

City of Detroit
CITY COUNCIL
HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD
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Detroit, Michigan 48226
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Proposed James McMillan School Historic District

Final Report

By a resolution dated, May 5, 1999, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed James McMillan School Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed James McMillan School Historic District consists of a single building located at 615 S. West End Avenue in southwest Detroit. The proposed district lies two blocks north of West Jefferson Avenue and northwest of the junction of the Detroit and Rouge Rivers in the hub of the city's industrial belt. McMillan School is located approximately five miles from downtown.

Boundaries: The boundaries of the proposed district are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the north, a line fifty (50) feet south of and parallel to the north boundary of Lot 9 of the Subdivision of PC 718 for the Heirs of Leonard Lenox (L68 P111 Deeds), said line being extended eastward and westward.

On the east, the centerline of South Springwells Avenue.

On the south, a line two hundred and forty (240) feet north of and parallel to the south boundary of Lot 9 of the Subdivision of PC 718 for the Heirs of Leonard Lenox (L68 P111 Deeds), said line being extended eastward and westward.

On the west, the centerline of South West End Avenue.

History of Del Ray: The James McMillan School is one of the oldest buildings still in use by the Detroit Public School system. The school was built in 1895 for the township of Del Ray. The history of McMillan School coincides with the growth and development of the community, as it changed from a small ethnic village to the city's largest industrial area.

Early newspaper accounts have referred to Del Ray as that spot at the junction of the Detroit and Rouge Rivers which provided the Huron and Algonquin Indians with food, transportation, a natural defensive barrier and two burial grounds for the indigenous people. The first Europeans to settle in the area were the French who established their ribbon farms along the rivers. They were followed by the Germans who in the 1800s were attracted by the many springs located in the area. In 1850 Augustus D. Burdeno, a veteran of the Mexican War, purchased the tract of land he would later name "Del Rey." Two years later Burdeno purchased Zug Island from the Indians for "a mere \$5.00 and a keg of whiskey." (*Del Ray News*, 1925) Burdeno changed the name of the area, initially known as Belgrade, to reflect the Mexican village he grew fond of while serving in the war. Del Ray was described as having, "...river roads lined with giant maple trees and [the Rouge] a beautiful stream filled with fish. Del Ray became the place where many Detroiters would sail their boats, go for Sundays picnics, or to pick the water lilies that flourished along the west side of Zug Island." (*Del Ray News*, 1925) By the mid-1850s many merchants began to establish businesses along the old Detroit-Toledo Territorial Highway (West Jefferson Avenue).

In 1860, when prospectors found large salt beds beneath Zug Island, Del Ray began to change from an idyllic village to an industrial enclave. On October 14, 1888 Del Ray was incorporated as a village with a population of 3,500. By 1888, an improvement company had been organized to drain the marshy land about the Rouge and Detroit Rivers for future development. Del Ray's combined availability of river transportation and natural resources made the area attractive to manufacturers of glass, railroad cars, pig iron, chemicals, glue, brick and building materials, and salt products. In 1894, the Solvay Process Company built its factory on the site of the 1891 Detroit Exposition. Between 1894 and 1905, Del Ray became the home to some of the area's largest manufacturers; they included the Detroit Salt Company, the Detroit Soda Product Company, the Pulp and Paper Mill Company, Detroit Iron Works, Allied Chemical Company and Great Lakes Steel. In 1906, Del Ray Township was annexed to the City of Detroit along with the townships of Springwells and Woodmere.

Detroit's industrial boom coupled with Henry Ford's \$5.00 a day for his employees led to an influx of Eastern European immigrants to the Detroit area. Several immigrant groups made Del Ray their home, including the Armenians, Poles, and Ukrainians. But it was the Hungarian immigrants who gave Del Ray its ethnic identity. They soon became the largest population in the area and the third largest Hungarian community in the country. As the inflow of Hungarians increased so did the number of Hungarian businesses in the community. By the 1940s members of Hungarian community began to move out of Del Ray and into other downriver communities. Following World War II, Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and southern Whites, attracted by jobs and inexpensive housing, began to move into the area. Del Ray continues to be home to a small number of Hungarian immigrants arriving in the Detroit area.

History of James McMillan School: In 1870, School District No. 2 was established to accommodate the growing student population in Del Ray Township. Del Ray's first school was built a year later; it was a two story, two room building located on Dearborn Avenue. In 1885 the Del Ray School Board allocated \$8,000 for the construction of a new four room school house and the appointment of a principal. District No. 2 school board member John Frank and his wife Carolina donated a lot located on West End Avenue for this purpose. Ground was broken for the new school in September, 1887 and the cornerstone was laid two years later. The school opened its door for classes September 7, 1891. The school was named for James McMillan, a prominent Detroit businessman, philanthropist and United States senator. Unable to attend the ceremony, McMillan donated a flag to the school named in his honor. Frank Cody was appointed McMillan School's first principal, a position he held for twenty-two years.

