 Schoolhouse Commission.*

diverse curricula and a larger audience: Americanization schools, vocational schools, business education, sports facilities required new and innovative designs.

After the school system was reorganized in the early 1900s, private architects were hired to design schools which accounts for the greater diversity of designs during this period. Famous local architects, such as Appleton P. Clark, Robert Stead and Waddy B. Wood, left their imprint on the neighborhood schools of Washington, D.C.

The passage of the 1906 Organic Act constituted a new era in school construction. In addition to provisions establishing lines of authority, professional standards and compensation for teachers, the act required the appointment of a commission to study all the buildings in the school system. The commission's findings and recommendations were published in a comprehensive 1908 report entitled *Report of the Schoolhouse Commission: Upon a General Plan for the Consolidation of Public Schools In the District of Columbia*. The commission recommended the phasing out of four- and eight- room schools and replacing them with 16- and 24-room schools—based on the New York, Boston and Chicago model—as main types for primary and grammar schools. Other recommendations included larger play areas and gymnasias, more vocational schools, and portable buildings (portables) to accommodate surges in population growth. Ironically, the commission was in favor of closing several old schools, Webster School (discussed in the Introduction) among them.²⁴ The commission also considered as a priority the appointment of a school architect to design and supervise school construction. The Commission's recommendations were not adopted in their entirety. However, the recommendation for a school architect was embraced by Congress which created the office of Municipal Architect in 1909 under the supervision of

²⁴ Schoolhouse Commission, 5-7.

the Engineer Commissioner, one of the three commissioners appointed by Congress. School construction followed the latest advances in building technology and became a specialized field with its own journal, *The American School Board Journal* founded in 1891, which disseminated issues related to all aspects of school building, management and maintenance.

The first chief of the Municipal Architect's office was Snowden Ashford, a prolific Washington architect, succeeded in 1921 by Albert L. Harris, also a prominent architect, who served until 1934. These two architects dominated early 20th century school design in the District of Columbia. Architectural styles ranged from Renaissance, to Elizabethan, to Gothic and Colonial Revival.

Between 1910 and the end of World War I, Washington witnessed a surge in population and a need for new and larger schools. The typical eight- and twelve-room school of the late 19th century morphed into the 16- and 20-room school. The mission of public education also changed, requiring more practical and vocational skills, military training and the accommodation of younger kindergarten children. Consequently, school architecture also changed allowing for flexibility, public use of facilities and less rigid classroom space. The need for new schools became critical, yet construction was limited by the labor and materials shortages created by the war effort. The crisis led architects to create "flexible" buildings that could be added on as the number of school-age children increased. Instead of building new schools several blocks apart as was customary in the 19th century, annexes were appended to old school buildings and portables became the norm. It is interesting to note that many 19th century schools were preserved because of the need for space and shortage of materials during this period.

In 1920, the United States Congress which still had jurisdiction over the affairs of

Washington, D.C. and its schools, formulated a plan (called the Five Year Building Program), to replace the small, antiquated neighborhood schoolhouses with new larger buildings.²⁵ 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 educational accommodations.”²⁶ The program was implemented by Albert T. Harris, who had taken over as Municipal Architect; the eight-room design for schools was completely abandoned in favor of the 16- and 20- room school. Harris favored the Colonial Revival style and many of the 27 schools built during this decade use this style (Figure 8). The Colonial Revival style was thought to evoke the comforts of home, remind people of their history, and impress laymen with its beauty.²⁷

The economic Depression of the 1930s had a twofold impact on public projects in Washington, D.C.: the administration of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal brought many new residents to the District while at the same time public projects were halted or canceled due to lack of funds. Public schools became overcrowded and any schools that had been slated for demolition by the Five Year Plan were spared; portable buildings and swing shifts were used to relieve overcrowding. World War II redirected public funds to the war effort and again halted the planning and construction of new schools.

During this period, (1934 to 1946) Nathan C. Wyeth held the position of Municipal Architect. A distinguished architect who had studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris in the 1890s, Wyeth was responsible for building many public buildings both in public practice and as a chief designer for the Architect of the Capitol. Despite the Depression and the war,

²⁵ Lee, 36

²⁶ Lee, 37.

²⁷ Lee, 35 quoting Ernest Sibley, “Why I Prefer the Colonial Style,” *School Board Journal*, volume 66, January 1923, 66

new construction did not stop completely.²⁸ Several junior high schools and additions were built.

The period between the end of World War II and the landmark US Supreme Court decision in *Bolling v. Sharpe* decision declaring segregation unconstitutional, the District of Columbia registered its highest population—the 1950 census puts the population at 802,178.



Figure 8. The Hearst School, 3950 37th Street, NW, 1931. Colonial Revival style preferred by Albert T. Harris. (Photograph by author, February 2008).

From 1959 onward the population of Washington, D.C. continually decreased and only recently has it begun to stabilize at around 572,000 according to the 2000 census.²⁹

The decrease in population since the 1950s and continuing after the 1968 riots has put many historic structures in jeopardy and schools are no exception. Faced with decreasing

²⁸ Wyeth's office designed the Municipal Building, Municipal Court, Police Court, Juvenile Court, Recorder of Deeds building and several others.

²⁹ D.C. Office of Planning, Census 2000, <http://planning.dc.gov/planning/cwp/view,a,1282,q,569460.asp>

enrollment and decaying older schools, the school system struggled with maintaining and finding new uses for surplus school properties, a problem that continues to this day.

