
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-20

James Ormond Wilson Normal School

1100 Harvard Street NW
Square 2856, part of Lot 812

Meeting Date: November 20, 2014
Applicant: Historic Washington Architecture, Inc.

Affected ANC: 1B
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the James Ormond Wilson Normal School, 1100 Harvard Street NW, a landmark to be entered in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that the Board request that the State Historic Preservation Officer forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1912 to 1987.

The property merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C and District of Columbia designation Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types... or... expressions of... design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia.” Specifically, it is an excellent example of Elizabethan school architecture designed by Snowden Ashford and the Office of the Municipal Architect as discussed in the nomination and the Multiple Property Documentation Form “Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960.”

It also merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B (“History”) for being “associated with... institutions... that contributed significantly to the... development of the District of Columbia,” as one of only two public normal schools in the city and a forerunner of the University of the District of Columbia.

Background

The establishment of Washington, D.C.’s first public school system dates to 1804, but the system was small, limited and deficient prior to the Civil War, and excluded whole segments of the population, including African Americans. It was not until the 1860s that a city-wide system of proper schools began to get its footing, but it would remain beset by racial separation and discrimination.

The first normal schools in the United States were established in New England in the 1820s and 1830s to educate and supply quality teachers to the common schools. The District of Columbia soon found the same need for instructors suited to a growing city and an industrializing and

bureaucratizing nation. The District's first private normal school was established in 1851 by educator and abolitionist Myrtilla Miner for the education of African American women.

D.C.'s first public normal school, Washington Normal School, opened in 1873, the first incarnation of what came to be named Wilson Normal for James Ormond Wilson, one of its proponents. It met first at Franklin School and instructed only white female students in a one-year course, but white men were later accepted, and the curriculum expanded to two years. With the growth of the program, more space was required. The new Municipal Architect, Snowden Ashford, was given the job of designing a proper facility soon after his appointment in 1909. The 300-foot-long brick and limestone structure was completed in 1913. The curriculum continued to change, and it expanded to a three-year program in 1927 and to a full four-year college in 1929. Following the desegregation of schools, Wilson Normal combined with Miner Normal to become the District of Columbia Teachers College, one of three institutions that were merged to become the University of the District of Columbia (UDC).

Evaluation

Like most schools, the primary significance of Wilson Normal School is its educational use, but its specific function was nearly unique in the city. It was unlike most D.C. schools in that, while located in a neighborhood, it was not *of* the neighborhood, but served a broader purpose, staffing schools throughout the District. It was not the first institution for educating teachers in Washington, as Myrtilla Miner had established her own school for African American women in 1851, and that became the public Miner Normal School or Washington Normal School No. 2 in 1914. But founded in 1873, what came to be known as Wilson Normal was the first public normal school and instructed generations of teachers in the latest pedagogy. That continued through the 1955 merger with Miner.

Wilson Normal is a very fine example of Elizabethan Revival architecture as applied to a school. It is an imposing building, with its quoined triple wings connected by recessed entries opening onto courts defined by balustrades. Full of light because of its many ganged windows, its most impressive feature is the pattern of repeating Flemish gables. The style was a favorite of D.C.'s first Municipal Architect, Snowden Ashford, because it seemed especially appropriate to schools and proved all the more so as the institution evolved into a college. Colleges constructed at Oxford and Cambridge during the Tudor period had inspired schools and libraries since. Snowden hoped his design would inspire pride and purpose in the student-teachers.

The style was not appreciated as much by the newly established U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, however, which favored classicism for post-McMillan Plan Washington and recommended the Colonial Revival style for local government buildings situated in residential neighborhoods. The CFA objected to Ashford's exuberant design for Wilson Normal, but relented because his drawings were too far advanced to be changed without difficulty. So Ashford won his point, and it would not be the last time he would employ the Elizabethan, Tudor or Gothic.

The property retains excellent historic integrity, including its original lunch-room ell, its chimneys, etc. It has the expected alterations and repairs for a building a century old, such as window replacements. Its appearance has changed with some entry features erected for the present occupant, a charter school, but these alterations are ultimately reversible.

The nomination proposes a period of significance from 1912, the principal year of construction, to 1987, when the school was vacated by the teachers school, which had been merged into the University of the District of Columbia beginning in 1978. While 1987 is a pretty recent date to be considered historic, such a terminal date has few implications for the preservation treatment of the building exterior, given its remarkable preservation from a century ago. Further, if the continuity of Wilson Normal including its mergers into more modern institutions is important, then recognizing this entire span is reasonable.