

**The Commission for Historical and Architectural
Preservation - Staff Report**
February 14, 2012



Landmark Designation Report
Paul Laurence Dunbar Junior and Senior High School, PS 133
540 N. Caroline Street
Baltimore, Maryland

Historical Significance

The former Dunbar Junior and Senior High School, PS 133, is an important building in Baltimore's history for its architecture, its historic and continuing important role in the community, and the legacy of quality education for African Americans that has been in place within one city block for over 130 years. In order to better understand the importance of this particular school building, a brief overview of the history of the Dunbar School that predates the construction of PS 133 in 1931 is necessary.

Background History

The Paul Laurence Dunbar School has a long history as an elementary, junior high, and high school for African American students in East Baltimore. The history of Dunbar is distinguished in part because of its push, decade after decade, to truly achieve the "equal" in the "separate but equal" doctrine that was in place for much of its history.

A school for African Americans was first established in 1890, when a white school at Caroline and Jefferson Streets was turned over for African American students. Named "Colored Annex School No. 2," the school was intended to serve students from primary, grammar, and high schools,¹ though appears to have only served as a primary school. Originally constructed in 1855 for white students,² this school served African Americans for 25 years. Reuse of former white schools for use as African American schools was common in Baltimore City during the late 19th century.³

Due to the tireless efforts of community members, particularly the Colored Citizens Equitable Improvement Association in East Baltimore, a new school was constructed in the same block in 1916.⁴ Public School No. 101 was named for Paul Laurence Dunbar, the seminal African American poet.⁵ At that time, it was called "the finest of its kind that the colored people of Baltimore have."⁶ It could house 700 students,⁷ in "24 classrooms, teachers' rooms, manual training and cooking rooms, and an assembly hall."⁸ The school was comparable to other City schools constructed during that decade.⁹ The School Commission Report for 1916 states that the school was "modern in every detail", and the African American community "expressed their appreciation that such a splendid building had been erected for the use of colored pupils."¹⁰

Interestingly, PS 101 pre-dated the first comprehensive school construction plan, which established the "separate but equal" policies for City schools¹¹ in "appearance, facilities, and cost".¹² Thus, PS 101 was a forerunner in the equity of school buildings for African American students in Baltimore City. Just as significant is that this school was constructed during World War I. In the same year that PS 101 was constructed, the construction of an annex to a seriously overcrowded school was not completed due to the "shortage of labor and the high price of material incident to the war."¹³ The implication is that the construction of a new school for African American students was a higher priority than other school construction projects.

PS 101 was exclusively an elementary school until 1925, when it expanded to include a junior high school, the first for African Americans in Baltimore City.¹⁴ By 1930, it was the largest school in East Baltimore, according to the *Afro-American*,¹⁵ which likely spurred the need for a new building.

History of the Property

In 1931, a new Art Deco school building was constructed at the corner of Caroline and McElderry Streets. Opened February 1, 1932, the new Dunbar Junior High School, PS 133, was praised by the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City as being a “building which exemplifies utility as well as beauty and simplicity of design.”¹⁶ Designed by famed Baltimore architectural firm Taylor & Fisher, the school had 47 rooms, with a student capacity of 1,205.¹⁷ During the 1920s and ‘30s, under the school building programs, the City hired numerous prominent architectural firms to design the multitude of new school buildings.¹⁸ Taylor & Fisher designed many important Baltimore landmarks, including the Baltimore Trust Building – now the Bank of America Building. The richly detailed architecture of PS 133 is representative of the firm’s other Art Deco buildings.

In 1934, Baltimore-born African American artist Elton Fax, a graduate of Syracuse University, received a Civil Works Administration (CWA) commission to paint murals for Dunbar Junior High School. The CWA was a project of the New Deal that created jobs for the unemployed during the Great Depression. Fax was assisted by Dennis Gross¹⁹ in painting the murals, which included “Survival” and “Aspiration”. These large murals depicted African Americans engaged in industrious activities, such as construction, painting, writing, and playing music in front of large, modern buildings.²⁰ Fax continued on to a prestigious career as an artist and writer. The fate of these canvas murals is unknown.

With PS 133 serving as the junior high school, PS 101 reverted to being an elementary school. It has since been demolished. In 1935, Dunbar Junior High School added 10th grade to its school,²¹ becoming the second African American High school in the city. The school began awarding diplomas in 1938.²² For over 35 years, students attended Dunbar for junior and senior high school.