Beginning with the modest frame schools of the early 19th century, school architecture evolved to respond to the needs of a growing population. The eight-room brick school was found in every community, with white schools sometimes right next to black schools during segregation. As neighborhoods grew, a new school was built a few blocks away. Children walked to school, went home for lunch and their mothers waited for them when they got home. When Washington's population grew too large for the neighborhood schools, larger and more specialized schools were built. The surviving historic schools are a reminder of the past history of Washington, some painful, and should be treasured as much as the marble monuments of the Federal City.

Chapter 3: Surplus Schools: Adaptive and Public Reuse

Buildings are among the most valuable records of a culture. If the play of history is to be seen as continual change, then individual buildings provide physical records—or at least significant clues—that can help us understand something of those who came before us. In turn, what we do to a building will help those who come after to understand us.

Hugh Howard, The Preservationist's Progress, 1991

During the 1970s and 1980s the District of Columbia was burdened with too much school capacity caused by a dwindling population. The municipal government was forced to sell its surplus property or to close the unused facilities. During the 1990s, the budget crisis grew so severe that Congress appointed a Financial Control Board to supervise the city's elected officials and take over the schools. One of the mandates of the Financial Control Board was to dispose of surplus schools to raise money for school maintenance.

The number of sold and reused schools from the 1970s through the 1990s is difficult to determine. In 1977, sixty five buildings were listed as surplus schools by the DCPS, 42 of them with inadequate maintenance.³⁰ In 2007, the D.C. Preservation League, an influential preservation organization in Washington, D.C. compiled a list of public schools in preparation for its *Most Endangered Places 2008* nominations. The list consists of 165 schools built between 1869 and 1956; of these, 86 buildings are eligible for the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites with only 26 already nominated.³¹

The 1990s extensive campaign to dispose of surplus school buildings and other city properties resulted in many successful instances of adaptive reuse. The District's precarious

³⁰ Shook, 24.

³¹ As this report was finalized, the D.C. Preservation League named the 2008 Most Endangered Places on May 13, 2008. Historic D.C. Public Schools as a collective resource were on the list. Available at <http://www.dcpreservation.org/angered/2008/MEPPProgramLowRez.pdf>.

financial situation in previous decades had left many buildings in dilapidated condition—an eyesore to communities already devastated by budget cuts. Not all residents were happy with the sale of the schools. Since schools had been built with public funds, it was, they felt, a disservice to the residents of the District to sell the schools for profit instead of using the space for community activities or low income housing.

Case Study Methodology

The case studies in this chapter and the next were selected from, an unofficial list obtained from Mr. Hayden Wetzel, chief archivist at the Sumner School Archives, who prepared it on behalf of the D.C. Preservation League. After surveying about 35 properties, the following criteria were considered for selection:

- Adaptive reuses that maintained the integrity of the building and were well integrated into the existing neighborhood fabric;
- Buildings no longer used as public schools but still under the ownership of the DCPS that have historic or architectural significance;
- The choice of vacant or deteriorating buildings was based on the condition of the building and its historic or architectural significance. Another important factor in the selection was whether a reuse plan currently exists.

There are approximately 21 D.C.-owned buildings built between 1865 and 1930 that are not occupied or are underused. An additional 25 buildings have been adaptively reused or are used by the D.C. government for non-educational purposes.

Adaptive Reuse of Public Schools By the Private Sector

THE CARBERY SCHOOL

The Carbery School (Figure 9), located on 5th and D streets northeast, is one of the early adaptive reuse projects of surplus schools on Capitol Hill. Built in 1887 by the Office of the Building Inspector, it is similar to several other schools (such as the Giddings School) with

its recessed center pavilion and symmetrical bays topped by pediments.

The building functioned as a school until 1949 when the city turned it into a warehouse.³² It was sold in the 1980s to developer Robert Herrema who divided it into 23 condominiums.



*Figure 9. The Carbery School.
Photograph by author, March 2008.*

THE PIERCE SCHOOL

The Franklin Pierce School (Figure 10) at 14th Street and Maryland Ave northeast was built by the office of the Building Inspector and named in honor of President Franklin Pierce. It was erected in 1894 for white students but became an African America school in the 1940s because of changing demographics; it ceased operating as a school in the 1970s. The

³² Lee, 53.

school's projecting central pavilion can be found in several other schools, but the octagonal tower on the corner, taking advantage of the location, is unique. The school was a homeless center until the late 1990s when the administration of Mayor Anthony Williams sold many public surplus schools to developers. In 2004 it opened as a rental apartment building. The new owner even reinstalled the roof on the corner tower which had been removed by the District of Columbia.



*Figure 10. Pierce School Condominiums.
Photograph by author, February 2008.*

THE GIDDINGS SCHOOL

Joshua R. Giddings Elementary School (Figure 11), located on 3rd and G streets southeast on Capitol Hill, was an eight-room school built in 1887 for African American children. It was named after Congressman Giddings of Ohio who had spoken out passionately against slavery. The school and its 1938 Colonial Revival addition (Figure 12) now houses the Results Gym.

Designed by the Office of the Building Inspector, the structure has a recessed central pavilion and two bays topped by a pediment with a semicircular window.

The District Columbia sold the Giddings School and its annex in 1999. Results Gym opened in 2001 after an extensive renovation that used historic tax credits to assist in funding the project.



*Figure 11. J.R. Giddings School, 1887 Wing.
Photograph by author, April 2008.*



*Figure 12. Giddings School, 1938 Colonial Revival addition.
Photograph by author, April 2008.*

THE LENOX SCHOOL

A 2006 condominium conversion, the Lenox School (Figure 13) is located on 5th and G streets southeast. It was built in 1887 as a white school within two blocks of the Giddings black school. Designed by the Office of the Building Inspector, the school's center projecting pavilion with a tower is reminiscent of other schools, scattered around Washington, such as the Madison School at 10th and G streets northeast built in 1889 (Figure 14) and now used as a homeless shelter. The Lenox School ceased to operate as a school in 1931. It was occupied until the 1990s by various non-profit organizations until it was sold for development in the late 1990s.



