Baltimore City
Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation

Landmark Designation Report
September 13, 2016

John Ruhrah Elementary Middle School (School # 228)

701 Rappola St.
Baltimore, Maryland
Significance Summary
The school is significant for its architecture and for its role in Baltimore City history. The school was constructed in 1930 in the Greektown neighborhood and was originally known as PS #228. It was designed by Herbert G. Jory, a Baltimore architect who was a member of the AIA and who designed many institutional buildings in Baltimore, including schools and hospitals. The school is an excellent example of the Classical Revival institutional style that was popular in the early 20th century. Following the 1935 death of Dr. John Ruhrah, an internationally recognized Baltimore pediatrician who served on the School Board during the 1930s, the school was named for Ruhrah. The school has been an important community site in the Greektown neighborhood for many decades, serving generations of the Greek community and new immigrants.

Property History
The school is located in the southeastern neighborhood today known as Greektown. When the neighborhood was first developing in the early 20th century, it was considered an extension of the Baltimore County community of Highlandtown. The area east of Highlandtown was largely settled by Greeks and Eastern Europeans that began immigrating to Baltimore after 1900. Following the City’s annexation in 1918, the vicinity began developing more rapidly, with the expansion of roads and other infrastructure. Beginning in 1920, Greek families began moving to this area, which was then referred to as the “Hills of Highlandtown,” quickly establishing restaurants, grocery stores, and shops that sold food and goods from Greece. The area soon became known as Greektown colloquially, though government documents such as School Board records continued to recognized the area as “Highlandtown” through the 1930s. Greek settlement in the area increased throughout the 20th century as immigration laws changed to allow families of American citizens to immigrate.

The rapid development and settlement in the Annexation portion of the City in the 1920s led to a serious shortage of schools and other needed infrastructure, which affected Greektown. The 1930 Annual Report of the Board of the School Commissioners report underlined the desperate need for these school building projects: “The rapid development of suburban districts and the rapid movement of the population to them has required very full consideration of their needs. In several of the outlying sections the growth has been so rapid that there are large schools of four or five hundred pupils who are housed in portables without any permanent building at all.” This report corroborates news articles about the conditions of schools in the area that is today served by PS #228. A Letter to the Editor in the Sun from 1924 stated that the portable school was overcrowded and that the students were being treated like cattle. The construction funds for building the school came from a $10 million building program that funded eighteen school building projects.

The plans, location, and architect for PS #228 – referred to as the new Highlandtown school – were announced in the Sun in March 1928. The architect, Herbert G. Jory, had also designed the original Highlandtown Elementary School in 1922. The cornerstone of this Classical Revival-style school was laid on March 14, 1930, and the school was
completed September 1, 1930. The speed of construction underlies the urgency for a real school building. It was designed to hold 808 students. When the building was constructed, it was simply known as PS #228 and was not named until the mid-1940s.

The school quickly exceeded capacity due to the continued rapid residential growth in the area, which continued in spite of the Great Depression. A two story addition to the school, also designed by Jory, was completed on September 1, 1936 to address the overcrowded conditions. The addition had ten classrooms and one recreation room and was intended to accommodate 400 students. This addition, like all of Baltimore’s school construction projects in the mid-1930s, was funded through the National Recovery Act of 1933 following the Great Depression.

The Sanborn Fire Insurance maps show that the school was built in an underdeveloped portion of Greektown, constructed in a location that likely anticipated further residential growth. In 1936, six years after the school opened, three of the four streets that bound the property were unpaved, including the block of Rappola St. that the school fronts upon. Despite of the lack of development immediately surrounding the school, the school had high attendance rates because it served a large area of southeast Baltimore.

Reports in the Sun from the early 1940s make clear that public infrastructure in southeast Baltimore was underdeveloped in other, more serious ways. In 1940, southeast Baltimore was the site of a public health emergency called “the worst typhoid menace in the city” due to inadequate sewer systems that resulted in raw sewage on roadways and in cesspools in backyards. An open ditch carrying raw sewage was located a mere two blocks from PS #228. A 1944 outbreak of diphtheria in children in southeast Baltimore led to widespread inoculations at public clinics and in schools, including PS #228.