Due to several factors, including the fact that the school served as a junior and senior high, a general lack of schools for African Americans in Baltimore City, followed by the economic crunch of World War II, Dunbar quickly exceeded maximum capacity. This was temporarily remedied by the installation of portable classrooms in the school yard in 1939, which by 1944, were in extremely poor condition and causing health problems to the students and teachers alike.²³ The student population was 1,670,²⁴ thirty percent more than the building’s capacity; and the portables were outdated when they were installed.²⁵ Following a lack of response from the School Board regarding the state of things at the school, teachers from Dunbar took action and wrote a letter to Mayor McKeldin, alerting him to the extent of the safety hazards. Mayor McKeldin visited the school and declared

that the portable buildings were “a disgrace to our city” and the conditions deplorable.²⁶ This assertive action by the Dunbar teachers led to a city-wide renovation and repair campaign of portable classrooms – the biggest ever undertaken for portables in the city. The teachers at Dunbar helped raise school conditions not just for students and teachers at Dunbar, but across the school system.²⁷

The School Board’s heightened awareness of the overcrowding at Dunbar also led to a new addition at Dunbar. Bids for proposals were sought in 1948,²⁸ and the addition was completed October 18, 1950.²⁹ Designed by architectural firm Gaudreau & Gaudreau, the addition comprised of 1 classroom, 12 shops, and a gymnasium that included showers and lockers.³⁰ Only part of this addition still exists – the South Addition, located on the Caroline St. wing. Architecturally, it is the same as the original building. The gymnasium addition, constructed on the McElderry Street wing and known as the West Addition, has been demolished.

In 1954, after the U.S. Supreme Court made a decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*, every local school board approached desegregation differently. Baltimore City’s School Board took a unique stance, voting to desegregate but allowing students to choose where they wanted to go to school. The free choice policy made integration voluntary, but uncommon. While it first resulted in minimal but peaceful desegregation, the schools eventually resegregated.³¹ Dunbar’s majority African American student population did not change after integration policies took effect. In the 1960s, the chair of CORE’s education committee, Marcia Kallen, charged that Baltimore City’s free choice policy was “planned segregation”, because the composition of the schools had changed so little since school desegregation.³²

The Art Deco building was phased out of use as Dunbar High School when the current Dunbar High School was constructed on Orleans Street in 1974. Echoing the actions of the Equitable Improvement Association in 1916 for the original Dunbar School, the construction of this new building was due to the efforts of the community members and students voicing a demand for high-quality education in a new building. Dunbar students who were members of the Student Committee on Racial Equality (S.C.O.R.E.) picketed outside their school,³³ and over 80 held a sit-in – that turned into a sleep-in – at the Department of Education in 1965.³⁴ The students found allies in the Dunbar Community-School Council, Dunbar PTA, Youth Task Force,³⁵ and others.

Despite their push for a new building, the community still valued PS 133. In 1965, the School Board’s plans to phase the old Dunbar school out of the school system was met with great resistance. Ninety faculty members at the school protested, calling Dunbar a “citadel within which citizens of the area have long associated and identified for many decades”. They stated that closing the school “would destroy for many citizens their roots of social, educational and cultural values, leaving a vacuum” in the lives of many in East Baltimore.³⁶

The faculty’s statements did not over-exaggerate the central place that Dunbar held in East Baltimore. While the school certainly played a critical role for the children who

attended that school for junior and senior high between 1932 and 1974, it also served the larger community in a variety of ways. It was one of the few recreational facilities in East Baltimore open to African Americans during segregation, used by children and adults alike.³⁷ It was the site of professional concerts and plays open to the community,³⁸ dances for service members in World War II,³⁹ women's teas, statewide educational meetings,⁴⁰ evening study centers for students,⁴¹ and more. The school provided free public baths to children in the 1930s,⁴² part of a city-wide effort in the early 20th century in parts of Baltimore with older housing stock that lacked modern plumbing. During the Great Depression, Dunbar, along with other African American schools that had vocational shops, repaired broken or discarded toys so that they could be given to children for Christmas.⁴³ Dunbar was a critical part of the community in East Baltimore.