*Figure 13. Lenox School Condominiums.
Photograph by author, April 2008.*



*Figure 14. The Madison School.
Photograph by author, March 2008.*

DENT SCHOOL

In some instances, old public schools have become private or charter schools as is the case with the Capitol Hill Day School located in the old Dent School at 210 South Carolina Avenue, SE. The Josiah Dent School (Figure 15) was built in 1901 in the Italian Renaissance style, probably for white children. It operated as a school until 1947 when it was converted into a warehouse and maintenance shop for the District of Columbia Public Schools. In 1980, the Capitol Hill Day School, a private school, leased the building. Declared a surplus building in the 1990s, it was sold to the school as part of the ongoing program to dispose of surplus schools. The Dent School underwent an extensive renovation after it was acquired.



*Figure 15. The Dent School.
Photograph by author, April 2008.*

Surplus Schools Used By the Public Sector

THE FRANKLIN SCHOOL

The Franklin School (Figure 16) and its innovative architecture was discussed in a previous chapter. The school is a National Historic Landmark (interior and exterior) and had been at the center of public education for almost a century when it ceased operation. From its opening in 1869 to 1925 it served, in addition to being a school, as the headquarters of the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Trustees who were able observe how modern pedagogical methods were applied. From 1873 to 1943 it housed the Normal School as well as a grammar school for boys and girls. For several decades, the Franklin School was an ideal for the modern school building, recognized throughout the world as a masterpiece of school design.



***Figure 16. The Franklin School.
Photograph by author, May 2008.***

Unoccupied for over a decade or longer and without interior heating, the Franklin School experienced interior deterioration such as falling plaster, rotting wood trim, and water damage. Since 2002 it has been used as a homeless shelter while negotiations with commercial developers are continuing. At a minimum, the District should make repairs and provide heating and ventilation to stop further deterioration.

THE SUMNER SCHOOL

The Sumner School (Figure 17), designed by Adolf Cluss and completed in 1872, was the first significant public school for black children. Located at 17th and M streets northwest in what had been a traditionally African American neighborhood, it was intended as the black counterpart to the Franklin School and as the headquarters of the Superintendent and



*Figure 17. The Sumner School Museum and Archives.
Photograph by author, May 2008.*

Board of Trustees of Colored Schools for Washington and Georgetown. Named for Charles Sumner, a radical abolitionist senator from Massachusetts, the school was at the forefront of educational advancement for black children. Cluss did not spare any expenses in building the finest school for African American children. Vaguely Moorish, the building has a central clock tower and is flanked by three bays on either side. The heavy brick cornice, belt course, paired windows, highly decorated arches and an outstanding slate roof make this building architecturally significant.

The very first class of high school students graduated from the Sumner School in the late 1870s. The high school was later moved to the M Street High School (later known as the Perry School), itself succeeded by the Dunbar High School (thoughtlessly demolished in the 1990s). The Normal School for training black teachers also saw its beginnings at the Sumner School, later to become Miner Teachers' College. The beauty and functionality of the school expressed contemporary hopes that schools for black and white children would be, if not integrated, at least equal in quality.

The Sumner School continued to be used for educational purposes and as a health clinic until the late 1970s when it was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. During the nomination process, the roof collapsed and the building was close to being demolished. In partnership with a developer, the D.C. government developed the surrounding property and re-opened the school in 1986 as a museum and repository for the D.C. Public School system archives.³³

³³ Lee, 100.

THE PERRY SCHOOL

The former M Street High School (Figure 18) located at 128 M Street, NW holds a special place in the history of African American education in the District of Columbia. Completed in 1891, the M Street School was one of the first black high schools in the country built with public funds. The demanding curriculum followed the precepts of W.E.B. Dubois who advocated sending talented black men to elite colleges to train as doctors,



*Figure 18. The Perry School.
Photograph by author, May 2008.*

lawyers, and other professions. And many did; graduates became some of the nation's most prestigious doctors, lawyers, architects, businessmen and other elite professionals, cementing the reputation of Washington, D.C. as the intellectual capital of black America. In 1915,



*Figure 19. Old Dunbar High School, 1925.
Source: DCPS Photo Gallery, www.k12.dc.us/schools.htm*

when enrollment exceeded the capacity of the school, a new high school, the Old Dunbar High School (Figure 19), was built a few blocks away at First and O streets northwest. The Old Dunbar School was demolished in 1977 to make room for the new Dunbar School.

Perry School is large brick school built in the Romanesque Revival style in a multi-part construction (central projecting pavilion with a tower and recessed wings that connect to the main wing with hyphens). It currently operates as a community center.

Conclusion

The reuses of public school—both private and public—discussed in this chapter demonstrate the challenges of historic preservation in an environment of competing priorities. When communities are indifferent or do not have the power to act, the economic imperative prevails. For General Julius W. Becton, who was appointed Superintendent of Schools by the Financial Control Board during the 1990s, the challenge was to keep the schools open. Unaware of the history of the city’s public schools and eager to raise money to

fix roofs and boilers, General Becton was quick to dispose of schools that had been vacant for years, sometimes decades. The African American community resisted the sale of schools to private developers, but considered the quality of the public schools more important. A condominium that reuses a historic black school is perhaps a poor choice, but so is the complete destruction of the school through demolition. A community center such as the Perry School is a much better use for a former school and helps retain a local function that the school fulfilled. Successful or unsuccessful adaptations of old schools can teach a lesson for the future and serve as a reminder that preservation means getting involved.

