

**NEWTON PUBLIC BUILDINGS SURVEY
PHASE II – ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Building Analysis

Oak Hill Middle School



Address: 130 Wheeler Road
Year of Construction: 1936

Level of Significance: Moderate

Recommended Treatment Level: Rehabilitation

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance

Building History

The Oak Hill School was constructed to serve the rapidly developing Oak Hill neighborhood of Newton in 1936. The original portion of the building is a two-and-a-half-story brick structure with cast stone trim and a steep hipped roof with a one-story gable roofed library wing to the east. Like many of the school buildings of this time period the building was constructed in the Georgian Revival style.

The Oak Hill neighborhood was largely rural until the 1920. As the area was subdivided and developed throughout the 1920s and 30s increasing population growth put stresses on the existing neighboring schools. Land for a new neighborhood school was acquired by the City in 1935. Construction of the school was partially funded by the Public Works Administration (PWA), a New Deal program designed to provide employment, stabilize purchasing power, improve public welfare and contribute to reviving American industry. The PWA funded the construction of more than 34,000 projects, including 70% of the new schools and 1/3 of the hospitals built between 1933 and its termination in 1941. In addition to funding the construction school building itself PWA funds paid for the construction of a new Oak Hill sewer line and an extension of local roadways to access the school site. The connected library built as part of the school complex was designed to serve as a branch library for the surrounding neighborhood.

The school was designed in 1936 by the firm of Densmore, Le Clear and Robbins, a prominent local firm with many buildings in Boston and Cambridge to their name. Some of their more notable projects include the Paine Furniture Building (listed on the National Register), the Salada Tea Company office building, the Bankers' Realty Co. office building and the Back Bay Telephone Exchange, all in Boston. Gifford LeClear, architect, engineer and one of the principals of the firm, was a resident of Waban. He earned his Bachelors and Masters degrees in engineering at Harvard, in 1895 and 1896 respectively. In 1897 he and Edward Dana Densmore opened an office in Boston together. In 1914, architect and Newton Highlands resident Henry Chandler Robbins, their employee in charge of architectural drafting since 1907, became a partner and the firm name changed to Densmore, LeClear and Robbins.

The school was closed in 1984, an era of declining school enrollment in Newton. The building was rented to the Solomon Schecter Day School as well as a Montessori school. In the 1990s the School department re-occupied the building. In 1997 a 1961-era addition at the west side of the building was demolished and a large contemporary addition constructed in its place. The school was re-opened as a middle school.

Level of Significance

The Oak Hill Middle School is significant under National Register Criterion A for its association with the rapid expansion of the Newton Public School system in the 1920s and 1930s. The building maintains a high level of architectural integrity. Recent additions do not detract from the historic appearance of the original building.

Bibliography

- The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. The Department of History of The George Washington University, Washington, DC. <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/glossary/pwa.cfm> (accessed 11/29/11)
- Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Form B NWT.3680—130 Wheeler Rd" (1997, 1986).
- National Register of Historic Places, Paine Furniture Building, Boston, Suffolk County, MA, Reference # 02001039
- Harvard Alumni Association. "Biographical Sketch: Gifford LeClear." *Harvard College Class of 1895 – Fifth Report*. Cambridge, MA: Crimson Printing Company (June 1915) p.178-179.
- Harvard Alumni Association. "Biographical Sketch: Henry Chandler Robbins." *Harvard College Class of 1901 – Fourth Report*. Cambridge, MA: Crimson Printing Company (July 1916) p. 350.
- United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. "National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form: Newton 20th Century Multiple Resource Area Amendment, Newton, MA". 1990.

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance: Historic Images



Figure 1: Front elevation of the school circa 1987 (credit: MACRIS).

Part 2 – Description of Historically Significant Features

Exterior Visual Character

Setting

- The school is set facing a road at the edge of a residential neighborhood. The building site is adjacent to two other schools forming a large educational complex.

Shape

- The original building is a rectangular two-story building with a high basement with a one-story library wing at the east connected to the main building by a low one-story connector.
- A large modern addition is located at the west side of the original school building.

