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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-07

### Thomas Jefferson Junior High School

Square 439, Lot 23

Meeting Date: January 28, 2021  
Applicant: D.C. Department of General Services  
Affected ANC: 6D

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Thomas Jefferson Junior High School a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO does not recommend that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places, however, because it is unlikely the Register would list the property because of the loss of the historic integrity of the building's interior.

Now known as Jefferson Middle School Academy, the building was constructed in 1939-1940 as the successor to the Adolph Cluss-designed 1872 Thomas Jefferson school at 6<sup>th</sup> and D streets SW, which had been converted to a junior high in the early 1920s. Both were racially segregated "white" schools, named in honor of the third president of the United States, who had chaired Washington City's first school board in 1804.

Near Southwest Washington was a unique neighborhood, with areas densely populated since the Civil War adjacent to tracts of industrial land where rail lines met the Potomac wharves. Like so much of the city, it saw significant increases in population during the World War I and Depression-era expansions of the federal government.

Already by the end of the war, the District of Columbia had developed a huge construction backlog to address school overcrowding. Labor demands had lured more residents, but material shortages chilled construction. Addressing this crisis would become the principal mission of a new superintendent of schools, Dr. Frank Ballou, and the Office of the Municipal Architect. It was not until early 1925 that Congress passed a Five-Year School Building Program Act for the construction of mostly suburban schools. The program contained plans for replacements of older schools as well.

The District had introduced an experimental junior high school to the former Central High building in early 1919 and soon adopted the practice generally. The original McKinley Manual Training School was converted to Shaw Junior High in 1922, about the same time as the conversion of the old Jefferson elementary. Petworth and Eckington received their own junior highs in 1923. The 1925 five-year plan would call for eight more such schools. In this, Washington emulated dozens of other cities that had established hundreds of junior highs in the first half of the 1910s. It was a Progressive-era reform being adopted nationwide, a recognition of the particular challenges of teaching children that had reached puberty and of the wisdom of

holding back the ninth-graders from immersion among older students. Junior highs such as Jefferson incorporated shops for vocational training, giving them the ability to set students on academic or vocational tracks early—often useful, but also a fraught proposition. In Washington, at least, the impetus behind junior highs was as much overcrowding as pedagogy. They relieved congestion in neighborhood schools by skimming off the higher grades from several, and putting the pupils into a new, centralized facility without having to disrupt and expand each of the elementary schools.

Replacement of the first Thomas Jefferson Junior High took a back seat to the provision of most of the suburban facilities, a sore spot for the Southwest Citizens' Association, which campaigned for the new school since early 1925. It had been expanded to a junior high only with the addition of “portable” classrooms. The Depression brought federal funding for a variety of local public facilities, but it also strained fiscal resources while attracting still more children of government workers. It was only at the end of the interwar period—a decade past the initial five years of the five-year building program—that the new Jefferson was completed. In fact, it was among the last of the program's projects.

The new Thomas Jefferson Junior High School was designed by the Office of the Municipal Architect led by Nathan C. Wyeth. Wyeth continued the predominantly Colonial Revival mode of his predecessor, Albert Harris, as the style was favored by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts as suitably domestic in scale and expression for compatibility with most residential neighborhoods. Wyeth would soon turn to streamlined Moderne expressions, for both aesthetic and cost reasons. Constructed on two condemned blocks consisting partly of industrial land, the T-shaped Jefferson faced H Street and the recreation center to the north—completed in 1944, after the Southwest Citizens' Association fought off a government warehouse. Plainly influenced by colonial Tidewater architecture, the school's main bar is organized in a five-part plan, with a nine-bay, hip-roofed central block surmounted by a frame cupola and distinguished by an engaged portico of limestone piers and a cornice and quoins of the same material. The building was equipped with a gymnasium and a separate auditorium, as well as a library in the easternmost section that served as the neighborhood's public library branch for more than 24 years. The school also served as the meeting place for the Citizens' Association.

### **Designation criteria**

Thomas Jefferson Junior High School is old enough to have allowed sufficient time to have passed to evaluate the property in its historic context. Indeed, a public schools survey performed that function a couple of decades ago, and a follow-up multiple-property thematic document suggested that nearly all pre-1961 schools that retain sufficient integrity may be eligible for designation. The multiple-property document *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960* places Jefferson within a school period and subtype “The Office of the Municipal Architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, 1934-46.” The registration requirements for this subtype include, in part:

[T]hey must be representative of the design concepts of Nathan C. Wyeth, the third Municipal Architect. They should demonstrate his development of Harris'[s] Colonial Revival junior high school, high school, and extensible designs as well as

the influence of the Commission of Fine Arts.... Subsequent additions must not detract from the original design in any significant way....

Jefferson Junior High School merits designation under National Register Criterion C and D.C. Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of... building types... or expressions of... urban planning, siting, or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation,” as a high-quality example of a fully realized junior high school in the characteristic and neighborhood-friendly Colonial Revival style of the era. It is an exemplary work of Wyeth’s predating his modernistic phase and a prominent visual landmark of Southwest.

At least as important, Jefferson Junior High School meets National Register Criterion A and D.C. Criterion B (“History”) as “associated with historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, achievements, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation” for its essential function of educating the youth of Southwest for generations. It has some significance for being among the last schools of the interwar period and of the protracted “five-year” program set out in 1925. Like most schools, its construction was sought by the local civic association, and it became a community center and meeting place. But perhaps uniquely, it hosted the local branch of the public library for a quarter of a century.

### **Period of significance**

The nomination proposes a period of significance of 1939-1940, the span of construction. As a formerly white school, Jefferson only incidentally participates in the story of the long struggle for civil rights in terms of equal access to education. While such a short period of significance does not account for any period of use as an educational institution and community center, there are no obvious events that call for a later date. It makes little practical difference, as the building remained substantially in as-built condition for decades.

### **Boundary**

The school stands on its original lot, although the parcel’s shape was altered by the construction of Maine Avenue on its south.

### **Integrity**

The school’s interior has been thoroughly rehabilitated within the past four years. Its original character has largely been wiped away, although the overall plan remains. This is not as much of an issue under the local preservation statute; Washington buildings are only rarely landmarked for their interior features and, therefore, alterations to the interiors are typically not subject to review. Without the same regulatory limitations, the National Register of Historic Places is keenly interested in historic integrity inside and out and would be unlikely to list the property for that reason.

The exterior has been altered with new but compatible windows, doors, and two minor stair-tower additions for egress from the south wing. The character-defining features have been retained, and the cupola was restored as part of the recent rehabilitation.