Chapter 4: Public Schools in Peril: Case Studies

Some of the schools that were not sold during the 1990s continued to languish and deteriorate as the D.C. government prepared a new Facility Master Plan in 2000. The municipal government was not always at fault: sometimes the residents fiercely fought school closings and wanted the vacant spaces to be renovated for community uses such as after-school programs.

THE BRUCE SCHOOL

The Bruce School (Figure 20) is located at 770 Kenyon Street NW at Sherman Avenue in the Mount Pleasant section of northwest Washington.



*Figure 20. The Bruce School.
Photograph by author, March 2008.*

The Bruce School was erected in 1898 in what was then a wealthy, upper-middle class suburb with a large black population. The eight-room school was designed by William M. Poindexter, a prominent Washington architect in private practice working for the Office of the Building Inspector. The school's namesake, Blanche Kelso Bruce, born in slavery, was the first black to serve a full term in the United States Senate during Reconstruction (1875-1881). A member of Washington, D.C.'s black aristocracy, he held other public offices including Recorder of Deeds for Washington, D.C. Naming the school in Bruce's honor reflected the optimism of the time that African Americans could achieve a high status in society through education.

The Bruce School was built of red brick in the Italian Renaissance style with a center projecting pavilion flanked by two symmetrical wings. The center pavilion is decorated with ionic columns supporting a stone lintel bearing the school's name. Between 1921 and 1927 portables were used to relieve overcrowding at the school; in 1927 a major addition was built doubling the area of the school.³⁴ The school was closed in 1973 after the new Bruce-Monroe school was built and was returned to the District of Columbia government which currently owns it.³⁵

The school is dilapidated and shows the effects of delayed maintenance; costs of rehabilitation can only increase as decay advances. Although it houses the City Wide Learning Center, only a small portion of the building is currently used.

The Bruce-Monroe school at 3012 Georgia Avenue that replaced the original school should serve as a warning to city planners and builders; the school, built in 1973, is itself

³⁴ Vertical Files, Schools, Sumner Museum and Archives.

³⁵ Property Owned or Under Jurisdiction of the District Government, <http://dcatlas.dcgis.dc.gov/opm/dcproperties.aspx>, Retrieved 20 April, 2008.

now scheduled for demolition to be replaced with a new modern school. Its design followed the 1970s open design plan which was thought to be conducive to learning. Such was not the case and the open design was abandoned. However, Washington still has about twenty open-plan schools that will probably be demolished in the future.

The fate of the Bruce School is still uncertain. Its physical state will not be helped by further delays in maintenance which will become costlier with the passage of time.

THE HAYES SCHOOL

Although the Hayes School (Figure 21), located at 5th and K streets northeast, is listed on the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, its poor condition demonstrates the challenges that the



*Figure 21. The Hayes School.
Photograph by author, February, 2008.*



*Figure 22. Hayes School, Torch of Knowledge
Photograph by author, May 2008.*



*Figure 23. Hayes School, Open Book
Photograph by author, May 2008.*

District of Columbia faces in its preservation efforts. The eight-room Hayes School was named after President Rutherford B. Hayes and is one of the earliest examples of school designs by architects in private practice (1897) and therefore architecturally significant. Responding to criticism about the uniformity of the Romanesque Revival school design, the Office of the Building Inspector hired private architectural firms to diversify its buildings. The school was erected for white students but was transferred to the black schools system in 1947. Hayes School was built in the Italianate style with ornamentation descriptive of its function, such as torches of knowledge below the roof in the main recessed area (Figure 22), and an open book in the window arches (Figure 23). The two Italianate towers were once capped with belfries covered with tile roofs; their fate is not known.³⁶

The school closed in 1970 and became an administrative annex. During the 1980s it was used by the Museum of the City of Washington. The building was vacated in 1990 and has remained vacant since.³⁷

In 2003, the D.C. Preservation League (DCPL), an influential preservation organization, listed the Hayes Schools as one of the *Ten Most Endangered Places for 2003*.³⁸ The D.C. Department of Aging has plans to convert the schools to a senior center but the preservation community has so far opposed the changes to the building as not sensitive to its historic character. Unfortunately, the delay has further exposed the building to vandalism and decay.