Roof and Related Features

- The main building has a hipped roof, the library wing has a gable roof. Both roofs are clad with asphalt roofing that is designed to mimic slate.
- The one-story connector between the main building and library wing has a flat EPDM roof. A wood balustrade is located at the roof edges.
- A two story wood cupola is located at the center of the main roof. The base of the cupola has raised corner quoins. The upper portion of the cupola has corner pilasters and elaborate surrounds around arched louvered openings and is capped with a domed copper roof and weather vane. There is a wood balustrade at the perimeter of the deck between the base and upper tier.
- The library wing has a masonry chimney at the east side of the roof. The main building has a large masonry chimney at the center of the north wall.
- The building's cornice and fascia are painted sheet metal. There are decorative brackets at the main building cornice.
- Gutters and leaders are aluminum, painted white.

Openings

- Window openings at the main building are either single or grouped in sets of three. Window sashes are modern replacements but typically retain the original 16-over-16 configuration of the original windows.
- The library wing has a large central projecting bay window with single 16-over-16 window sashes with transoms at either side. Other windows are single openings.
- The main building has symmetrically placed entrance doors at each side of the street (south) façade with double doors and transoms. The door openings are each located within a pedimented stone surround. There is a single window opening above each entrance, also located within a stone surround.

Projections:

- A wood balcony with wood balustrade projects from the tall center window on the first floor of the main building.
- There is a projecting bay window at the south elevation of the library wing. The projection has an EPDM roof with a wood balustrade at the perimeter.
- A canopy with a lead coated copper roof spans the main entrance at the west wall of the library wing.

Trim and Secondary Features:

- The entrance doors and the windows above them are set within cast stone surrounds and the windows have cast stone sills.

Materials

- The walls are typically red brick with an alternating course of header and stretchers every 6th course. The header bricks are typically a dark yellow/brown. Trim is limestone, wood and painted sheet metal. Window openings have jack arch brick lintels supported by steel angles. Exterior stairs are typically granite. The building has a concrete foundation.

Craft Details

- The tall windows at either side of the library wing projecting bay have decorative wrought iron railings at the exterior.
- A carved stone tablet is set high in the wall of the east gable end of the library wing.

Interior Visual Character

Individually Important Spaces

Art Classroom, Ground Floor

- The entrance to the room is through a recessed pair of wood doors set within a wood paneled opening. Each door leaf has 10 lights.
- The room is the original main library space and has a fireplace with wood mantle and quarry tile surround. Some of the tiles have decorative motifs (Indian, castle, knight, etc.). The fireplace opening is bricked in.
- The ceiling is hidden with a non-original suspended acoustic tile ceiling that slopes up as it approaches the exterior walls to allow for full height windows. Original finishes may be present above the ceiling tile.

Related Spaces

Corridors

- Corridors at the first floor of the original building have plaster walls with rounded corners. Glazed yellow/buff ceramic tile wainscot is installed at the lower portion of the walls (~5') with baseboard tiles and a bullnose top edge. Doors to the classrooms have a tile border with rounded edges at the head and jamb. Modern surface-mounted lockers have been installed along some of the walls.
- Basement corridors are similar to those on the first floor except the walls are painted cast-in-place concrete with visible formwork marks.
- Doors are typically wood with 9 vision lights each (typically with a clear center pane while the other panes are textured translucent glass). Doors typically have 5-pane fixed wood transoms.
- There is one built-in wood display case at each floor. The cases contain a pair of wood framed glass doors and have wood interior finishes. The cases have been modified to become fire alarm closets.
- Other corridor finishes have been modified. The ceiling is suspended acoustic tile with integral light fixtures and the floor is modern vinyl tile.

Stairs

- The original building has metal pan stairs with terrazzo treads and landings.
- The stair rail consists of a profiled wood top rail with vertical balusters and a lower metal handrail. The rail is curved at where it bends.
- Stairwells have plaster walls with the same ceramic tile wainscot found in the corridors.

Other Significant Interior Features

Classrooms

- Classrooms have non-original suspended acoustic tile ceilings that hide the original ceiling and the tops of the walls. A picture rail was visible at the top of the wall at one area with a missing ceiling tile. Flooring has been replaced with vinyl tile.
- Walls are plaster and there are typically built in bookcases and low cubbies with doors within the classroom spaces.