In 1894, the four-room school building was destroyed by fire. What was left of the original building was torn down, and plans were made to build a new sixteen room, two story, brick school building on the old site. During the period of construction classes were held in various vacant buildings including saloons, stores, and homes.

The architectural partnership of Malcolmson and Higginbotham, formed in 1890, was commissioned to design the new building. Malcolmson and Higginbotham had been retained by the Detroit Board of Education on an annual basis since 1891 and were associated with the Detroit School for thirty years. The Preston School (1894, now demolished), Detroit Central High/Old Main (1894), and Beard School (1896) were all designed in the Romanesque style.

The school and district were annexed to the Detroit Public School System in 1907 before which time McMillan had become a high school. When Mr. Cody became Assistant Superintendent of the Detroit Schools in September of 1914, Mr. George Murdock succeeded him as principal. Mr. Murdock was transferred to the Nordstrum (now Southwestern High School) in September, 1916, taking the high school division with him. McMillan reverted back to an elementary school and has remained one to this day.

James McMillan was born in Hamilton, Ontario on May 12, 1838. Upon completion of college he moved to Detroit and entered the hardware business where he was employed at Buhl and Ducharme, dealers in general hardware and cutlery at wholesale. In 1855, with the assistance of his father, McMillan acquired a position with the Detroit Milwaukee Railroad Company as a purchasing agent. By 1864, McMillan organized the Michigan Car Company. Gradually, his business interests varied to include banking, railroads, the building and operation of passenger and freight steamers, as well as other manufacturing endeavors. McMillan either organized or served on the board of some of area's most profitable companies, including Detroit Dry Dock Company, Detroit Union Depot Company, Detroit Charcoal Furnace Company, Silver Islet Company, National Rolling Stock Company, Duluth, South Shore & Atlantic Railroad, Detroit, Mackinac & Marquette Railroad and the Edison Electric Light Company. The family was probably best known as the majority shareholders and managers of the Detroit & Cleveland Navigation Company, which operated a fleet of prestigious sidewheel passenger steamers.

James McMillan was also a philanthropist whose charitable contributions were numerous. During his tenure as a park commissioner for the city, he helped draft legislation for the acquisition of Belle Isle Park. He later made several substantial monetary contributions to the development of the park. McMillan donated \$200,000 to Grace Hospital; at the time it was the largest single contribution given to a hospital by an individual. Prior to his death McMillan presented the University of Michigan with one of the most complete Shakespearean libraries in the country.

In 1889, James McMillan was elected to the United States Senate, replacing Senator Thomas W. Palmer. Known as a zealous Republican, McMillan belonged to the progressive wing of the party. While in his first term, McMillan was appointed chairman of the District of Columbia, virtually becoming the mayor of Washington D.C. He is most noted for the establishment of an urban plan and park system. McMillan's plan for Washington D.C., based upon and reviving the L'Enfant plan for the city, became the nation's first comprehensive city plan and is credited with beginning the city planning movement in the United States. James McMillan died in 1902 during his third term as Senator.

Physical Description

McMillan School was built in 1895 to the designs of the Detroit architectural firm of Malcomson and Higginbotham in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Although originating from a more traditional classical style, the architect's design for the school followed the famous architect Henry Hobson Richardson's lead by utilizing traditional materials manipulated to add creativity to the design, particularly in the use of intricate units of detail in molded brick. Contrasts of window and wall massing, light and shadow, and textures add further interest to the exterior of this impressive school building designed by Detroit's premier school architect of the time.

The original section of McMillan School is a large, orange pressed brick, two-story rectangular building with an additional full story within a high basement. Symmetrically arranged, the middle bay of its five-bay front facade is composed of a projecting entrance tower flanked by recessed, fenestrated wall sections followed by projecting, gable-roofed, fenestrated end pavilions. The foundations of the original building are masonry.

Gable roofs intersect the main hip roof over the projecting wall surfaces of the outer pavilions of the front facade and the center bays of the side elevations. Their resulting end gables form triangular pediments framed by wooden horizontal friezes on their bases and slopes, the friezes devoid of detail other than the raised wooden moldings defining their edges. Centered in each of the two frontal gables on the front facade is a round panel defined by molded brick.

The horizontal frieze and moldings of the pediments continue around to all elevations, with a break at the central tower. The tower rises above the roofline and appears to be altered, its height stunted; it is capped with a shallow hip roof. Its base contains the main entrance to the building. The piers of the large arched opening leading to the entrance are constructed of smooth stone laid in courses of alternating large rectangular blocks and narrow slabs. Foliated imposts, a diamond-patterned molded brick extrados, and brick spandrels with a raised fifth course ornament the face

of the entrance. Incised in the name plate above the arch, centered within a wide band of weave-patterned brick squares, is the name, *Jas. McMillan School*. Proceeding up the three stone steps through the archway are a pair of modern steel doors.

