
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 08-10

John Fox Slater Elementary School
45 P Street, NW
Square 0615, Lot 0827

Meeting Date: October 27, 2011
Applicant: DC Preservation League
Affected ANC: ANC 5C
Staff Reviewer: Patsy Fletcher

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the John Fox Slater Elementary School of Washington, DC as a District of Columbia Landmark. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Staff also recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places under the separate Multiple Property Document *Public School Buildings of Washington, DC: 1864-1960*.



Summary Statement:

Slater Elementary School is a purpose-built public school building in the Shaw East community of Washington, DC constructed in 1891 for African-American students. Built at a time when public education was segregated by race, in its location at 45 P Street, it forms part of a complex of black schools along First Street, NW between L and P Streets. The school is named for John Fox Slater (1815-1884), a white industrialist and philanthropist from Rhode Island.

In the classic Romanesque revival style, the building is a turreted red brick, eight classroom, two-story school, emblematic of the “Office of the Building Inspector, 1874-1897” subtype

referenced in the Multiple Property Document *Public Schools Buildings of Washington, DC, 1864-1960*. The building is one of a series of red-brick school buildings designed in the 1880s and 1890s by the District of Columbia's Office of the Building Inspector, "[that] tended to emphasize simplicity, efficiency, and durability... [S]mall in size, generally Romanesque in style, often picturesque in composition... [they] blended in with the surrounding community." Approved by Edward Clark, Architect of the Capitol, Slater is identical to the earlier Jackson School on R Street in Georgetown, built for white students in 1889. The red-brick box is characterized by projecting pavilions, gables, towers, and molded brick string courses. Slater's tower is capped by an eight-sided roof, but unlike Jackson's tower, is sheathed in tin.

A playground is located to the east of Slater School and separates the building from Langston School. Although building shows the effects of wear and deferred maintenance, it is highly intact. In addition, it is possible that historic archaeological resources are present. If so, an archaeological investigation may be warranted.

Historical and Architectural Background:

Development of the District of Columbia Public School System and African-American Education

Public education in the city of Washington was rigidly segregated by race throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Dating to 1804, early public schools were considered an essentially charitable endeavor for white students whose parents could not afford private instruction. The schools were to be provided with an annual endowment of \$1,500 from the proceeds of taxes on "slaves, dogs, licenses from carriages and hacks, for ordinaries and taverns, for retailing wines and spirituous liquors, for billiard tables, for theatrical and other amusements, and for hawkers and peddlers." By the late 1840s, public schools were open to all white children regardless of their family income.

From 1807, however, black residents of the District took matters into their own hands and established the first school for African Americans. Thereafter, several schools for free people of color opened as private ventures subsidized by individuals and churches.

In May 1862, a month after passage of the law enacting the emancipation of the enslaved of the District, Congress authorized a Board of Trustees of Colored Schools for Washington and Georgetown and subsequently mandated that funds be allocated to "colored schools" in the same proportion as African-American children were to white children in the city population. The several private schools for blacks were incorporated into the new system at the invitation of the Trustees, so that by 1864 there were eleven schools including a high school, 21 teachers and 1,000 pupils.

Concurrently, administrators of the District public schools lobbied Congress for the same kind of financial support that schools in other jurisdictions received. With increased support, the District initiated an ambitious program of constructing permanent school buildings, buildings that would become the envy of other cities. In spite of public opposition to providing education and educational facilities for the District's African-American children, substantial buildings were built for their schools within the next few years. The brick John O. Cook School at 4th and O

Streets, NW opened in 1867, followed by the original Thaddeus Stevens (1868) and Charles Sumner Schools (1872), designs prepared by the eminent architect Adolph Cluss.

In 1873 the black school system was formally transferred to the District of Columbia government under a reorganized Board of Trustees and an integrated board, but under which African-American schools remained separate from white ones. George F.T. Cook was appointed superintendent of the “colored” schools and served until 1900. In 1875, black schools had a total enrollment of more than 5,400 and a total of ten buildings, one of which was a high school. (The first white public high school did not open until seven years later.)

