

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

**Building Analysis**

**Williams Elementary School**



Address: 141 Grove Street

Year of Construction: 1950

Level of Significance: Moderate

Recommended Treatment Level: Rehabilitation

## **PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance**

### *Building History*

The Williams School, constructed in 1950, was the first new school building constructed in Newton after World War II. Unlike the schools built in the City in the 1920s and 1930s, which were predominantly Georgian Revival or Tudor Revival, the Williams school was designed in a contemporary style influenced by the Art Moderne movement. The building is a two-story flat roofed rectangular structure with rounded bays at each end. The main entrance at the center of the street elevation is set within a protruding stone bay with stone blocks that form a ziggurat at the top of the wall.

After a restriction on construction during World War II, and material shortages shortly thereafter, municipal projects were renewed. The need for new schools in the city was acute, as the population of Newton had greatly increased during and after the War. In addition to new suburban development in previously open areas a great deal of additional development took place within older neighborhoods, stressing already existing schools. To address the increased need for school facilities Newton's school system underwent a period of rapid expansion. In the 1950s and 1960s approximately fourteen new school buildings were constructed within the City, either to serve newly developed areas or to replace older existing schools. The Williams School was built to replace an existing 19<sup>th</sup> century school of the same name at 102 Hancock Street. The original building had been named for Auburndale resident Thomas Scott Williams (1812-1874), a civil engineer and supporter of public education. Williams was involved in the construction of the Boston Water Works and later became the Superintendent of the Boston & Maine Railroad. The new Williams school building was constructed on the playground of the former school, which was demolished upon completion of the new facility.

The new school was designed by Frederic B. Stearns (1874-1959), an Auburndale resident and principal of the Boston firm of Shepard and Stearns. Stearns obtained his architecture degree from MIT in 1899 and became a draughtsman for the firm of Winslow and Bigelow Architects. He worked for the firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge from 1904-1908 and for the firm of Derby, Robinson & Shepard from 1908-1910. When Derby, Robinson & Shepard dissolved in 1910 he joined George F. Shepard as an associate. The two formed the partnership of Shepard and Stearns in 1921. Among the principal works of Shepard and Stearns are the YWCA building in Boston, the Walter Baker Company administration building and storehouse in Dorchester and the Union Wool Company building in South Boston.

The school retains a great deal of its original historic fabric. The original bands of glass block and steel windows were replaced by bands of aluminum windows in 1993. An appropriately-designed addition was constructed in 2001.

### *Level of Significance*

The Williams School is significant under National Register Criterion A for its association with the post-World War II expansion of the Newton Public School system. The building is also significant under Criterion C as a rare example of Art Moderne civic architecture within the City.

### *Bibliography*

- American Institute of Architects. "Questionnaire for Architects' Roster and/or Register of Architects Qualified for Federal Public Works: Shepard and Stearns – Architect Engineers" (May 14, 1946)  
<<http://communities.aia.org/sites/hdoaa/wiki/Wiki%20Pages/ahd4004913.aspx>> (visited March 28, 2012).  
Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Form B NWT.2594—141 Hancock Street" (1987).  
Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Form B NWT.5808—141 Grove Street" (1997).  
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: Williams Elementary School circa 1987 showing the original glass block and steel strip windows. (Credit: MACRIS)



Figure 2: Previous Thomas S. Williams School on Hancock Street, replaced by the current school building. (Credit: Auburndale Library)

## **Part 2 – Description of Historically Significant Features**

### **Exterior Visual Character**

#### *Setting*

- Facing southeast towards Grove Street. A parking lot and playground are in the rear.

#### *Shape*

- The horizontal two-story structure with side wings extending towards the rear. The front elevation bends slightly to accommodate the curvature of Grove Street.
- The east, auditorium wing is a tall, single-height volume.

#### *Roof and Related Features*

- A low-slope roof is hidden behind a parapet wall with an aluminum fascia or cap.

#### *Openings*

- Windows are typically clustered in horizontal bands, with some single openings, predominantly near the entries. All have steel lintels and limestone sills. The original glass block and low, steel ribbon windows have been replaced by operable aluminum double-hung windows with infill transom panels.
- The tall window over the side entry has a soldier brick surround with mitered corners.
- Doors are pebble-finished aluminum replacements. The east auditorium wing retains its original pair of wood 3-paneled doors, set within a glass block and limestone surround.

