
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic District Case No. 15-15

Spingarn, Young, Phelps and Browne Educational Campus

Square 4486 Lots 801 and 802

Meeting Date: April 28, 2015
Applicant: Kingman Park Civic Association
Affected ANC: ANC 5B (5D in 2013)
Staff Reviewer: Kim Williams

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board approve the historic designation of the Spingarn, Young, Phelps and Browne Educational Campus as an historic district to be listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. Staff also recommends that a historic district nomination for the campus be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places.

The educational campus meets District of Columbia Criteria A (Events) and B (History) because the complex of schools was specifically constructed and built between 1930 and 1952 to serve African American students in a predominantly African-American neighborhood during a period of racial segregation in the city. The district also meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) since the schools buildings are all executed in a Classical Revival-style that was reflective of public school building architecture in the city during the early to mid-twentieth century.

Preservation Background

The Spingarn, Young, Phelps, and Browne Educational Campus is an approximately 35-acre tract of land located along the Anacostia River in northeast D.C. that was set aside for the construction of a complex of schools for African American students during a period of school segregation in the city and country. In November 2012, the Historic Preservation Review Board designated the Spingarn Senior High School within that campus as a D.C. Landmark at the same time that it reviewed a project to build a new streetcar facility adjacent to the school building. At that time, the Board suggested that the entire campus be considered for historic district designation. With that recommendation, the Kingman Park Civic Association prepared a nomination on the campus and its four school buildings, including the already designated Spingarn Senior High School. Simultaneously, and as mitigation for the construction of the streetcar barn on the Spingarn site, the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT) contracted with a preservation consultant to prepare a National Register nomination for the four-school campus complex.

As a result, there are two nominations on file for the campus property. While both nominations generally provide the same historic context and architectural descriptions, they offer some

differences, namely in the name, boundaries, number of resources, eligible criteria, and period of significance. These differences will be addressed in the evaluation section below.

History and Architecture

The Spingarn, Young, Phelps and Browne Educational Campus is located at 26th Street and Benning Road NE in the Kingman Park/Carver/Langston neighborhood of Washington, D.C. The complex of schools occupies an extensive site consisting of 35 acres set upon a rise of land overlooking a fairway of the Langston Golf Course and the Anacostia Stream valley. Before construction of the schools between 1931 and 1952, this parcel of land, partly reclaimed from the Anacostia River, was specifically set aside as a school site to serve African-American students resident in the northeast section of the city. The National Register-listed Langston Dwellings stand immediately west of the campus, and part of the eighteen-hole Langston Golf Course, also listed in the National Register, is located to its east within Anacostia Park, along the west bank of the Anacostia.

The four school buildings, cohesively designed in the Colonial Revival style by the city's Office of the Municipal Architect, are oriented east to the river and sited in a staggered fashion along 26th Street. Spingarn High School is the southernmost of the four schools, then Young Elementary set back from it, Phelps Vocational School set back even further, and Browne Junior High projecting forward at the far north end. In addition to the four school buildings, the site contains a football stadium and track, and basketball and tennis courts. The D.C. Streetcar Barn is under construction at the southwest corner of the site, behind Spingarn. Upon completion, that building will face Benning Road.

The idea to develop a new "school site" dates to 1927, with the establishment of the Kingman Park subdivision, whose homes were marketed specifically to African Americans. By 1931, to accommodate those families moving into Kingman Park and other northeast neighborhoods, and to fill a longstanding need for more schools for the city's black population, the Board of Education purchased a 42-acre site north of Benning Road on the west side of the Anacostia River, upon which it planned to build "school buildings and playground sites... new junior high school, etc." for African-American students.

After a delay in construction due to the Great Depression, the first of the school buildings in the complex, Young Elementary, opened in October 1931. It was named for Charles E. Young, one of the first African-American graduates of West Point. Browne Junior High followed in 1931-1932, honoring Hugh M. Browne, a native-born Washingtonian and African-American educator, minister, and civil rights advocate. In 1932-1934, Phelps Vocational School joined the elementary and junior high schools on the site. Phelps Vocational, later Phelps Architecture, Construction, and Engineering High School, was named for naval captain and diplomat, Seth Leyard Phelps, who had also served as Commissioner of the District of Columbia from 1875 until 1879.

