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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-19

### Lucy Diggs Slowe Elementary School

3115 14<sup>th</sup> Street NE  
Square 3960, Lot 0806

Meeting Date: October 28, 2021  
Applicant: DC Preservation League  
Affected ANC: 5B

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate Slowe Elementary School at 3115 14<sup>th</sup> Street NE a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board forward the nomination under the Multiple Property Document *20<sup>th</sup> Century African American Civil Rights Sites in Washington, DC, 1912-1974* and under the Multiple Property Document *Public School Buildings in the District of Columbia, 1862-1960* to the National Register of Historic Places for listing under Criteria A and C.



### Background

The Lucy Diggs Slowe School first opened as the Crummell School Annex on this site at 14<sup>th</sup> and Jackson streets NE in 1945 in response to a lawsuit against D.C.'s segregated school system filed by Brookland resident John P. Davis. One year earlier, in 1944, John Davis attempted to enroll his five-year-old son, Michael, in kindergarten at the nearby Noyes Elementary School, for Whites-only, but was turned away because Michael was African American. At that time, the Brookland neighborhood, which was becoming increasingly African American, was served by four public schools for Whites and no public school for Blacks. African American children attended elementary school at either the distant Monroe or Mott Elementary schools in Columbia

Heights and Le Droit Park, respectively. Despite the Board of Education's requirement that students should attend schools within one-half mile of their homes and not have to cross an arterial highway to reach it, both Monroe and Mott schools were well beyond that distance from Brookland and both required students to cross multiple major roads.

Davis, a 1933 graduate of Harvard Law School and co-founder of the National Negro Congress, had moved to Brookland in 1935, and was, in 1944, legislative secretary to a U.S. Congressman. Well-equipped to plead his son's case, Davis argued that the Board of Education's failure to provide an elementary school for African American children in Brookland violated the Constitution. Davis further argued that because of that failure, the Board should grant his son admission to the Noyes School, or any other school within a half-mile of his home. In response, the Board of Education claimed that its policy was to provide equal facilities, but also admitted that it found it increasingly difficult due to "the shifting of the population." Indeed, the Brookland neighborhood was attractive to and popular with African Americans who were legally restricted from many D.C. neighborhoods, but not in certain areas of Brookland. Since the mid-1930s, as the African American school-aged population continued to grow, the Brookland Civic Association had been advocating for a school for African Americans in the neighborhood. Despite this history, in May 1944, the case was dismissed in the District Court based on the judge's determination that the complaint did not show discrimination, but merely "inconvenience." Davis thus amended his court filing which noted that 500 black families, including at least 100 school-aged children in that section of Brookland were not served by a single African American school. Conversely, he noted that no white residential area with more than 30 elementary school children in the District was without a public school nearby. In June 1944, rather than hearing the case, or allowing Davis or any other African American children to attend a neighborhood White school, or considering the transfer of one of Brookland's under-enrolled White schools to the school division for Black students, the Board of Education instead sought and received a Congressional appropriation of \$44,000 to construct a "colored" school in Brookland and the case was dismissed. To build the school, the Board chose a site immediately across the street from Davis' house, requiring the purchase of and, in face of opposition, the condemnation of land and the eventual demolition of houses on the site.

To begin with, in January 1945, the city opened a modest, two-room school, called Crummell School Annex, in two temporary structures connected to the house at 1325 Jackson Street—the largest of the houses taken by the school board. The school opened with 75 students enrolled. Shortly thereafter, in February 1945, as a new school building was in the design stages at the Municipal Architect's office, the school was named Lucy Diggs Slowe Elementary School in honor of long-time DC educator and then Dean of Women at Howard University. As designed, the school consisted of a two-story, plus raised basement, concrete structure and brick building facing Jackson Street and extending south along 14<sup>th</sup> Street NE.

The building with its flat roof, horizontal banks of windows and glass block at the corners and entrance bay, was designed by Municipal Architect Nathan Wyeth in a Modernist aesthetic. Wyeth designed the school at the end of his career, and at the beginning of a transition in the design of public schools from the Colonial Revival-style tradition of the pre-World War II era to a more modern design aesthetic of the post-War years. The school opened in 1948 with only the basement and first floor levels completed on the interior; in 1951, the interior of the second floor

was completed, adding five classrooms and a multi-purpose room to the already over-enrolled school, doubling its capacity to 360 students. In the years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, as the city's Black population continued to increase, both in number and as a percentage of the total population, Slowe School, along with other schools city-wide, became overcrowded and over-enrolled. In 1967, to help relieve this overcrowding at Slowe, a sizeable addition was built to the west of the 1948 school building at a rise in the topography and on the site of the school playground. The former residences and temporary school structure on the site had been demolished in 1950 for the creation of the playground.

### **Evaluation**

Slowe Elementary School has been evaluated under two Multiple Property Documents (MPD): *Public School Buildings of Washington, D.C., 1862-1960*, and *20<sup>th</sup> Century African American Civil Rights Sites in Washington, D.C., 1912-1974*. Slowe Elementary School meets National Register Criteria A and C under the Civil Rights MPD with Conflict Sites as its Associated Property Type. The school was constructed as the result of a conflict over equal access to education and the fight to desegregate public schools. Schools that fall into this category are more typically those that barred Black students and were the object of protests to demand access for African Americans, such as Sousa School in Southeast. The Slowe School instead represents the decision, in face of conflict, to build a new school for African Americans rather than desegregate an existing one. The Slowe School's construction directly across the street from the home of John P. Davis who brought the lawsuit precipitating the school's construction, adds to the building's importance. In addition, because the school was overcrowded from the time it opened and lacked adequate amenities, it remained a site of conflict over unequal education in the District throughout the 1950s and 60s.

The Slowe School also meets Criteria A and C of the Multiple Property Document for Public Schools under the Associated Property Sub-type VI, "The Office of the Municipal Architect, Nathan C. Wyeth, 1934-46." In addition to Meeting Criterion A under this cover as an excellent example of the "evolution of public education for African Americans" as part of the city's segregated school system, Slowe School meets National Register Criterion C as a good representation of Municipal Architect Nathan Wyeth's stylistic transition from Colonial Revival to modern. The school is one of the early examples of the Office of the Municipal Architect's usage of Modern design influences in the District of Columbia, and was the last building designed by Wyeth, who is primarily associated with the school system's Colonial Revival phase in the 1920s to the mid-1940s. For the same reasons cited above, Slowe Elementary School meets D.C. Designation Criteria A (Events), B (History), and D (Architecture and Urbanism).

### **Period of Significance**

There are two periods of significance for the property. Under Criterion A, the period of significance extends from 1948 when the school was constructed to 1967 when an addition was built to accommodate increasing student enrollment. Under Criterion C, the period of significance ends in 1951, with the completion of the interior of the 1948 school building. While not included within the period of significance under Criterion C, the 1967 addition to the west of the original school building does not detract from the physical or visual integrity of the original structure and is relatively compatible with it.

**Recommendation**

HPO recommends that the Board designate Slowe Elementary School for the reasons cited above and forward the nomination (to be enhanced by interior description and photos) to the National Register of Historic Places.