
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-21

Blanche Kelso Bruce School

770 Kenyon Street NW

Square 2891, Lot 823

Meeting Date: November 20, 2014
Applicant: Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A

Affected ANC: 1A
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Blanche Kelso Bruce School, 770 Kenyon Street NW, a landmark to be entered in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. The HPO further recommends that the Board request that the State Historic Preservation Officer forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1898 to 1927.

The property merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion C and District of Columbia designation Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types... or... expressions of... design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia,” because it is a good example of a Renaissance Revival-style school, the product of an era of improvement in school design as detailed in the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Public School Buildings of Washington, 1862-1960*. It is also very unusual for the way it was expanded in later years, with a 1920s “extensible school” wing.

Bruce School also merits designation under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B (“History”) for being “associated with... institutions [and]... patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the... development of the District of Columbia,” especially as an example of a segregated African-American school and as a cultural center of a largely African-American neighborhood.

Background

Although Washington County had had several rural schoolhouses since the mid 1850s, and a handful of African-American schools joined them in the Freedmen’s Bureau era, the former county had little in the way of neighborhood schools until suburbanization began in earnest. The Organic Act of 1871 had dissolved the city and county corporations into a single District of Columbia, but the early District public schools were located in the old city, an inconvenience to rural dwellers, especially to African-American students, who typically had to commute farther to their segregated schools.

But suburbanization came quickly with the streetcar lines, and among the early concentrations of middle-class housing were the rowhouse neighborhoods out Georgia Avenue and North Capitol Street. It was that general area that received some of the first major school buildings erected outside the L'Enfant city and Georgetown. The James Monroe School for white children was erected in 1889 in the 700 block of Columbia Road NW, and the Bruce School, following Monroe by nine years, was its African-American counterpart and neighbor, less than two blocks away.

Bruce School was named in honor of Blanche Kelso Bruce, the recently deceased politician, the first African American to serve a full term as an elected U.S. senator. The building was among the first schools erected under a campaign to improve school design by farming out commissions to prominent private architects. By the end of the century, the standard, red-brick Victorian model elementary school was seen as drab and outmoded. A post-Columbian Exposition public was interested in more modern modes inspired by the classical world. Bruce was designed by William M. Poindexter, an architect with his own firm, but who had worked under A.B. Mullett in the Office of the Supervising Architect and occasionally collaborated with Joseph Hornblower, Paul Pelz, and others. Bruce's typical center-hall, four-over-four-room plan was enclosed in a very classical package: an absolutely symmetrical square-plan composition on a high base and behind a pedimented central pavilion; an elaborate entrance frontispiece under a modillioned entablature, incorporating a distyle in antis porch and a mezzanine level; a broad cornice and acroteria. The approximately \$30,000 school must have been a desirable facility, as one of the District commissioners urged that the white students at the older Monroe and the black pupils at Bruce switch buildings.

From the beginning, Bruce was a meeting place for African Americans of the neighborhood and beyond. An 1899 "mass meeting" drew a large crowd and several prominent orators. Mrs. Bruce remained involved with the school named for her husband, representing the "Bruce School Mothers' Club for some years.

Much of the lot was taken up with later additions, the first of which was designed by the second Municipal Architect, Albert Harris. Built in 1927, the \$120,000 addition copied the central section of Harris's model "extensible school." The combination and contrast of the turn-of-the-century classicism with Harris's gabled Colonial Revival addition is pretty unusual and notable among D.C. schools. A more recent eastern addition is less successful and of little historic significance. Despite the additions, Bruce, like other African-American schools, always suffered overcrowding as the neighborhood demographics changed.

The principal significance of the school is as an educational facility, serving generations of African-American elementary students during the era of segregated schools. Like other neighborhood schools, it grew out of and grew up with the community, serving as a community center in all senses.

The building is significant as well as a great example of one subtype of school, a product of the "Architects in Private Practice" era of 1897 to 1910, as described in the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Public School Buildings of Washington, 1862-1960*. It also stands as an interesting application of Albert Harris's extensible school design as an addition.

The nomination proposes a period of significance that ends at 1927, the year of construction of the Harris wing. This seems early for a school significant for its history as well as its architecture, but it fits well with the architectural evolution of the site, including the Harris wing, but not the east addition, as significant.