Of the three original African American High School buildings in Baltimore City – Frederick Douglass High School, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, and Carver Vocational Technical High School – only the Dunbar building is still used as a school. The original Carver building was demolished, and the original Frederick Douglass building is no longer used as a school.

Many great leaders in Baltimore City, Maryland, and the United States at large were part of the Dunbar community, as faculty, staff, and students. Former State Senator Clarence Blount was a vice-principal at Dunbar in the 1960s,⁴⁴ and was instrumental as the coordinator of the New Dunbar Development Program for the current Dunbar High School, before becoming State Senator.⁴⁵ Mayor Clarence “Du” Burns worked at the school for 22 years as a locker room attendant, before being elected to City Council and becoming the city's first African American Mayor.⁴⁶ Dr. Carrington L. Davis, the principal of the school from 1933 – 1949, was president of the Maryland State Teachers Association and the American Teacher's Association, a professor and Chairman of the Morgan State Board of Trustees.⁴⁷ He was a 1904 Harvard graduate, classmate and friend to Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Dunbar provided a quality education to generations of students, and nurtured their talents in other ways as well, through the arts, sports, and various other extra-curricular activities. Dunbar has shaped alumni that are exceptionally civically-engaged, with many serving as lawyers, judges, doctors, and elected officials at all levels of government. Alumni include Robert M. Bell, Chief Judge of Maryland's Court of Appeals; Paul Smith, retired from the Baltimore City Circuit Court; Clarence Davis, former State Delegate; Nathan Irby and John Jeffries, former State Senators; City Council President Bernard C. “Jack” Young; former City Councilman Edwin Johnson; Reginald Lewis, lawyer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist; Dr. Nina Rawlings, pediatrician; Ester McCready, the first African American admitted to University of Maryland's School of Nursing in 1950, who paved the way for other African Americans to attend the undergraduate and professional schools at the University of Maryland.⁴⁸ Countless other graduates of Dunbar have been leaders in the civic, business, and sports communities – with many breaking the color-barrier present in their chosen profession.

After the Dunbar High School moved into the building on Orleans St, PS 133 served as the Paul Laurence Dunbar Middle School until 2010. Today, it is home to the National Academy Foundation High School.

Dunbar is an important site in Baltimore's history, both for its striking architecture heritage, but equally for its important role as the site of community empowerment and a hard-won quality education for African Americans, bearing the legacy from the late 19th century to the present day.

Architectural Description

The school is a four-story multi-colored brick and concrete, L-shaped Art Deco building. The majority of the building was constructed in 1931, and two additions were added to the building 1949-1950. The building is located at 540 North Caroline St, and sits at the southwestern corner of the intersection of Caroline and McElderry Streets. The main entrance is located on the corner of the building, facing the intersection. A large, two-story tall, highly decorative brick and concrete tower sits atop the building above the entryway. Projecting chevrons on the turret resemble battlements.

The verticality of the structure is emphasized by columns and piers that run the full height of the building. Brick columns separate the bays, which contain windows. The typical bay holds four windows, but the bays in the base of the tower hold two windows each, and occasionally, a bay holds 1 window. The fenestration of each bay is the same on all four floors. Each window on the top floor of the building is topped with a semicircular pressed concrete slab with a Deco sunburst design. The narrow vertical piers separating the windows project into finials above the roofline, which interplay with the chevron-shaped parapets located on the roof above the window-bays.

The top of the tower is octagonal, with three sides visible from the front of the building. The faces of the tower are highly decorated, made of pressed concrete, with brick columns. Each face of the turret is the same: the top of the turret is comprised of projecting chevrons, below which is a highly stylized owl sitting on a branch, holding an open book. This symbolizes learning. The rest of the facade is an abstract pattern comprised of linear and curved components.

The school has a castle-like quality to it, with the large tower, decorative parapets, and vertical brick columns emphasizing its height.

The building has an addition on its east elevation. The southern two bays of the wing facing Caroline Street were added in 1949-1950. Architecturally, the addition looks exactly the same as the rest of the building. The only notable difference is that the brick is slightly a different color, and there is a datestone with the year 1949 engraved on it. The addition was completed in 1950. Another addition that was also added in 1949 has since been demolished. It used to exist on the McElderry St. wing, and was an extension from the auditorium. It was located on the corner of McElderry and Eden St.