Architecture

School construction lagged population growth. However, in 1878, a more stable system of construction planning was put in place under the immediate oversight of the District of Columbia’s Engineer Commissioner in the office of Building Inspector, Thomas B. Entwistle. Designs were contributed from the Architect of the Capitol, Edward Clark. A result was that 62 schools were built between 1880 and 1893. Even so, African-American student-to-classroom ratios remained high.

Slater typifies the buildings constructed by the Office of the Building Inspector under Entwistle. Its red-brick building was an almost standardized, turreted, Romanesque Revival school design with four classrooms on each of two floors that emphasized simplicity, efficiency and durability. Though this prototype was criticized for being uninspired, Slater, as were other schools from the same period, was designed to blend in with the rowhouse-style buildings in the surrounding community. It is additionally significant that the design for a black elementary school was the same as for a white school, Jackson.

Slater School

In the year that Slater was built, school enrollment for African Americans had increased 4.63 percent. In 1891, it was reported that there were close to 40,000 students in the District school system, 30 to 32 percent of whom were “colored”. Slater was one of six new schools proposed in 1889 including the new M Street High School building. Opening on P Street two years later, Slater was immediately filled to capacity. Built in a predominantly African-American community already housing several “colored” schools, students were on half day schedules, which many rightly complained stunted their educational experience.

Slater School’s first principal was prominent educator Lucy B. Chase who happened to also be the sister of Calvin Chase, editor of the *Washington Bee*. Like similar elementary schools of the period, Slater School’s eight rooms held classes representing grades one through eight. The course of study was fairly standard. The curriculum included language arts, penmanship, grammar, arithmetic, algebra, geography, history, physiology, physical science, nature study, physical exercises, music, moral training, and practical life skills.

In addition Slater School was part of a cluster of African American public schools. By 1919, within a few blocks were three elementary schools, a junior high school, a vocational school and

Washington's only two black high schools. By 1925, this African-American academic campus was educating a quarter of the District's black public school students.

In 1902, the Langston Elementary was built adjacent to Slater to relieve the severe overcrowding. The schools operated independently until the late 1910s, when Slater's third principal, Anna E. Thompson, became principal of both schools. The schools were referred to as Slater-Langston until 1951, when the Slater building became an annex to Margaret M. Washington Vocational School while Langston continued as an elementary school. Slater was returned to its original use in 1958. In 1965, the deterioration of the facility, its overcrowded condition and lack of modern facilities were featured in a *Washington Post* article entitled, "Moldy Shaw Fed by Even Moldier Schools." In 1975, Slater was closed as an elementary school. The building now houses a daycare and social service concern.

Registration Criteria

The John Fox Slater Elementary School merits listing in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places for the following reasons:

DC Criterion B (history) and NR Criterion A (contributes to broad patterns of history, education and cultural heritage/Black): the building conveys important information regarding the development of the District of Columbia public schools, including a) the evolution of public education for African Americans, and b) segregation.

DC Criterion D (architecture and urbanism) and NR Criterion C (embodies distinctive characteristics of a type of construction): the building is an excellent example of a public school building built for African American students and meets the designation criteria referenced in the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Public School Buildings of Washington, DC: 1864-1960* under the associated property type "The Office of the Building Inspector, 1874-1897."

Period of Significance and Integrity:

The Period of Significance for Slater Elementary School extends from 1901 when the building was constructed until 1951 when it first closed as an elementary school. The school building retains sufficient integrity to convey, represent or contain the values and qualities for which it is judged significant and sufficient time has passed since its significance was achieved.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 08-10

John Mercer Langston Elementary School
43 P Street, NW
Square 0615, Lot 0005

Meeting Date: October 27, 2011
Applicant: DC Preservation League
Affected ANC: ANC 5C
Staff Reviewer: Patsy Fletcher

After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the John Mercer Langston Elementary School of Washington, DC as District of Columbia Landmarks. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Staff recommends, in addition, that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places under the Multiple Property Document *Public School Buildings of Washington, DC, 1864-1960*.