The rapid population growth in the city during World War II due to the influx of defense workers and their families put a further strain on the capacity at PS #228. In 1941, defense workers and their families were concentrated largely in Armistead Gardens, Philadelphia Road, and Horner’s Lane. A lack of schools in this area led the children in these communities to attend several elementary schools, including PS #228. When the O’Donnell Heights defense housing project opened in 1943, the children who lived there also attended PS #228.

In 1945, PS #228 was named for Dr. John Ruhrh, a Baltimore pediatrician of international renown who was also a member of the School Board. The naming of the school was supposed to be a temporary memorialization, as his name was intended to be given to one of the planned new postwar school buildings. However, the name has remained ever since.

Into the 1940s, the newly dubbed John Ruhrh Elementary School served a wide swath of southeast Baltimore. Some argued it served too broad a population of students, like the families living in the federal housing projects of O’Donnell Heights, which originally were constructed as defense workers’ housing and converted into low-income housing following the end of World War II. In 1946, residents of the O’Donnell Heights housing
project held multiple “bus” strikes, keeping over 400 children from attending school as a protest against inadequate transportation for their children to get to school. This strike included the majority of the 436 students in O’Donnell Heights that attended PS #228. The strike occurred because the parents feared for their children’s safety on their one-and-a-half mile walking route to school. This route took the students through “a dump, dense underbrush, across a creek and over a railroad track,” and students had reportedly been molested by men on that route. Parents from O’Donnell Heights held a meeting with Mayor McKeldin, giving an ultimatum that the community receive a bus service to get their children to school or open a new school in O’Donnell Heights.

The strike was successful because just a year later, in January 1947, the School Board announced plans for constructing an elementary school in O’Donnell Heights as one of 26 essential new construction projects. In June of the same year, it was identified as one of the five priority schools.

Although the new school in O’Donnell Heights was approved in 1947, the planning and construction of the school took several years. In 1949, PS #228 was identified as one of eighteen schools in the city with serious overcrowding. Part-time classes were held in order to accommodate the students from the neighborhood and O’Donnell Heights. Graceland Park and O’Donnell Heights Elementary School No. 240 did not open until October 1952.

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, John Ruhrah Elementary School has been an important civic structure in the community of Greektown. Today, it is an elementary and middle school that continues its heritage of serving immigrant communities. The school has the largest English as a Second Language (ESOL) program in the city, with the program serving Spanish-speaking and Chinese-speaking students. Due to the recent flux of new immigrants in the past decade, the school is overcrowded yet again. At this time, the school has multiple portable classrooms on the property to house all of the students. As part of the 21st Century Schools Plan, a rear addition will be constructed to provide sufficient space and high-quality learning facilities for students.

**John Ruhrah (1872-1935)**

In 1945, the building was named after Dr. John Ruhrah, a Baltimore pediatrician of international renown. His work on polio (then termed infantile paralysis) was groundbreaking. Born in Chillicothe, Ohio, in 1872, he moved to Baltimore for medical school and stayed, building a forty-one year career in medicine in the City. In the early 20th century, polio wasn’t merely crippling, it was deadly. Ruhrah was both an eminent scholar and a strong advocate for public education regarding the disease.

Ruhrah served as the president of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Pediatric Society, and the Medical Library Association. He also served as a member of the Baltimore School Board from 1932 until his death in 1935. He authored, co-authored, and edited medical texts, and contributed music and book reviews to the *Sunday Sun* and the *Evening Sun*. Ironically, he himself was afflicted with polio in 1930, and died in 1935 from a stroke. His family received
personal condolence cards from President and Mrs. Roosevelt. Immediately following his death, the school board received many requests to name a school after Dr. John Ruhrarah to honor the important contributions that he made to medicine and education in Baltimore. This naming did not occur until 1945.

While the structure is named for Dr. Ruhrarah, it is not eligible for landmark designation for its association with Dr. Ruhrarah, as he had no personal affiliation with this building during his lifetime, and because other buildings that are more closely associated with him, such as 11 E. Chase St, where he had both an apartment and an office for more than 25 years, are still standing.