The exterior of the building remains virtually unchanged. There is some damage to the brickwork in the form of salt efflorescence around the entrance. A recent addition to the building is a hanging metal awning over the main entrance, which was added by Baltimore City Public Schools at the request of the National Academy Foundation. The salt efflorescence appears to be the result of water dripping off of this new awning over the entrance.

Community Support

See attached letters.

Staff Recommendations For Baltimore City Landmark List

Meets CHAP Landmark Criteria:

1. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history;

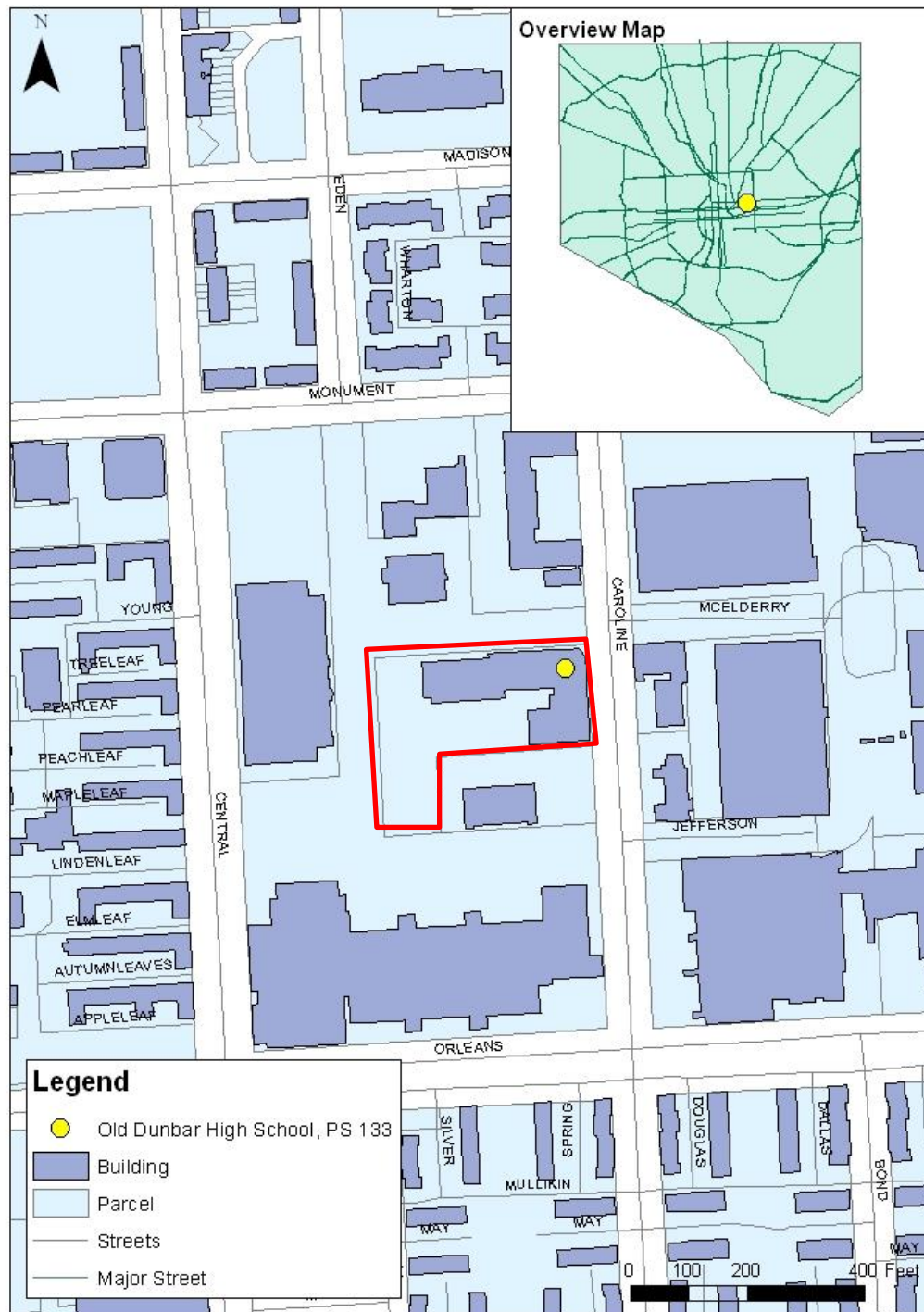
The old Dunbar Junior Senior High School, PS 133, played an important role in the community in East Baltimore for the majority of the twentieth century. For many years, Dunbar was the only high school for African Americans in East Baltimore. This school has a legacy of the community demanding equitable, high-quality education in quality school buildings – with the community, faculty, and students taking part at several different points in its history. Many African American leaders and citizens in Baltimore and the state of Maryland were part of the Dunbar community, as faculty, staff, and students. The school also played a critical role in the community, particularly during segregation, as a site for community recreation and social events.