The new schools significantly boosted interest in area real estate. During the 1930s, house sales in Kingman Park and adjacent neighborhoods took off, led by middle-class African-American families whose heads of household worked for the federal government. In 1935, immediately behind the school site, the Public Works Administration began construction of Langston

Dwellings, a public housing complex designed by African-American architect Hillyard Robinson in the International style. Its construction, from 1935 to 1938, marked the beginning of the federal government's active local involvement in the replacement of substandard dwellings with that of a planned community for black families. At its completion, Langston Dwellings was widely praised. Development in this northeast section of the city—slow-moving well into the twentieth century—was taking off.

In 1939, engineer and civic leader Howard D. Woodson championed the construction of a high school at this site, observing that “A senior high school at the school center at Kingman Park would be a boon to about 1,000 pupils from the Northeast and Southeast who live east of Eighth Street and now attend high school in the Northwest, where all our senior high schools are grouped and also over-crowded.” Unfortunately, no high school would be constructed on the site for another decade, well after the end of World War II. Finally, in 1950-1952 Spingarn Senior High School was erected and named for Dr. Joel Elias Spingarn (1875-1939), a scholar of international reputation. Its completion was so significant that it drew dignitaries from around the country for its dedication.

In May 1954, less than two years after the opening of Spingarn, the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* ended segregation in public schools. By July 1, the city was re-zoned and new integrated boundaries for each school level were submitted to the Board of Education. Just begun was the difficult task of integrating the administrative and supervisory structure of the schools with dual philosophies, methods of control, teaching practices, pupil achievement measurement, and record-keeping. By the fall of 1954 the dual segregated system was transformed into a single integrated system.

Evaluation

Name: The two nominations propose different names for the campus. The Kingman Park Civic Association nomination names the district as the Browne, Young, Phelps and Spingarn Educational Campus, with the school names listed in chronological order by date of construction. The consultant-prepared nomination created the name Education Hill Historic District. Staff proposes to name the historic district as the Spingarn, Young, Phelps and Browne Educational Campus. This name puts first the landmarked Spingarn, the high school and the building nearest Benning Road. It is followed in sequence as the buildings proceed northward.

Boundaries: The two nominations propose slightly different boundaries, with that of the Kingman Park Civic Association more encompassing. Staff recommends that the boundaries be drawn consistent with the consultant-prepared nomination. Those boundaries include Lot 801 and 802 on Square 4486 that hold the four school buildings and their land, plus part of Parcel 0160/0042 to include the basketball and tennis courts and the stadium. The boundary excludes that part of the Reservation known as Section G of Anacostia Park, comprising the Langston Golf Course and its associated resources. The school parking lot is within the bounds of this Reservation and would not be included in the historic district boundary.

So drawn, the boundaries will include the four contributing school buildings, the non-contributing Streetcar Car Barn currently under construction, and the non-contributing pre-fabricated shed just north of the stadium.

Criteria: The Spingarn, Young, Phelps and Browne Educational Campus meets District of Columbia Designation Criteria A (Events) and B (History), because the complex of schools was specifically constructed on land set aside for a school complex to serve African American students of this section of the city during a period of racial segregation.

The campus meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) because the school buildings are all cohesively executed in an early- to mid-twentieth-century Colonial Revival-style. Beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century, and largely influenced by the Commission of Fine Arts, the city's Office of the Municipal Architect adopted the style as preferred for public school buildings in the District. This red-brick classicism prevailed throughout the mid-twentieth century. After World War II, however, and under the direction of Municipal Architect Merrel Coe, the District turned to a more functionalist, modern vocabulary. Despite Coe's preference for a more modern design aesthetic, he employed the Colonial Revival-style form and vocabulary at Spingarn, so that it would fit sympathetically with the three older schools. Spingarn is notable for being the last of the Colonial Revival-style school buildings constructed in the District of Columbia.