Summary Statement:

The John Mercer Langston Elementary School, a school for African Americans, was built in 1902 to handle the overflow of students from the adjoining 1890 Slater School. Built at a time when public education was segregated by race, in its location at 43 P Street, it forms part of a complex of black schools along First Street, NW between L and P Streets. The new school was named for John Mercer Langston (1829-1897), the first African-American congressman from Virginia, who also had a distinguished diplomatic, academic and legal career in the District of Columbia. One of 31 schools opened between 1895 and 1902, Langston was built during steady

population growth in the District and denser development in many established neighborhoods, black and white, along the North Capitol Street corridor. It is significant that the school officials chose to address the overcrowding of a school, especially one for blacks, by building a separate building as opposed to erecting a temporary structure or adding to the Slater School.

The Langston School is a stately red brick two-story Italianate-style, eight classroom school, from the subtype "Architects in Private Practice, 1897-1910" referenced in the Multiple Property Document *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1864-1960*. Designed by Appleton P. Clark, Jr., the building has two towers on the front elevation marking the boys' and girls' entrances. The asymmetrical arrangement of towers and bays can be ascribed to the "unfinished" nature of the building. Clark had planned a wing to the west that was never built. The front elevation features molded-brick surrounds of both entrances, segmental-arched windows, limestone sills, blind arches above the second-floor windows, and a Star of David design placed in each of the blind arches. The overhanging eaves are supported by carved brackets.

A playground is located to the west of Langston and separates the building from Slater School. The Langston School is in good but neglected condition; its defining features remain intact. It is possible that historic archaeological resources are present. If so, an archaeological investigation may be warranted.

Historical and Architectural Background:

Development of the District of Columbia Public School System and African-American Education

Public education in the city of Washington was rigidly segregated by race throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Dating to 1804, early public schools were considered an essentially charitable endeavor for white students whose parents could not afford private instruction. By the late 1840s, though, public schools were open to all white children regardless of their family income.

From 1807, however, black residents of the District took matters into their own hands and established the first school for African Americans. Thereafter, several schools for free people of color opened as private ventures subsidized by individuals and churches.

In May 1862, a month after passage of the law enacting the emancipation of the enslaved of the District, Congress authorized a Board of Trustees of Colored Schools for Washington and Georgetown and subsequently mandated that funds be allocated to "colored schools". The several private schools for blacks were incorporated into the new system at the invitation of the Trustees, so that by 1864 there were eleven schools including a high school, 21 teachers and 1,000 pupils.

Concurrently, administrators of the District public schools lobbied Congress for the same kind of financial support that schools in other jurisdictions received. With increased support, the District initiated an ambitious program of constructing permanent school buildings, buildings that would

become the envy of other cities. In spite of public opposition to providing education and educational facilities for the District's African-American children, substantial buildings were built for their schools within the next few years. The brick John O. Cook School at 4th and O Streets, NW opened in 1867, followed by the original Thaddeus Stevens (1868) and Charles Sumner Schools (1872), designs prepared by the eminent architect Adolph Cluss.

In 1873 the black school system was formally transferred to the District of Columbia government under a reorganized Board of Trustees and an integrated board, but under which African-American schools remained separate from white ones. George F.T. Cook was appointed superintendent and served until 1900. In 1875, black schools had a total enrollment of more than 5,400 and a total of ten buildings, one of which was a high school. (The first white public high school did not open until seven years later.)

School construction lagged population growth. However, in 1878, a more stable system of construction planning was put in place under the immediate oversight of the District of Columbia's Engineer Commissioner in the office of Building Inspector, with design contributions from the Architect of the Capitol.

Within the school board, there continued to be changes and mounting turmoil, especially over the slow pace of school construction and the consequent number of students in half-day classes throughout the city. Finally in 1900, the Senate replaced the existing board of trustees with a new board of seven members, abolished the Office of Superintendent of Colored Schools and reclassified the position as one of two "Assistant Superintendents" reporting to a white Superintendent who oversaw all public schools. The ultimate result of these reorganizations was increased, yet still insufficient, funding for the construction of the earliest public schools for African-American students.