THADDEUS STEVENS SCHOOL

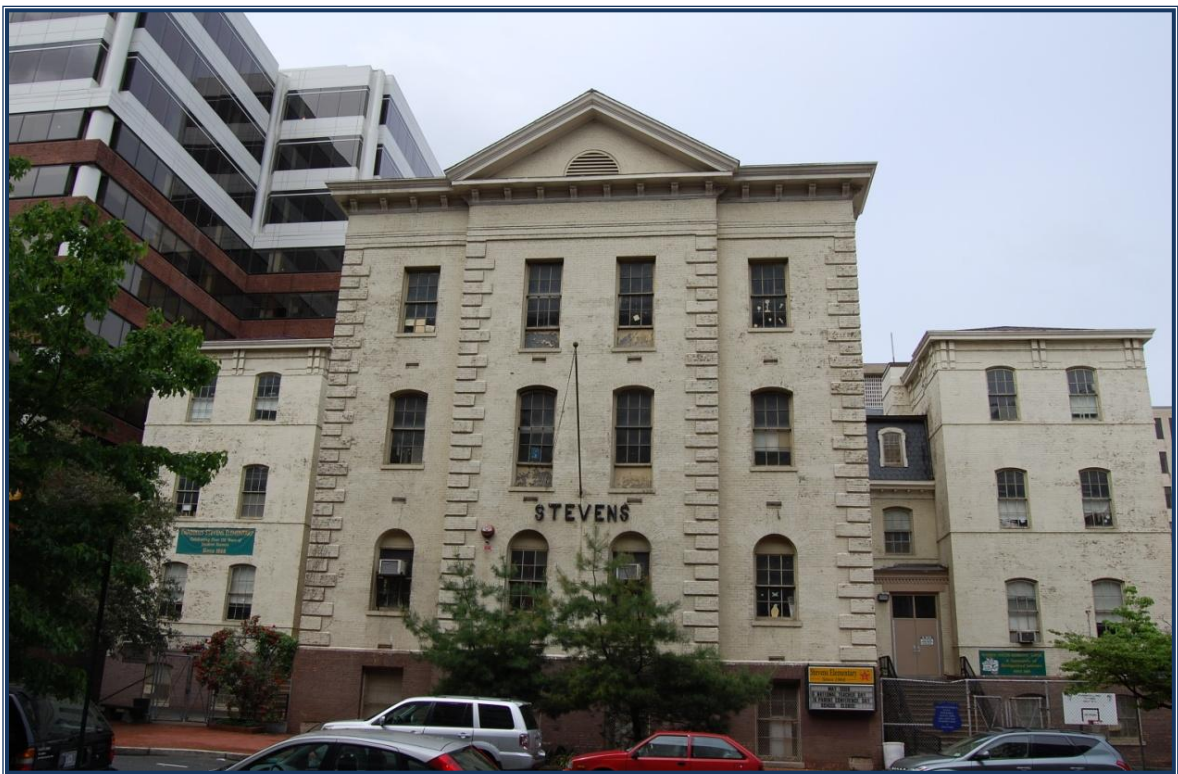
The Stevens School (Figure 24) is located at 21st and K streets northwest in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood (also known as the West End). It is significant for its association with

³⁶ Lee, 51.

³⁷ Directive from the Office of the Superintendent, Sumner School and Archives, Vertical Files, Schools.

³⁸ D.C. Preservation League, <http://www.dcpreservation.org/angered/2003/hayes.html>, accessed 20 April 2008.

African American history in the 19th century. Although it currently operates as an elementary school it is scheduled to close in late 2008. Dating to 1868, it is the oldest surviving black public school built with public funds in the District of Columbia. As such, it is of enormous importance to the African American community that traditionally inhabited the area, formerly the center of light industry in Washington. The Potomac docks, the breweries, glass works, and the lime kilns attracted African Americans as well as poor Irish and German immigrants who lived in modest two-story rowhouses. The Stevens School is one of the last remnants of this period in the gentrified area of Foggy Bottom.



*Figure 24. Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School.
Photograph by author, May 2008.*

The current building structure is the result of the 1897 renovation that added the central projecting section. The hyphens with the mansard roof are most likely original.³⁹

The Stevens School has been scheduled for closing since the 1990s and it is again scheduled to close in late 2008. Parents have successfully opposed the closing until now, but its low enrollment has finally doomed it. There are no plans for its future but the school sits on prime real estate and the African American community fears that it will be torn down to make room for office space. Colbert I. King, a Washington Post columnist and fifth generation Washingtonian wrote in his column about the closing of Stevens School:

The issue for me—then [during the 1990s ed.] and now—is how the city handles landmarks such as the Stevens. For scores of Washingtonians, that 140-year old building has as much meaning and value as some of the historic structures on the Mall.

I have seen what happens when people who call the shots have little regard for history.⁴⁰

THE OLD CONGRESS HEIGHTS SCHOOL

The Old Congress Heights School is located in the Anacostia section of Washington, D.C. at 600 Alabama Avenue, SE at Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue. It is a large structure (over 100,000 sq.ft), occupying an entire city block.⁴¹ It is significant as one of the first large-scale school buildings in the District of Columbia and for its distinctive Snowden Ashford architecture. The original school (Figure 26, center) was built in 1897 as an eight-room white school by the Office of the Building Inspector in the wealthy area of Anacostia. As the neighborhood grew and the need for additional space developed, Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford redesigned the entire structure leaving the plan open for future expansion.

³⁹ Lee, 97.

⁴⁰ King, Colbert I. "A Building that Speaks to Us." *Washington Post*, May 10, 2008.

⁴¹ Lee, 60.

The front façade (Figure 25) faces Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue and is in the Elizabethan



*Figure 25. Old Congress Heights School.
Photograph by author, February 2008.*

style with a clock tower (the clock has been removed) and crenellated towers. The classroom wing (Figure 26, visible in the back) was added later, date unknown. The façade on the 1897 original block was refaced during the 1913 renovation to match the rest of the addition. Six classrooms were added in 1931 matching the original 1913 design.⁴²

The school most likely ceased operation in 1970 when the new Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School was built directly across Alabama Avenue. In 1998 it was declared

⁴² Letter from Eva Trusheim, Adm. Principal to Boise L. Bristor, Statistician, Public Schools of the District of Columbia, April 24, 1945. Sumner Archives, Vertical Files, Schools.

surplus property by the Financial Control Board and several developers made presentations to the community to gain support for development but the building remained unoccupied. The District of Columbia is currently soliciting offers for the reuse of the building with the requirement that any development preserve the historic character of the building. Approved uses include:⁴³

- Recreation, park or landscaped open space for the use and enjoyment of neighborhood residents;
- Job-training or vocational education programs;
- Space for community meetings and activities or a community center (specifically in the auditorium); and
- New neighborhood-serving retail and office development.



*Figure 26. Old Congress Heights School 1897 block
Photograph by author, February 2008.*

⁴³District of Columbia Government, Office of Property Management
http://opm.dc.gov/opm/frames.asp?doc=/opm/lib/opm/pdf/Old_Congress_Heights_School_Solicitation-Final.pdf, retrieved 22 April 2008.