#### *Projections:*

- The tall limestone panels at the main and side entry bays extend above the roofline.
- A shallow limestone canopy with 3 carved horizontal lines projects over the main entry.
- The front façades of the east and west wings have a shallow, bowed shape.
- The east wing granite stairs have brick cheek walls with limestone coping and pipe rail handrails.
- Shallow brick buttresses at each structural bay are the full height of the building.

#### *Trim and Secondary Features:*

- Non-original exterior concrete stairs and ramps have been built over existing, concentric granite stairs at the entries.
- There is a flush limestone cornice at the auditorium wing.

#### *Materials*

- The building is predominantly yellow/buff brick with limestone articulating prominent features such as entries with some ornamentation.
- The ceilings at the east and west wing entries are stucco.

#### *Craft Details*

- Stylistically, ornamentation is appropriately sparse and streamlined. Articulation is typically through shallow stepped planes, in the brick and limestone and in the copper roof flashing.
- The front elevation is articulated with Art Deco bas relief decorative carving, including:
  - “WILLIAMS SCHOOL” carved into the top of the main entry limestone panel
  - the school seal, integral to the main entry panel
  - ornamental carving above the east wing entry
  - at the limestone cornice of the auditorium wing
- Soldier courses at west wing provide subtle ornamentation.

## **Interior Visual Character**

### *Individually Important Spaces*

#### William A. Leighton Auditorium

- The wide, shallow barrel-vaulted ceiling has adhered acoustic tile and built up lighting coves. There is a wood ceiling directly in front of stage  
-suspended linear fluorescent fixtures and ceiling fans
- The plaster walls have shallow inset panels and decorative painted, cast plaster strips in a leaf motif, between the shallow panels and surrounding the proscenium.
- The 4' tall wainscot is of varnished plywood panels, alternating in grain direction. Ornamental wood rails are applied along the seating.
- The sloped floor is covered in commercial carpet.
- The diagonally-laid wood floor at the stage and level "ramp" appear to have been recently refinished. The "ramp" has a painted pipe railing.
- The upholstered theater seats are not original.

#### Auditorium vestibule

- The suspended acoustic tile ceiling has a wide plaster reveal at the full perimeter.
- The plaster wall has a 6'-6" tall plywood panel wainscot, similar to that in the auditorium.
- The terrazzo floor has a border of a darker color with an integral baseboard.
- The exterior doors and glass blocks have an aluminum-clad frame and bullnose at the side.
- Two pairs of plywood doors with vision panes lead to the auditorium.

### *Related Spaces*

#### Corridors

- The original ceiling is hidden behind suspended acoustic tiles with integral light fixtures.
- The painted plaster walls have a 5' tall wainscot of large, textured, pale celery glazed ceramic tiles and dark green base tiles. The plaster and tile are typically flush. At the perimeter of the auditorium the tile sits proud of the surface with a bullnose tile border.
- The original flooring is covered with commercial carpeting.
- The lockers are recessed into the walls.
- The plywood classroom doors with vision panes are hung in painted, hollow metal frames.

#### Gymnasium

- The painted brick walls have high windows and a tall tile wainscot above the wood floor.
- Acoustic tile is adhered between the exposed steel girders and heavy timber beams.

#### Main Entry Vestibule/Stair Well

- The two original stairwells, one of which is also the main entry vestibule, are similar.
- The ceilings have adhered acoustic tiles. The west stair ceiling has suspended acoustic tiles.
- The painted, exposed brick walls have a wainscot of large, matte, buff ceramic tile.
- The original floor is covered with non-original vinyl sheet flooring.
- The utilitarian metal pan stairs have wood handrails and textured vinyl treads.

### *Other Significant Interior Features*

- Each classroom has a little entry vestibule, with a door on the corridor side only.
- There are non-original skylights in the art classroom.
- The stair halls and corridor segments are typically separated with thick, metal-framed glazed walls, consisting of a pair of plywood doors with vision panes, flanked by 3-pane sidelights and three transom panels, all with wire glass. The exception is at the main entry and stair, where the 3-paned plywood panel sidelights and the multi-paned transoms are supported by a wood-clad frame.

**Part 2 – Images**



Figure 3 (top): auditorium entrance

Figure 4 (center left): limestone panel at main entrance

Figure 5 (center right): glass block-surrounded doors in auditorium vestibule

Figure 6 (bottom): auditorium



### **Part 3 – Treatment Recommendations**

#### **Preservation Treatment Level**

Williams Elementary School is still in use as part of the Newton school system, and as an active school has ever changing programming needs. To enable the school to continue to serve its primary educational function it is recommended that future work be performed according to 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 which convey the building's historic character.