3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possesses high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

The building is a fine example of the Art Deco style designed by the famed Baltimore architectural firm Taylor & Fisher, who designed many other seminal architectural works, including several other important Art Deco buildings.

Images

Locator Map



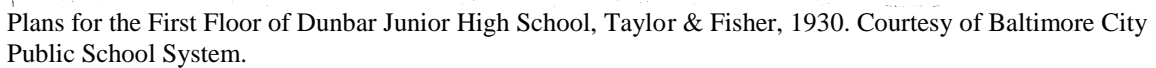
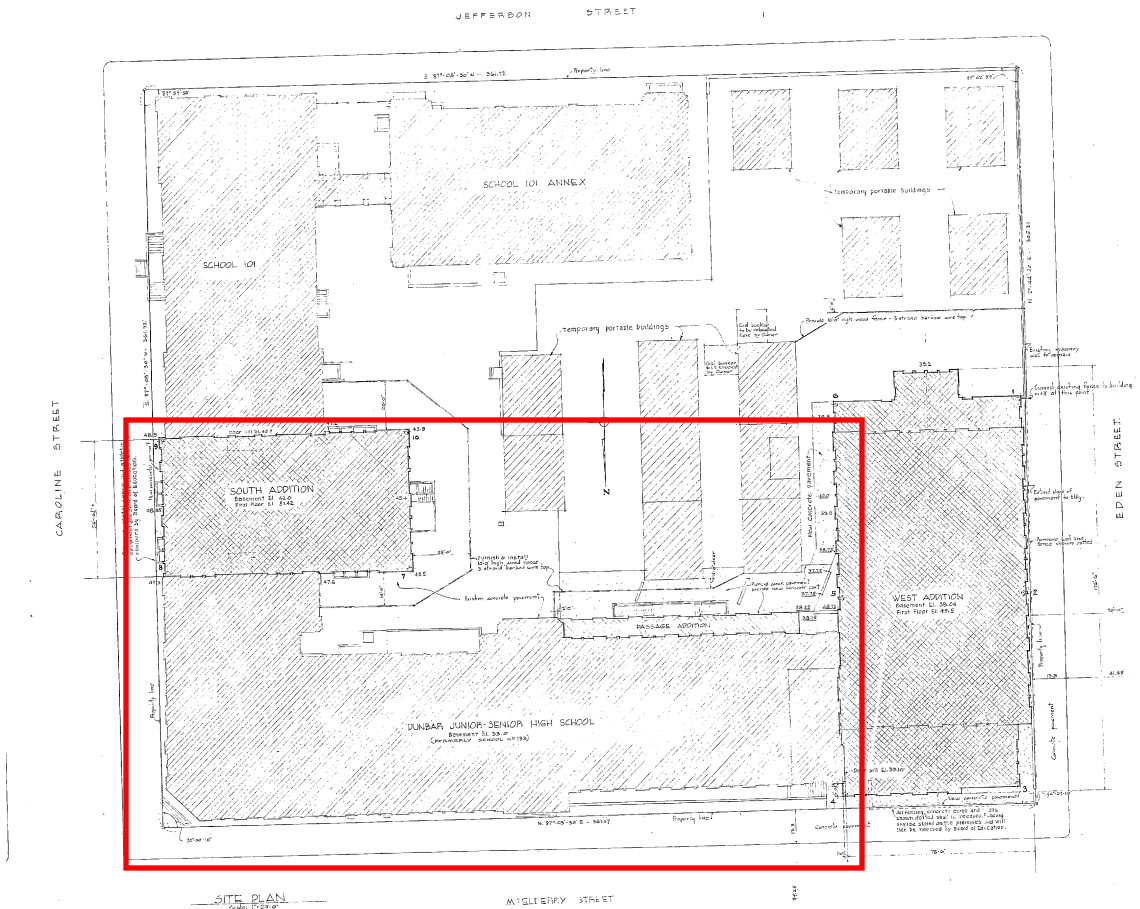