The situation is complicated by the proximity of Old Congress Heights School to the historic St. Elizabeth's Hospital campus which is being considered for relocation of certain US government offices.

THE ARMSTRONG MANUAL TRAINING SCHOOL

Located at First and O streets northwest, the Armstrong School (Figure 28) was built by the well-known Washington architect Waddy B. Wood. It is one of several black schools in the area built for black children in the neighborhood, such as the Slater School (Figure 29) and the Langston School (Figure 30) both at P and First streets northwest. The Langston School was built to handle the overflow from the Slater School. Both schools are currently vacant awaiting disposition by the DCPS.

The Armstrong School, listed both on the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places, was built in 1902 of cream-colored brick in the Renaissance Revival style. It has a symmetrical shape with a central projecting pavilion and recessed end sections. There are two entrances each topped with an elaborate pediment (Figure 27). Additions built between 1924 and 1927 doubled the size of the building. The building has been vacant since 1996.

The Armstrong Manual Training School followed the teachings of Booker T. Washington who argued that vocational, business and manual training could lift African Americans and bring progress and racial acceptance. His teachings were in contrast to the views held by some of the many African Americans in the District of Columbia who, adhering to the teachings of W.E.B. DuBois, believed that industrial training would only help to prolong segregation by preventing talented blacks from going to universities and elevating their status. A controversy erupted when the white superintendent of schools tried to

downgrade the curriculum at the M Street High School where black students



*Figure 27. Armstrong School, detail of pediment
Photograph by author, May 2008.*



*Figure 28. Samuel H. Armstrong School, c. 1910.
Source: DCPS Photo Gallery, www.k12.dc.us/*

studied liberal arts and classics in preparation for college. Many M Street High School graduates went on to elite universities in the north, including Harvard, Yale and Dartmouth.⁴⁴ The dispute raged for many years after the Armstrong school opened and divided the African American community into different camps.

The Armstrong Manual Training School had many illustrious alumni and was instrumental in developing an architectural preparatory program that trained many African American architects in Washington. Alumni were also involved in local and national politics and served as mentors to generations of students. The school's significance in the education of African Americans makes the preservation of this school a priority.

Conclusion

The cases outlined in this chapter demonstrate the abdication of leadership by the municipal government and the D.C Public School System in particular. No city remains vibrant without its history and the public schools are public resources that must be safeguarded irrespective of the ups and downs of the economy. These collective resources cannot be sacrificed by the inertia and indifference of public officials. Columnist Colbert I. King expresses why the past is important:

There are some things in life that once gone you can never get back. Our physical heritage is such a thing. Those structures [schools ed.], snickered at by some as irrelevant to the moment, should be sources of pride and should be left standing as symbols of past achievement. They tell us something about who we once were and teach lessons our children should never forget.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Pielmeier, 29.

⁴⁵ King, Colbert I. "A Building that Speaks to Us." *Washington Post*, May 10, 2008.



Figure 29. The Slater School, 1891.



*Figure 30. The Langston School, 1902.
Both photographs by author, February 2008.*

Chapter 5: Current Disposition Procedures

”The decisions about modernization and replacement of schools will change the face of the District for generations. While many of the considerations are technical, the decision-making process associated with the planning and design of the public schools is political. This does not mean, however, that it cannot be thoughtful and well-informed.

*Replace or Modernize, 2001*⁴⁶

Public policy for disposition of surplus schools is geared toward reuse, leasing and sale rather than providing for the preservation, maintenance and sensitive adaptive re-use. The success stories outlined in chapter three are more the result of the commitment of developers to historic preservation than guidelines from the District of Columbia (the adaptive reuse of the Bryan School at 1315 Independence Avenue, SE is an excellent example of a developer committed to historic preservation).

According to current regulations, the Superintendent of Schools recommends the phasing out of schools to the Board of Education which has ultimate decision-making power following special community meetings held to receive comments and input from the public. The building(s) remain under the jurisdiction of the Board of Education until no longer needed for “educational purposes.”⁴⁷ However, the school system may retain control of a building if future educational uses are envisioned. During this time, the Board of Education has to allocate funds for the maintenance of the building(s). The allowance for future use which allows the school system to delay the transfer of the property to the Office of Property Management results in either (a) scarce funds being used for school maintenance or (b) neglect of the facility due to lack of funds. Once the schools have been transferred to the

⁴⁶ 21st Century School Fund, Section 1, p. 2.

⁴⁷ D.C. Municipal Regulation, Title 5 Section 3612.

Office of Property Management (OPM), decisions about further actions are vested in the Office of the Mayor.

The system of school closings provides for extensive public hearings. While it is very important to get the community's input into government action, school closings can be traumatic for communities which can perceive the closings as a loss of prestige or cause them to worry about the disruption of sending children to a new school.⁴⁸ The D.C School Reform Act of 1995 states that the priority should be given to charter schools when public school buildings are decommissioned. Day care and community centers and educational organizations are also given preference. Charter schools have been avidly pursuing surplus schools for their students. As the number of charter schools has increased in the District of Columbia, surplus school space has been allocated to them. However, in several instances the District of Columbia government has rescinded offers to charter schools after the affected communities raised objections that charter schools would draw students away from the public school system and further degrade the quality of public education. In February 2000, five schools were offered to charter schools (Keene Elementary School, Addison School in Georgetown, Bruce School in Mount Pleasant, Bundy School, and the Reno School).⁴⁹ However, in 2001 the Mayor reconsidered the decision and discussed returning the schools to the public system or using them for municipal offices.⁵⁰

It is clear that the system of surplus school disposition is in need of reform. The Bruce School, which was discussed in the previous chapter is still vacant, and continuing to

⁴⁸ District of Columbia Public Schools, Master Facilities Plan Community Forums, Summary of Planning Area Meetings, September 2006.