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)

- The roof was not accessible for survey. Minor water stains on the interior may indicate roof leaks. Inspect the roof and repair as required.
- Repair loose drip edge at library skylights. Ensure batt insulation is not exposed to the outdoors and water damage.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Structural cracks. Determine cause, remediate if still active, and repair. Includes: limestone at main entry projection, at the top right and at the overhang; step cracking at north windows;
- Confirm the necessity of the ferrous wall ties. Replace with stainless steel.
- Remove rust and repaint all ferrous elements, including handrails, ventilation grilles on building facades, steel grilles over areaways, hold-open hardware at entry doors, and exposed conduit.
- Repair concrete at ramps, stairs, and landings where spalled and broken from rusting handrails. Reinstall handrails with more appropriate detail. Resecure loose diamond plate metal nosings; replace missing nosings in kind.
- Remove extraneous ferrous elements from building exterior. Patch as required.
- Steel window lintels are rusted. Many need to be replaced, all need to be repainted. Reset and repoint displaced bricks where rust jacking has occurred and where removed to replace lintels. Rust jacking is particularly severe at the second floor windows.
- Investigate the cause of rust staining at the north elevation windows, gymnasium wing. Remove rusting elements. Replace with non-ferrous or stainless steel if necessary. Reset and repoint displaced bricks and limestone where removed.
- Efflorescence is present below each vertical mullion of aluminum windows. This is typical at all Newton schools with aluminum replacement windows, and appears indicative of water infiltration. Inspect all windows, including sealant joints, and repair as necessary.
- Repair wood components as necessary. Paint all wood elements, including paneled doors at east wing entry.
- Review the cheek wall detailing for water infiltration. Provide through-wall flashing under the limestone coping.
- Replace broken bricks in kind, including at the southwest corner, and at rust-jacked window openings.
- Provide a Dutchman repair to the spalled, broken limestone surround at the east wing entry to seal the enclosure.
- Repair the cracking limestone sill at the front elevation.
- Replace the missing and cracked glass blocks in kind.

- Remove ivy growth.
- Weatherproof the wide gap between the exterior doors to the auditorium vestibule.

#### Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Patch minor cracks in limestone.
- Clean and repaint the rusting recessed ceiling light fixtures at the front entries.
- Replace the sealant joints at the exterior grilles.
- Provide a new light fixture to match the missing original at the east door junction box.
- Clean building exterior, including:
  - Rust staining: below ferrous elements; at north windows, gymnasium wing.
  - Waterstaining at south entry overhangs- no drip edges; at north face of library wing
  - Biological growth, moss: east wing entry cheek walls; east elevation
  - Efflorescence: minor patches; east wing entry cheek walls
  - Graffiti: at limestone surround, east wing entry
  - General staining: particularly at the limestone
  - Copper staining: at limestone sills, west wing

#### Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Monitor the mildly spalling limestone at the entries. Find an alternative to salt use.
- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features.
- Maintain all drains to keep clog-free.

### **Interior Recommendations**

#### Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Investigate and repair the cause of water damage. Includes:
  - acoustic ceiling tiles in front of the west stair window
  - scattered tiles, mostly on the west side of the auditorium ceiling , and the plaster walls below
  - acoustic ceiling tiles in the hall in front of the gymnasium
  - severe damage at the acoustic tiles and plaster ceiling at east end of the auditorium vestibule

#### First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Repair and repaint plaster and replace damaged ceiling tiles, after addressing the source of damage, above.
- Refasten the loose bottom edge of the aluminum-clad bullnose in the auditorium vestibule.
- Reattach loose plywood wainscot panels in the auditorium and repair where damaged.
- Reattach the loose piece of wood at the glazed wall between the main entry and the lobby.

#### Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Investigate the necessity of the suspended acoustic tile ceilings, particularly where it blocks the tops of windows and vestibules, including in the west stair and the main lobby. Restore original ceiling height where possible.
- Repair the cracks in the flat plaster, including in the auditorium and corridors. Repaint.
- Repair the cracks in the auditorium cast plaster ornament. Repaint in kind.
- Clean the paint and sealant from the aluminum-clad frame in the auditorium vestibule.
- Refinish the wood handrails and repaint the metal stair elements.
- Repair or replace in kind the cracked corridor bullnose tile next to the auditorium door.
- Reset the loose acoustic ceiling tiles in the main corridor. Replace the bent elements as required.



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- When the spray paint mural in the main entry vestibule is no longer desired, remove carefully from the tile wainscot.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features.