It was the practice of the Engineer Commission to locate new schools close to population centers. When schools became overcrowded, the customary practice was to construct a new school building in an adjacent lot or within a few blocks or to append small annexes to the original buildings. In the early 1900s, the District's architects began to experiment with expansible school designs. Many building were designed as a complete whole but were constructed in sections as the population of the surrounding community expanded.

Slater School built on P Street was immediately filled to its capacity upon opening. Built in a predominantly African-American community already housing several "colored" schools, students were on half day schedules, which many rightly complained stunted their educational experience. A call for an additional school took ten years to come to fruition even over objections of white neighbors in Eckington and along North Capitol Street complaining of the excessive concentration of black schools and devaluation of their property.

Langston was designed under the public school building subtype "Architects in Private Practice". In addition, it could be considered an extensible building type also referenced in the public schools Multiple Property Document in that it was designed to have two identical wings on opposite sides of the main block. Unfortunately, the west wing was never completed, giving the school an asymmetric look.

The Architect: Appleton P. Clark

Appleton Clark (1865-1955), one of the city's most prolific and influential architects, designed a wide range of building types during a more than 60-year career. Among his extant works are the Foundry Methodist Church and Roosevelt Hotel both on 16th Street NW, the Owl's Nest at 3031 Gates Road, NW, Second Baptist Church at 816 3rd Street, NW.

Clark, active in civic affairs, viewed architecture as a vehicle for civic betterment. His commitment was exemplified in his involvement in the projects of the Washington Sanitary Housing Company, which built the pioneering, low-cost, low-income dwellings on Bates, P and Q Streets surrounding the Slater and Langston Schools. On his death in 1955, the *Washington Post* eulogized him as the "dean of Washington architects".

Langston School

Like its neighbor, Slater School, and other African-American elementary schools of the period, Langston's eight rooms held classes representing grades one through eight. As was the case with Slater School, Langston was chronically overcrowded from its earliest years.

Also like other black schools at the time, the faculty generally consisted of the best and brightest of African Americans foreclosed from entering most other professions. Langston School's first principal was the redoubtable Ella D. Barrier, also an active clubwoman.

In addition Langston School was part of a cluster of African American public schools. By 1919, within a few blocks were three elementary schools, a junior high school, a vocational school and Washington's only two black high schools. By 1925, this African-American academic campus was educating a quarter of the District's black public school students.

For almost two decades, Slater and Langston Schools operated as independent until the late 1910s, when Slater's third principal, Anna E. Thompson, became principal of both schools. The schools began being referred to as Slater-Langston. When Slater became an annex to Margaret Murray Washington Vocational School in 1951, Langston continued as an elementary school.

In the months before the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation, Langston was cited as one of a number of African-American schools "operating above capacity". But by 1982, the overcrowded situation at Langston reversed when enrollment steadily declined until, in 1993 it was at 102 or 53 percent. The community now overwhelmingly black, which had fought previous attempts to shutter the school, now accepted the closure. In 1997, the building became a homeless shelter. It is now empty.

Registration Criteria

The John Mercer Langston Elementary School merits listing in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places for the following reasons:

DC Criterion B (*history*) and NR Criterion A (*contributes to broad patterns of history, education and cultural heritage/Black*): the building conveys important information regarding the development of the District of Columbia public schools, including a) the evolution of public education for African Americans and especially the neglect and the relief of school overcrowding, and b) segregation.

DC Criterion D (*architecture and urbanism*) and NR Criterion C (*embodies distinctive characteristics of a type of construction*): the building is an excellent example of a public school building built for African American students, and in particular, of an “Italianate-style rectangular block extensible school building,” devised to accommodate an increased need for new school buildings in the city. Designed by master architect, Appleton P. Clark, Langston School meets the designation criteria established in the Public Schools Multiple Property Document for the Associated property “Architects in Private Practice, 1897-1910” subtype.

Period of Significance and Integrity:

The Period of Significance for Langston Elementary School extends from 1901 when the building was constructed until 1975 when the District’s public schools were integrated. The school building retains sufficient integrity to convey, represent or contain the values and qualities for which it is judged significant and sufficient time has passed since its significance was achieved.