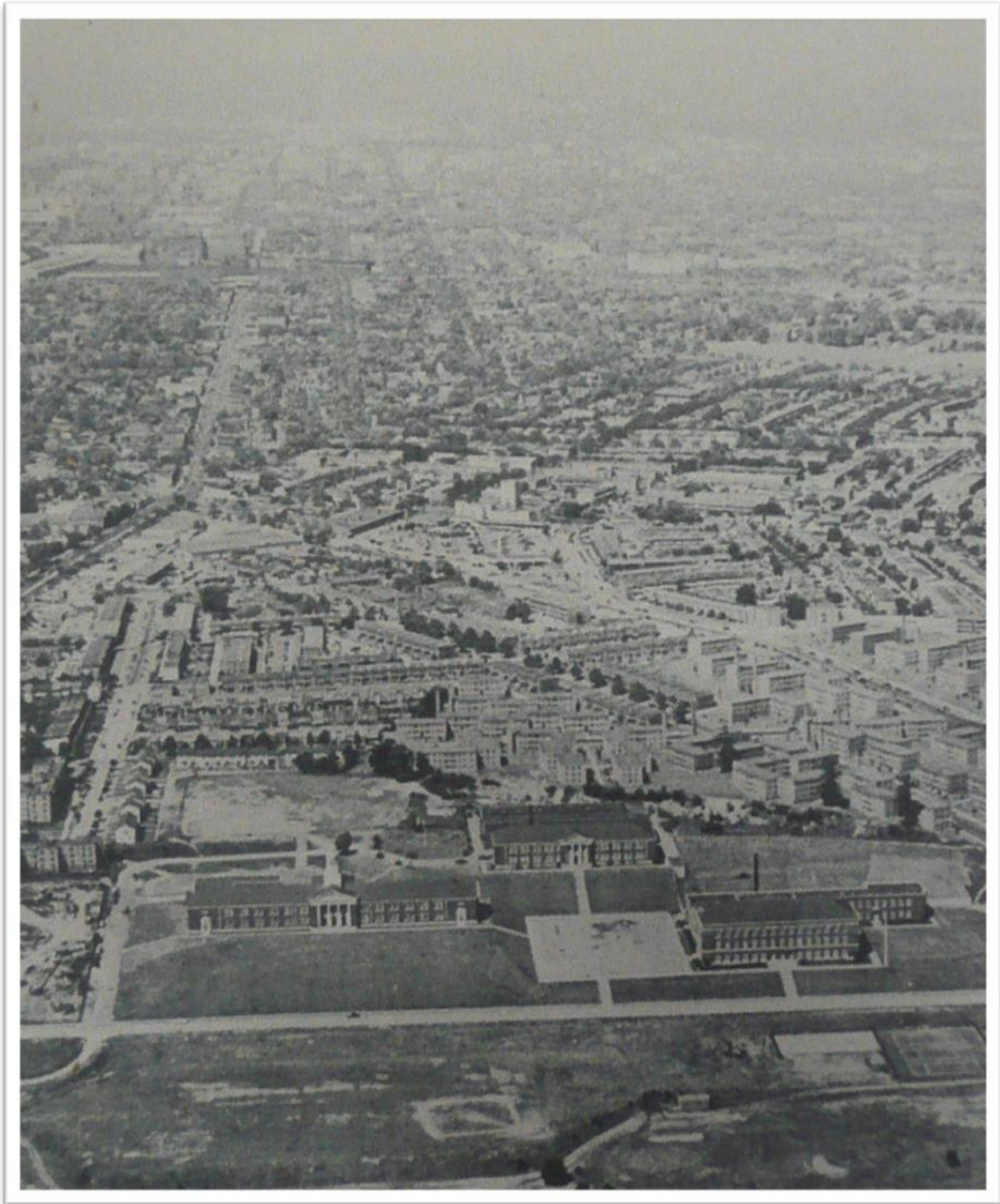
The campus also merits listing under National Register Criteria A and C, under the Multiple Property Document *Public School Buildings of the District of Columbia, 1862-1960*.

The nomination submitted by the Kingman Park Civic Association indicates that the property also meets National Register Criterion B (Persons) for its association with Hugh M. Browne, Charles Young, Seth Ledyard Phelps, and Joel Elias Spingarn. According to the National Register Guidelines, however, this criterion is restricted to properties that illustrate, rather than commemorate, a person's achievements. Because these persons were not directly associated with the schools named for them, Criterion B is not relevant.

Period of Significance: The period of significance differs between the nominations. The Kingman Park Civic Association proposes a period from 1931 to the present. This brings it too close to the present without offering a compelling date or reason for a terminal date within the past 50 years.

The consultant-generated nomination proposes an end date of 1954. This is not inappropriate, but negates the importance of the 1950s transition of the city's schools from a segregated to an integrated school system.

Staff recommends that the period of significance extend from 1931, when the first school was completed, to 1960, the end-date of the Period of Significance of the Multiple Property document, *Public School Buildings of the District of Columbia, 1862-1960*. As the story of the four schools is directly associated with the history of racial segregation and desegregation of public facilities, it seems important to include the entire 1950s, which represents the period of desegregation and the consolidation and reorganization of the formerly dual school systems. An end date of 1960 captures this era, and also coincides with the tenure of notable students, teachers, principals, and dignitaries who attended events on the campus.



An aerial view of campus in 1950, before construction of Spingarn High School.