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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-17

### Calvin Coolidge Senior High School

6315 5<sup>th</sup> Street NW  
Square 3269, Lot 66

Meeting Date: September 23, 2021  
Applicant: District of Columbia Department of General Services  
Affected ANC: 4B

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate Calvin Coolidge Senior High School a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board request the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1938-1940.

#### **Background**

After the turn of the twentieth century, the District of Columbia's Board of Education embarked on a modernization of school facilities to address the overcrowding and obsolescence of the Victorian model school buildings. In addition, many of these had been sited on small lots that did not accommodate proper playgrounds. Legislation in 1906 reorganized the educational system and permitted the abandonment of older schools. It established a Schoolhouse Commission, and Congress provided funding for the construction of new schools, initially designed by architects in private practice. Between 1908 and 1920, the Board of Education built or renovated more than thirty elementary schools. Suburban expansion played a large role in the location of the new schools, as many were located in new neighborhoods whose growth was fueled by the rise of streetcars and, eventually, the automobile. The Board of Education abandoned several older schools in central city neighborhoods, whose residential population was shrinking from suburbanization and commercial and institutional redevelopment.

School construction did not keep pace with growth in the school-age population; between 1910 and 1920, elementary school enrollment increased from 49,481 to 56,526. The Board of Education enlarged class sizes, occasionally used rented space, and employed portable classrooms. Overcrowding only worsened with an influx of residents during the First World War coinciding with wartime restrictions on the availability of building materials and a postwar recession. Meanwhile, Washington's public schools were offering a more diverse range of educational and vocational programming, placing additional demands on the design of schools, including the incorporation of internal and external recreation space, dining space, and sometimes vocational training spaces, laboratories and auditoriums.

In 1924, the Board of Education proposed a Five-Year Building Program focusing on the construction of high schools and junior highs, additions to existing school buildings, and new playgrounds. Incomplete at the advent of the Great Depression, the program was now delayed

further as funds were not readily available. The New-Deal upscaling of the federal government attracted more workers and families to the District, sharpening the need for schools. Some federal financing did become available for public buildings, and twenty-seven new schools were completed during the 1930s, including Calvin Coolidge High School, completed in 1940. Like most other schools in the segregated system set up during the Civil War, Coolidge served only white pupils until desegregation during the following decade.

Coolidge High was well-appointed, with boys' and girl's gyms and an auditorium, laboratories, workshops, a library, a music room and a study hall. An initial cost-conscious design—hampered by a limited Congressional appropriation—was panned by an irate Takoma Park neighborhood, and Wyeth was sent back to the drawing board to create an aesthetic rival to Roosevelt High (1932).

Although erected during the tenure of Municipal Architect Nathan C. Wyeth, the Georgian-Revival Coolidge reflects the influence of earlier works, such as Wilson High, by Wyeth's predecessor, Albert Harris, who died in 1933. Harris had a fondness for a Palladian five-part plan, as employed at MacFarland Middle School, which echoed his extensible-school model and allowed for construction in phases. But with its internal courtyards, Coolidge's E-plan looked back instead to the 1914 Elizabethan Cardozo High School by the first municipal architect, Snowden Ashford. In this regard, it would prefigure Spingarn, not completed until 1952 by Wyeth's successor, Merrell Coe.

Wyeth largely carried forward Harris's Colonial- and Classical-Revival designs, favored by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts as compatible with residential neighborhoods, but able to be scaled up from elementary schools to monumental high-school facades. Becoming increasingly modernist at the end of his career, Wyeth would play with the traditional, central portico, first engaging it to the façade and then abstracting it, an early example of which can be seen at the *rear* of Coolidge, but which reached a high point in its evolution at the Moderne-style old Kelly Miller Middle School (1949, but based on a 1936 plan and 1941 elevations; demolished). On the other hand, Wyeth would carry on Harris's wholly decorative and expensive tower/cupola from Roosevelt High as a distinctive marker of his subsequent high schools, and even some of the middle schools.

### **Significance and designation criteria**

Like any school, Coolidge's primary significance lays in its educational function, drawing students from a broad swath of the city and educating them for more than 80 years. It was one of the last schools of the inaptly named five-year construction program of 1924, reflecting the filling out of the District's boundaries, as a Takoma Park High School clustered with the neighboring Whittier elementary (1926) and a playground. At long last, the Citizens' Association of Takoma Park—founded the same year as the "five-year" program—achieved its desire for K-through-12 education housed in attractive facilities within the neighborhood. For these reasons, the property merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B ("History").

Coolidge is a handsome educational building, a visual landmark of the community, reflecting the best planning of the Harris and Wyeth tenures as municipal architect. It is an excellent example

of Georgian Revival design applied to a public school meeting the latest functional standards of its day. Its exterior reflects the resistance of its client community to a value-engineered facility stripped to its basics. Thus did the Albert Harris cupola become a trademark of Nathan Wyeth schools. Coolidge High is representative of the design concepts of Wyeth, as he developed them from Harris's earlier work, and the property is a good example of the sub-type "The Office of the Municipal Architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, 1934-46" as described in the multiple-property documentation form *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960*. For these reasons, the property merits designation under National Register criterion C and District of Columbia criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism").

### **Period of significance**

The proposed period of significance is 1938-1940, the original building's dates of construction. For a property of historical significance beyond a single event, a longer period of significance—coinciding with a period of significant use—is typically appropriate. In this instance, however, there is not an obvious alternative terminal date. The property continues to be used for its original purpose, and the principal alterations occurred relatively recently, during the 1980s and 2010s. While desegregated during the 1950s, the documentation does not support a special role for Coolidge in that struggle.

### **Integrity**

Coolidge High School retains a high degree of historic integrity. Despite the "activity center" addition of the 1980s, and the recent enclosure of the courtyards, the historic core retains much of its original form and character. The building remains in its original location in a setting that has not changed dramatically since its completion in 1940. But, with the exception of the features attached to the building—the entry steps, the areaways—there are no original landscape features of note. The walk/plaza at front has been re-laid and expanded; the rear altered with additions and revamped playing fields, the side yards; lost with additions and gardens. Still, wrapped by the recreation center, the whole retains a sense of standing within a green landscape.

Coolidge's exterior retains design characteristics and materials that convey its architectural significance. The Georgian Revival design elements—including the brick, limestone, wood, and cast-iron finishes, articulated plan, hipped roof and massive portico—are intact. The original windows have been replaced as part of a 2018-2019 modernization (which prompted this landmark application), but the original fenestration pattern has been retained. The modernization included restoration of the cupola. The 1980s addition did not alter or remove important character-defining features of the Georgian Revival design. A 2019 addition for the Ida Wells Middle School was constructed on the site of a school greenhouse, but carefully reviewed at by the Commission of Fine Arts and the DC Historic Preservation Office, it, too, does not compromise the character-defining features of the main block.

Original workmanship and materials are reflected in the original 1938 terrazzo floor and marble wainscoting of the formal spaces, most notably the main entrance and the auditorium foyer. Most of the ceramic tile wainscoting has been replaced, but in kind. Many of the original wood doors have been replaced with steel doors that mimic the paneled design of the original doors, although a few original wood doors remain.