⁴⁹ Letter to Mayor Anthony Williams from Malcom E. Peabody, Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS), May 14, 2002. Vertical Files, Sumner Schools and Archives.

⁵⁰ "Mayor Illegally Blocks Schoolhouse Door". The Washington Times, September 18, 2002.

deteriorate despite the fact that a charter school could take it over and perform needed maintenance. In the case of the Bundy School, the city government decided to turn it into a center for abused and neglected children. Some organizations promoting charter schools have accused the DCPS of holding back on turning properties over to charter schools to protect their monopoly over the school system.⁵¹ Whether this is a valid criticism is open to interpretation; however, the fact that charter schools are in dire need of space—while the DCPS and the city government debate the use of its excess properties—is real.

The lines of authority in the disposition of surplus schools are blurred: although the Board of Education should immediately dispose of excess schools, it continues to retain control for future use. Although the Mayor has final jurisdiction over District-owned property including surplus schools, the continued control over properties by the school system invalidates the Mayor’s authority. This amounts to “demolition by neglect” as various agencies fight over control.

Current Facilities Master Plan

Twenty three schools have been selected for closing or replacement in the Master Facilities Plan with a total building space of 4 million square feet and over 75 acres of developable land.⁵² Of the 23 schools approved for closing, two were built before 1900 and nine date from the 1920s and 1930s. It is ironic to note that one of the schools slated for demolition, the Hine School, (Figure 31) replaced the historically significant Wallach School razed in 1949. Unlike several of the schools proposed for closing, the Hine School was

⁵¹ Downtown Shelter To Be Reopened: Advocates for Homeless Hail Decision”, By Theola S. Labbe, The Washington Post, January 6, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A50209-2005Jan5.html>, retrieved 23 April 2008.

⁵² Master Facilities Plan, Section C, “Schools as Centers of the Community, p. C28-C32.

completely out of proportion with the neighboring rowhouse style and overpowered it.

The projected savings from the closings are \$23 million a year. The Office of the Mayor is supervising the sale and reassignment of excess schools. The Mayor is focusing efforts on freeing scarce space for development; other agencies are more focused on reusing the buildings for educational and community uses.⁵³



*Figure 31. Hine Junior High School, 1965.
Built on the site of the demolished Wallach School (Photograph by author, April 2008)*

While the city government is considering its options, challenges are easy to envision. Historic preservation regulations will delay many actions; the location of schools in residential neighborhoods will require zoning changes for any adaptive reuse other than residences; the community would also fight additional traffic and parking requirements that a public building will require; complex procedures for approving any new building or renovation of historic building will be costly to a for-profit developer.

⁵³ "School Closings in D.C. Put Prime Spots in Play". Washington Business Journal, December 10, 2007.

It is too easy to be pessimistic on the future of surplus schools. However, Washington, D.C. has inherent advantages that no other city in the nation has. Although it cannot grow physically and is therefore limited in its geography, it can grow in stature and population. There are many organizations that will need a footprint in the capital and proximity to the US government and can absorb the inventory of surplus buildings. Awareness, public involvement, and innovative solutions are essential to ensuring the viability of the city's heritage.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

“If an older building can be equated with poor education, why would anyone want to send a child to an Ivy League School?”

Residents of Two Rivers Wisconsin protesting the razing of a historic school⁵⁴

The residents of Washington, D.C., African Americans in particular, are used to being treated dismissively by the federal government and their own elected officials. During the urban renewal of the 1950s, Congress sent its benevolent reformers to demolish large swaths of Southwest Washington in the name of progress. Urban renewal was renamed “Negro Renewal” by the community. The West End had a similar fate: entire communities of extended families, small homes, shops and churches were removed as the area was gentrified. The city government was not blameless either: school administrators paid many times the going rate for roof repairs with contracts going to preferred contractors.⁵⁵ So perhaps the apathy of Washingtonians regarding their historic heritage is understandable. But historic resources are not renewable and their destruction affects the quality of life for all residents.

Recommendations

REVISE POLICIES FOR OWNERSHIP OF CLOSED SCHOOLS

The decision to close a particular school is a long and arduous process with many participants. However, once a decision has been made, ownership of the school should be transferred to the Mayor’s office for permanent disposition. If the DCPS chooses to retain ownership for future use, it should justify its demographic projections. Funds should also be allocated in the budget for maintenance for as long as it foresees its ownership of the building

⁵⁴ Quoted in Beaumont, 8.

⁵⁵ Statement by Julius W. Becton, Jr., CEO and Superintendent, D.C. Public Schools before the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, January 14, 1998

in order to avoid “demolition by neglect.”

ENGAGE THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

African Americans have been very vocal in demanding better schools but not in preserving historic sites. Their history and past matters and should not be allowed to disappear. However, African Americans have to be actors in the historic preservation movement, not spectators.

SURVEY, DOCUMENT, AND INVENTORY ALL STRUCTURES

A complete survey of all public schools older than fifty years, their physical condition, historic association, and current use should be completed immediately in view of the school closings and consolidations that are being contemplated. The last survey was completed in the early 1980s.

NOMINATE ELIGIBLE BUILDINGS

Only a fraction of eligible buildings have been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places and the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. According to the records of the Sumner Archives, a collective nomination for all the pre-1945 public schools has been filed, but few individual nominations. The Phase I and Phase II surveys completed for the National Register nomination can form the basis for individual nominations.