Part 2 – Images



Figure 2: Close up view of stone entrance surround and door transom at main building.



Figure 3: Decorative wood bracket below projecting balcony at south elevation.



Figure 4: Cupola at main roof.



Figure 5: Tile wainscot and door surround in corridor.



Figure 6: Decorative tilework at fireplace surround of former library space.

Part 3 – Treatment Recommendations

Preservation Treatment Level

Oak Hill Middle School is still in use as part of the Newton school system. As an active school the building has ever changing programming needs. A recent large addition to the school was built to accommodate these new uses. The addition has been designed to be compatible in both materials and shape with the original school building, which was restored at the same time. The alterations made to the school during this campaign are a very successful example of the "Rehabilitation" Level of treatment outlined in the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*. The Rehabilitation treatment allows for the building to be altered or added to through the construction of additions to support new uses while preserving those portions or features that convey the building's historic character. This continues to be the recommended treatment for future work at the school.

The following bulleted list contains an analysis of existing conditions and recommended treatments for the significant features catalogued in Part 2 of this report.

Exterior Recommendations

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Determine the source of water infiltration into the second floor corridor and repair.
- Install a gutter and leader at the perimeter of the canopy roof over the library entrance at the south elevation to control runoff from the roof at this area that is damaging the masonry below.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Perform wood repairs at projecting balcony at center of south elevation, main building and the roof balustrades at the library connector and library bay window. Repairs include:
 - Complete removal of existing paint from wood surfaces. This will also remove the biological growth present at the balustrades.
 - Installation of new wood dutchmen with profiles matching the existing wood elements at areas of severe deterioration. Replacement of wood elements in-kind at areas of deterioration that are not repairable.
 - Consolidation at areas of less severely deteriorated wood.
 - Repainting wood surfaces.
 - Installation of painted metal caps at some of the more vulnerable areas of wood to prevent further deterioration.
- Repoint the granite steps and landings and brick and granite sidewalls at the exterior entrances, particularly around the entrance to the library wing at the south elevation. Repaint or replace all metal stair pipe railings. Repaint original wrought iron railing at library entrance landing.
- Refasten the sheet metal fascia to the masonry wall at the south elevation of the low one-story connector between the main building and library where it has become detached. Clean bird droppings from the brick at this location.
- Repaint the wrought iron balconies and areaway guardrails at the windows on the south elevation of the library wing.
- A number of steel lintels, particularly lintels at the library wing basement windows and at windows at the north elevation are showing signs of rust jacking. Some of the lintels are actively displaced are causing cracking and spalling at the adjacent brick. These lintels need to be replaced, all need to be repainted. Rebuild areas of displaced bricks where rust jacking has occurred and where removed to replace lintels.
- Regrade the area adjacent to the areaways leading to the basement entrance of the library on the east elevation and the basement entrances to the main building on the north

elevation to prevent water infiltration into the areaways – the entrances are currently being protected with sandbags.

- Replace the deteriorated and rusting metal cap at the main chimney with a new metal cap.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Clean staining from paint residue from the brick below windows.
- Once repairs have been made to the library entrance landing perform plaster repairs at the exterior ceiling below.
- Replace rusting ferrous metal flashing at the main building chimney.
- Remove loose paint from the sheet metal cornice, perform minor repairs to the metal as required and repaint.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features.
- Maintain all gutters, leaders and drains to keep clog-free.

Interior Recommendations

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Water damaged acoustic tile was observed in the center of the second floor corridor, adjacent to the elevator. Determine the source of this leak and repair the roof above. Replace damaged tile.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Patch or replace in kind damaged and broken tiles at the corridor and stairway wainscot.
- The brown/finish coats of plaster around the door to the exterior porch in the Art Classroom are delaminating. Repair the exterior surround to prevent water entry and repair plaster.
- Consolidate and hide loose-hanging wiring at classroom ceilings.
- Concrete patch repairs at spalled areas of foundation.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Repair cracks in terrazzo at stairwells. Clean and re-polish terrazzo.
- Repaint worn metal stair elements in the stairwells.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features. Elements that become deteriorated should be repaired or replaced in kind.
- Future alterations should continue to be sensitive to the original design and should strive to retain as much of the original material still present as possible.