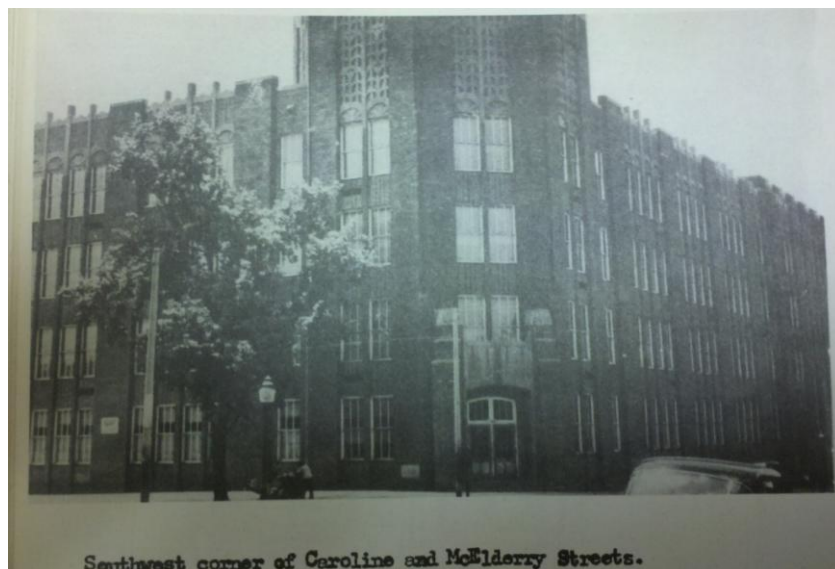
Photo of Dunbar Junior High School in the *Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners in Baltimore City, 1932*, p.133. Courtesy of the Enoch Pratt Free Library Maryland Room. Note that the left wing is a couple bays shorter than it is today. The additional bays were added in 1950, making this school about the adjacent Dunbar Elementary School, PS101 (seen far left).



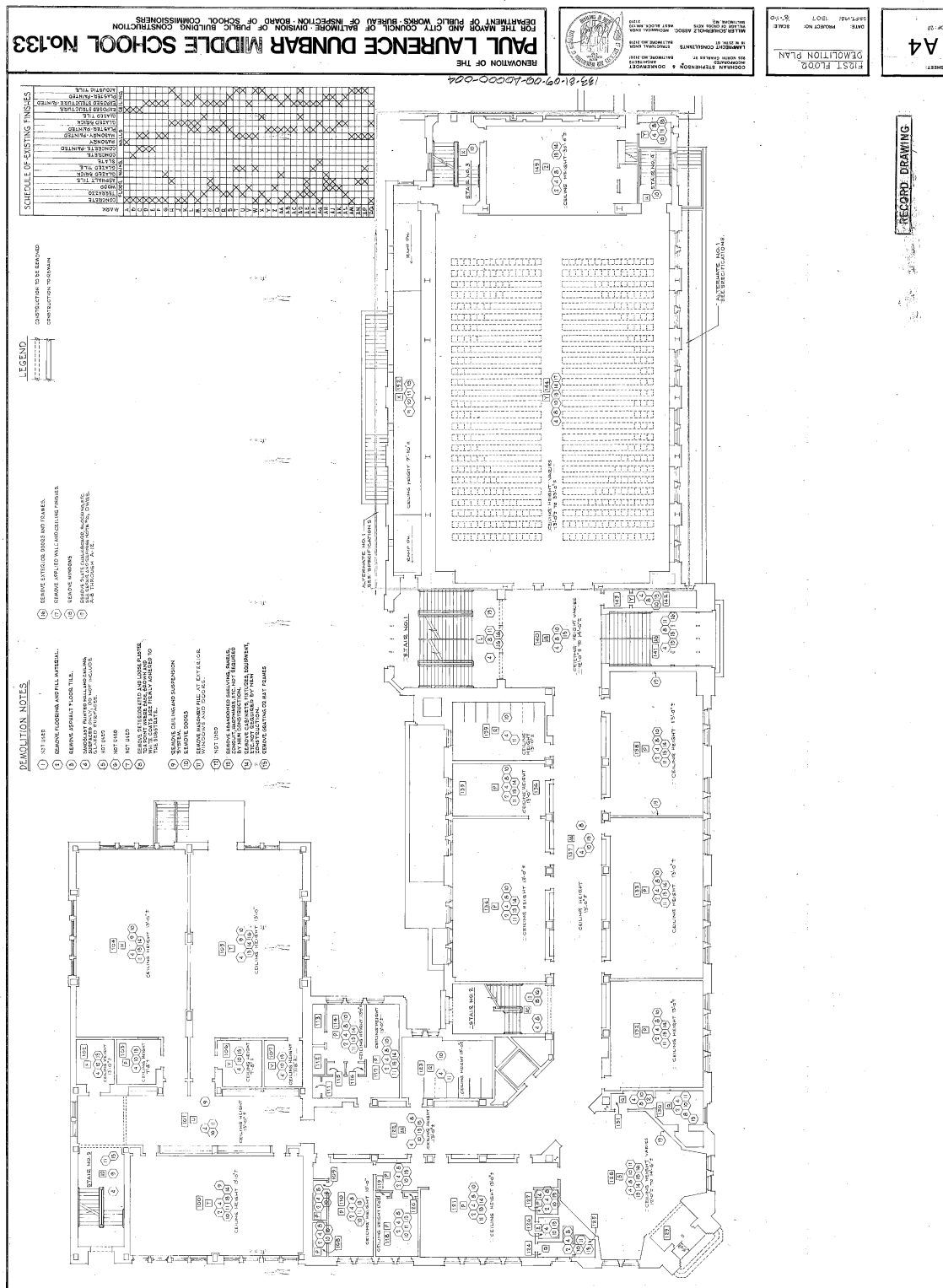
The building today.