INSTALL HISTORIC MARKERS AND SIGNS

Many of the old schools that have been reused have no markers or signs describing their history and role in the community. Such identification raises awareness and provides context when the reuse of vacant schools is discussed.

DEVELOPERS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

Many preservationists are suspicious of developers, often with cause. However,

developers have discovered that old schools were built with superior materials and beautiful craftsmanship than are successfully marketed to the public. As previously mentioned, the Sumner Archives would not exist if developers did not renovate it in exchange for developing an adjoining parcel of land.

The above recommendations would go a long way toward enhancing the public's appreciation for the city's historic schools and simplify the process of transfer once the schools are no longer needed. The Master Plan promises to preserve the public school as the center of the community. The city has to carry out this promise and be responsive to all the needs of the community: education as well as preservation.

Appendices

Table 23. District of Columbia - Race and Hispanic Origin: 1800 to 1990
(See text for sources, definitions, and explanations)

Census year	Total population	Race					Hispanic origin (of any race)	White, not of Hispanic origin
		White	Black	American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut	Asian and Pacific Islander	Other race		
NUMBER								
1990	606 900	179 667	399 604	1 466	11 214	14 949	32 710	166 131
Sample	606 900	179 690	399 751	1 659	11 233	14 667	31 358	166 225
1980	638 333	171 768	448 906	1 031	6 636	9 992	17 679	164 244
Sample	638 333	174 705	448 370	1 014	6 883	7 361	17 777	166 803
1970	756 510	209 272	537 712	956	5 372	3 199	(NA)	(NA)
15% sample ¹	756 492	210 863	537 705	700	(NA)	(NA)	15 671	200 656
5% sample	756 510	210 217	537 712	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	15 108	201 301
1960	763 956	345 263	411 737	587	4 690	1 679	(NA)	(NA)
1950	802 178	517 865	280 803	330	2 890	290	(NA)	(NA)
1940 ²	663 091	474 326	187 266	190	1 309	(X)	720	473 609
5% sample ²	(NA)	474 500	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(X)	720	473 780
1930	486 869	353 981	132 068	40	780	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1920	437 571	326 860	109 966	37	708	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1910	331 069	236 128	94 446	68	427	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1900	279 718	191 532	86 702	22	462	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1890 ³	230 392	154 695	75 572	25	100	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1890 ⁴	230 392	154 695	75 572	25	100	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1880	177 624	118 006	59 596	5	17			
1870	131 700	88 278	43 404	15	3			
1860	75 080	60 763	14 316	1	-			
1850	51 687	37 941	13 745	(NA)	(NA)	14 316	11 131	3 185
1840	33 745	23 926	9 819	(NA)	(NA)	13 746	10 059	3 687
1830	30 261	21 152	9 109	(NA)	(NA)	9 819	6 499	3 320
1820	23 336	16 058	7 278	(NA)	(NA)	9 109	4 504	4 505
1810	15 471	10 345	5 126	(NA)	(NA)	7 278	2 758	4 520
1800	8 144	5 672	2 472	(NA)	(NA)	5 126	1 572	3 554
						2 472	400	2 072
PERCENT								
1990	100.0	29.6	65.8	0.2	1.8	2.5	5.4	27.4
Sample	100.0	29.6	65.9	0.3	1.9	2.4	5.2	27.4
1980	100.0	26.9	70.3	0.2	1.0	1.6	2.8	25.7
Sample	100.0	27.4	70.2	0.2	1.1	1.2	2.8	26.1
1970	100.0	27.7	71.1	0.1	0.7	0.4	(NA)	(NA)
15% sample ¹	100.0	27.9	71.1	0.1	(NA)	(NA)	2.1	26.5
5% sample	100.0	27.8	71.1	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	2.0	26.6
1960	100.0	45.2	53.9	0.1	0.6	0.2	(NA)	(NA)
1950	100.0	64.6	35.0	-	0.4	-	(NA)	(NA)
1940 ²	100.0	71.5	28.2	-	0.2	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
5% sample ²	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(X)	0.1	71.4
1930	100.0	72.7	27.1	-	0.2	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1920	100.0	74.7	25.1	-	0.2	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1910	100.0	71.3	28.5	-	0.1	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1900	100.0	69.7	31.1	-	0.2	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1890 ³	100.0	67.1	32.8	-	-	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1890 ⁴	100.0	67.1	32.8	-	-	(X)	(NA)	(NA)
1880	100.0	66.4	33.6	-	-			
1870	100.0	67.0	33.0	-	-			
1860	100.0	80.9	19.1	-	-	100.0	77.8	22.2
1850	100.0	73.4	26.6	(NA)	(NA)	100.0	73.2	26.8
1840	100.0	70.9	29.1	(NA)	(NA)	100.0	66.2	33.8
1830	100.0	69.9	30.1	(NA)	(NA)	100.0	50.5	49.5
1820	100.0	68.8	31.2	(NA)	(NA)	100.0	37.9	62.1
1810	100.0	66.9	33.1	(NA)	(NA)	100.0	30.7	69.3
1800	100.0	69.6	30.4	(NA)	(NA)	100.0	16.2	83.8

Footnotes:

- Represents zero or rounds to 0.0. (X) Not applicable. (NA) Not available. ¹ Hispanic origin based on Spanish language. ² Hispanic origin based on the White population of Spanish mother tongue. Percentages shown based on sample data prorated to the 100-percent count of the White population and on the 100-percent count of the total population. These estimates are in *italics*. See Table E-6 and text. ³ Includes Indian reservations. ⁴ Excludes Indian reservations.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau

Internet Release Date: September 13, 2002

APPENDIX I. Population Table for the District of Columbia, 1800 to 1990. Source: United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0056/tab23.pdf>. Retrieved 10 March 2008.

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