All windows on the facade and north and south elevations of the original school building are substantially recessed in wooden frames and contain subdivided window sashes with transoms. The fenestration within the five bays of the front facade is regularly and rhythmically arranged; the central entrance bay has a pair of windows; the flanking inner two bays have a grouping of three windows, and the outer bays have groupings of four.

At second story level, the tower section features a window arrangement composed of two double-hung sash, four-over-four pane windows, the top sash being arched. Its voussoirs are composed of narrow bricks laid three-deep. A continuous stone band runs horizontally at the sill level and the impost level; the arcaded extrados is composed of molded brick and the impost blocks are in the form of foliated balls. Centered above these windows is a round panel with the dates, 1889 and 1895 inscribed. Two plain rectangular openings are positioned just below the top of the altered tower.

The fenestration of the first and second stories of the recessed section flanking the entrance tower consist of a set of three four-paned windows, each with a transom window above, which share window sills and lintels. On the outside end of this section on both stories is a single narrow opening containing a pair of transoms with narrow rectangular windows below. A molded, scroll-like stone keystone and brick voussoirs rest above these smaller windows.

Lastly, the outer bays feature a set of four similar double-hung sash four-over four windows per story, their sills supported on pairs of small console brackets made of molded brick. Between each window opening is a stack of rounded bricks linked by flat bricks, visually creating an interlocking effect. Around these windows is a field of square bricks molded with a basket-weave pattern; at their edges are brick moldings with a bead pattern and, lining them, an egg and dart molding. Slightly raised brick quoins are located at the corners of the end sections of the front facade.

Basement windows, slightly taller than wide, exist in a regular fashion above grade and, like some upper story windows, are framed as a group with diamond-patterned molded brick. Those on the north elevation are boarded.

The north side elevation features a projecting central section with a large arched secondary entrance and a window arrangement composed of two double-hung sash, four-over-four pane windows with square transoms above and half-round windows above them. The flanking recessed section of this three-bay elevation has groupings of either three or four windows identical to those on the recessed bays of the front facade; they featured a continuous sill and a molded diamond-patterned brick enframingent. The north elevation remains intact today; the south side elevation has been partially obscured and altered by two later additions.

On the interior of the original school building, the hallways are lined with wainscoting. Ornamental detail is minimal; positioned in the corners of the archway leading to the north side stairway are decorative corner brackets. There are now five classrooms on the main floor, eight on the top floor, and three in the basement.

A newer wing, constructed in 1924, was attached to the west half of the south side of the original school building and a one story, concrete block, brick faced addition was added to the southeast corner of the original building in 1962. The "Annex", as the 1924 addition is known, is a two-story yellow-brown brick building on concrete foundations that was sited greatly forward on the property from the original school building. Its design attempts to pick up on some historical design cues from the main building, although the addition is more Neo-Georgian in style. Its entrance is framed with masonry surrounds and a segmentally arched pediment; a stone panel above bears the words, *AD McMillan Annex 1924*. Windows that are banded with continuous sills and quoins ornament blank wall surfaces and corners. Many of the large windows have been covered over. The Annex was built to house an auditorium and a gymnasium on the first floor and the library and teachers' lounge on the second story. The auditorium is particularly noteworthy due to its decorative ceiling, wooden stage, and plaster molding around the proscenium. Hallways of this section have high oak chair rails and terrazzo floors.

The rear elevation of McMillan School is more utilitarian in appearance than the other visible elevations, although the horizontal frieze moldings run around the entire original school building, including the rear. A one-story boiler room occupies the space of a former courtyard, its tall chimney jutting up at its northwest corner. Large rear windows are of the double hung sash variety. The rear area of the school property is occupied by a gravel parking lot, a basketball court and a playfield.

Criteria: The proposed historic district would appear to meet two of the criteria contained in Chapter 25, Section 25-1-1: Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified. Section 25-2-3: Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Russell L. Baltimore, Melanie A. Bazil, Gordon P. Bugbee, Beulah Croxford, De Witt Dykes, Lucile Cruz Gajec, Marie M. Gardner, Calvin Jackson, and Florence (Peggy) LaRose. The ex-officio members, who are frequently represented by members of their staff are: Maud Lyon; the Director of the City Planning Commission, Marsha Bruhn; and the Director of the Planning and Development Department, Paul Bernard.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district, with the design treatment level of "conservation." A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

PROPOSED JAMES McMILLAN
HISTORIC DISTRICT
(Boundaries of district
heavy Black)

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