Detail of Site plan for the 1949 Additions to Dunbar Junior-Senior High School, Gaudreau & Gaudreau. Courtesy of Baltimore City Public School System. This map is oriented South. The South Addition is still standing, and the West Addition is not. The current building is enclosed within the red box. The interior of the block held thirteen portables.



Entrance of the school in 1952, published in the *School Plant Directory*, City of Baltimore, Department of Education, Bureau of Research, 1952, Revised by Shirley Kyle July 1957.



Plans for the First Floor of Dunbar High School, 1981. Courtesy of Baltimore City Public School System. This is the current configuration of the school, with the retention of the Caroline Street wing, and the demolition of the McElderry Street addition, both added in 1949.



The main entrance of the school, at the corner of Caroline St. and McElderry St. (view from north)



Close-up of the tower, with chevrons, owl, sunbursts, and abstract geometric patterns.



The cornerstone for the main portion of the building.



Cornerstone for the South Addition on Caroline Street.



The auditorium wing offers an excellent view of the window and roof details (view from south).



The 1950 addition that is no longer extant, attached to the auditorium to the left. Published in the *School Plant Directory*, City of Baltimore, Department of Education, Bureau of Research, 1952, Revised by Shirley Kyle July 1957.



Aerial Views:



View from south (Baltimore City Pictometry 2011)



View from east (Baltimore City Pictometry 2011)



View from north (Baltimore City Pictometry 2011)



View from west (Baltimore City Pictometry 2011)

¹ 62nd *Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of Public Schools*, (Baltimore: John Cox, City Printer, 1891), 26

² *Ibid.*

³ *Baltimore City School Architecture Context Papers*, (Maryland Historical Trust, 1990), 15

⁴ “Association to Meet”, *The Afro-American*, January 22, 1916, 2

⁵ “Tablet Presented to Dunbar School”, *The Afro-American*, December 2, 1916, 1

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “New Colored School Dedicated”, *Baltimore Sun*, November 11, 1916, 2

⁸ 88th *Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of Public Schools*, (Baltimore: King Brothers, City Printer, 1918), 10

⁹ “Development of Baltimore City School Architecture, 1920-1939.” *Baltimore City School Architecture Context Papers*, (Maryland Historical Trust, 1990), 7, citing Strayer, 1921: 56.

¹⁰ 88th *Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of Public Schools*, (Baltimore: King Brothers, City Printer, 1918), 10

¹¹ “Development of Baltimore City School Architecture, 1920-1939.” *Baltimore City School Architecture Context Papers*, (Maryland Historical Trust, 1990), 13, citing Strayer, 1921: 6

¹² “Development of Baltimore City School Architecture, 1920-1939.” *Baltimore City School Architecture Context Papers*, (Maryland Historical Trust, 1990), 23

¹³ 88th *Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of Public Schools*, (Baltimore: King Brothers, City Printer, 1918), 11.