**Herbert G. Jory (1877-1946)**

Herbert Godfrey Jory was the early 20th century Baltimore architect who designed PS #228. Born in Baltimore, he was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Architecture School, a member of the Baltimore Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, a member of the Architectural Commission of Baltimore, and treasurer of the Baltimore Architectural Club. He briefly worked with Benjamin Owens and George Archer, and worked for the Supervising Architect for the U.S. Treasury from 1902-1911. From 1911-1919, he had his own firm. During World War I, he served as a Captain of the Construction Division of the U.S. Army, and rose to the rank of Colonel in the reserves. In the early 1920s, the Public Improvement Commission of Baltimore City developed a new plan for standardizing public school buildings in terms of safety features and design. A board of prominent Baltimore architects was formed to assist with this process, including Herbert Jory.

Jory designed civic buildings in Baltimore and elsewhere, including Highlandtown Elementary School at the corner of Gough St. and 5th St. (now S. Eaton St.) Some of his other works include McCready Memorial Hospital in Crisfield, the South Baltimore Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Charity Hospital on Light Street in Federal Hill, and the conversion of two rowhouses at Eutaw and Lanvale into the Baltimore Ear, Nose, and Throat Hospital in Bolton Hill. Jory died in 1946 from a fatal car crash.

**Architectural Description**

The school is located on a city block in the Greektown neighborhood. The property is bound by Foster Avenue to the north, Tolna Street to the east, Fait Avenue to the south, and Rapolla Street to the east. The school building and its ancillary portable classrooms are surrounded by playfields. The streets surrounding the school are comprised of simple two story brick rowhouses. The building is comprised of a three-story brick “I” building and two brick additions. The main block of the building features a central projecting bay that features a stone loggia entrance with arches, Ionic columns, and balustrade. The top of the projecting central bay has a decorative stone parapet featuring a coat of arms. The building has other decorative Classical features such as a stone watertable, dentilled and arched belt courses, and decorative brickwork consisting of banding, latticework, and window surrounds comprised of darker brick. The north elevation of the building has a one story portico entrance. The southern portion of the main building has the 1936 addition, which is a sensitive two-story brick addition that is smaller in scale and is
architecturally similar to the main block, but is less ornate in its design. There is a late 20th century two story brick addition on the rear of the 1936 addition that has no fenestration pattern. While the school retains a high degree of integrity, there have been a few alterations. The most visible alteration is the infill of many window bays with brick – however, this infill does not detract from the overall sense of cohesion or balanced fenestration. This school is an excellent example of a Classical Revival school structure and retains architectural integrity.

**Staff Recommendations**
The property meets CHAP Landmark Designation Standards:
B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:
   1. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history;
   3. That embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

The school is significant for its architecture and for its role in Baltimore City history. The school was constructed in 1930 in the Greektown neighborhood and was originally known as PS #228. It was designed by Herbert G. Jory, a Baltimore architect who was a member of the AIA and who designed many institutional building in Baltimore, including schools and hospitals. The school is an excellent example of the Classical Revival institutional style that was popular in the early 20th century. Following the 1935 death of Dr. John Ruhrah, an internationally recognized Baltimore pediatrician who served on the School Board during the 1930s, the school was named for Ruhrah. The school has been an important community site in the Greektown neighborhood for many decades, serving generations of the Greek community and new immigrants.
Historic Map

Historic Images

Photograph from the 1931 School Board Report. (One Hundred and Second Annual Report of the Board of School Commissioners of Baltimore City (Baltimore: City of Baltimore, 1931) pg. 142.)

Aerial Photos

View from west.
View from east.

View from north.
View from south.

Current Photographs

View from north.
1936 addition.

North elevation.
Rear (east elevation) with modern addition and portable classrooms.

View from east, intersection of Fait Ave and Tonla St.
“To Plan Crisfield Hospital”, The Sun (1837-1991); Nov 30, 1919; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Sun, pg. C6; “NEW HOSPITAL TO GO UP: SOUTH BALTIMORE'S NEED IS TO BE SUPPLIED AT . . .” The Sun (1837-1991); May 17, 1913; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Sun, pg. 5; “DELAY IN HOSPITAL WORK NOT EXPECTED: Architect Says Construction Will . . .”, The Sun (1837-1991); Jan 21, 1924; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Sun, pg. 3; “Herbert G. Jory, Hit By Auto, Dies”