¹⁴ 103rd *Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City*, (Baltimore: City of Baltimore 1932), 45

¹⁵ “5,000 Delegates at Baptist Convention”, *The Afro-American*, September 20, 1930, 10.

¹⁶ 103rd *Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City*, 43

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122

¹⁸ “Development of Baltimore City School Architecture, 1920-1939.” *Baltimore City School Architecture Context Papers*, 23

¹⁹ “Other 25 – No Title”, *The Afro-American*, January 6, 1934, 6

²⁰ “Other 49 – No Title”, *The Afro-American*, January 27, 1934, 24

²¹ “Elmer Henson Sent to P.S. 101, Mrs. Lee to 112”, *The Afro-American*, July 20, 1935, 14.

²² “Dunbar High School has 178 in 1938 June Graduating Class”, *The Afro-American*, July 9, 1938, 24.

²³ “Mayor to View Dunbar School, Where Gas Fumes Bring Tears”, *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan 28, 1944, 20.

²⁴ “Repairs at Dunbar Shorten Hours” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 4, 1944, Enoch Pratt Free Library Maryland Room Vertical Files.

²⁵ “Mayor to View Dunbar School, Where Gas Fumes Bring Tears”, *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan 28, 1944, 20.

²⁶ “Mayor Finds School Rooms ‘Deplorable’”, *The Baltimore Sun*, January 29, 1944, 14.

²⁷ “\$35,000 Spent on Portables”, *The Baltimore Sun*, September 1, 1944, 9

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- ²⁸ “City to Accept Four School Bids”, *The Baltimore Sun*, August 6, 1948, 21.
- ²⁹ *122nd Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City*, (Baltimore: City of Baltimore, 1956), 50
- ³⁰ *119th Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City*, (Baltimore: City of Baltimore, 1951), 61
- ³¹ Howell Baum. *Brown in Baltimore: School Desegregation and the Limits of Liberalism*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010), xi.
- ³² *Ibid.* 123.
- ³³ “Protest Set by Students”, *The Baltimore Sun*, March 3, 1965, 10.
- ³⁴ “School Board Hit by Sit-In over Dunbar”, *The Baltimore Sun*, April 9, 1965, 48.
- ³⁵ “Dunbar School Drive Backed”, *The Baltimore Sun*, September 4, 1968, C28.
- ³⁶ Lowell E. Sunderland, “Dunbar Faculty Rues Phase-Out” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 22, 1965, 40
- ³⁷ “Negroes Plan Play Centers”, *The Baltimore Sun*, February 26, 1945, 10.
- ³⁸ “School Board Turns down \$10 Award”, *The Afro-American*, February 27, 1932, 16.
- ³⁹ “Busy Weeks Slated for Service Men”, *The Baltimore Sun*, November 23, 1941, 24.
- ⁴⁰ “Negro Teachers to Open Annual Meeting Today”, *The Baltimore Sun*, November 11, 1938, 4
- ⁴¹ “Second Study Center Due at Dunbar High”, *The Baltimore Sun*, March 20, 1963, 10.
- ⁴² “23, 571 Served at Public Baths”, *The Afro-American*, December 10, 1932, 9.
- ⁴³ “Old Man Depression Can’t Beat Santa”, *The Afro-American*, December 10, 1932, 20.
- ⁴⁴ “Poverty Job is Given to Dunbar Aide”, *The Baltimore Sun*, September 22, 1968, 28.
- ⁴⁵ “Blount Quits City Schools”, *News American*, May 5, 1973. Enoch Pratt Free Library Maryland Room Vertical Files.
- ⁴⁶ Johnathon Briggs, and Laura Vozzella, “First Black Mayor of Baltimore Dies”, *The Baltimore Sun*, January 13, 2003, 1A
- ⁴⁷ “Carrington L. Davis, Veteran Educator, Dies”, *The Afro-American*, November 8, 1958, 18.
- ⁴⁸ Maryland State Archives, “Esther McCready” Entry in Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame. Maryland Commission for Women, 2004. Accessible online at:
<http://www.msa.md.gov/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/mccready.html>