
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 20-07

Samuel F.B. Morse School

440 R Street NW
Square 509, Lot 197

Meeting Date: September 24, 2020
Applicant: 440 R Street Partners LLC
Affected ANC: 6E

The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the Samuel F.B. Morse School, 440 R Street NW, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, with a period of significance of 1883 to 1975, the duration of its public school use. HPO does not recommend that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing because of integrity issues, but it could be referred for the Register’s review if the applicant wishes.

The population of the District of Columbia more than doubled between the beginning of the Civil War and 1880. By the latter date, infrastructure improvements allowed the extension of rowhouse neighborhoods and connected them with close-in suburbs. New schools were required and, in a mostly pedestrian world, that meant neighborhood-based facilities, especially for small children. During the Civil War, the city developed individualized model schools for its new education system, but rapid expansion meant a need for a less-expensive, easily reproduced model compatible with the character of dense residential areas. Under the District of Columbia Commission government, the review of permit plans and of building itself was placed under an Office of the Building Inspector, as was the design and construction of public facilities.

The Office of the Building Inspector developed a standard two-story center-hall elementary school with four rooms per floor, one room per grade. The exterior and structural walls were red brick, compatible with their predominantly rowhouse neighborhoods. There was some variation in roof features such as towers and turrets. The plan had slight variations, too, as in these early days, the elementary schools typically had separate entrances for boys and girls, sometimes on opposite sides of the building and sometimes perpendicular to each other.

Morse School was erected in 1883 to plans completed the previous year and named for an American scientific hero who had died a decade earlier.¹ The building was typical in that most schools of the era were erected for White students, in a strictly racially divided system—or rather, two parallel but not truly equal systems. The property had an unusually varied career. In 1911 it was repurposed for “ungraded” White students, “for the most part incorrigible children

¹ The naming was more suited to a white school of the time as Morse was on one hand a philanthropist, but was also a nativist and had publicly defended slavery as a positive good.

who present social behavior problems” and those “mentally deficient to such a degree as to be unable to profit by instruction in regular classes, but still not feeble-minded in the sense that they should be confined in institutions such as a social menace.” These pupils received vocational training in “a cooking department, carpenter shop, room for cutting and tailoring, and a model room for dressmaking” on one floor and in the basement. Because of neighborhood demographic changes, in 1930 Morse was reassigned for similar “atypical” classes for African American students, another example of Black pupils receiving an old building. In the late 1930s, its administration was combined with the nearby Twining School as city leadership contemplated their consolidation in a new school to replace the superannuated facilities. It was not until 1949—and another huge influx of population during the war—that Morse’s pupils were transferred to the new Winfield Scott Elementary.

During the Korean War, the old Morse building accommodated administrative offices, evening classes for veterans and some vocational training. From 1954 to 1968 it was again an elementary school, finally integrated, but it was closed following the 1968 riots. Reopened as a boys’ junior high school branch in the early 1970s, it soon again served students with “emotional or behavior problems... who could not adjust to the normal classroom setting.” In 1976, the now-vacant and decrepit building was officially closed and declared surplus. In 1981, the property was purchased for the headquarters of the nonprofit Africare, which gutted the interior.

Evaluation

Significance

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 Victorian model elementary school, as described in the Multiple Property Documentation Form *Public School Buildings of Washington, 1862-1960* as the type erected under the Office of the Building Inspector, 1874-1897.

Previous school designations have cited 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,” recognizing the properties’ crucial central function of educating children. The same is true of Morse School. Like other elementary schools, it was a community center and neighborhood visual landmark. But it had an especially varied career as a White elementary school, a Black elementary school, a White remedial/vocational school, a Black remedial/vocational school, an integrated elementary school, and an integrated remedial/vocational school. According to the multiple-property document, for the school subtype of the Office of the Building Inspector period, consideration should be given to the significance of programmatic changes.

Period of significance

The nomination proposes the building’s construction date as the period of significance, and that

is certainly the appropriate initial date. Yet, schools have typically been designated with an extended period of significance to reflect the importance of their function over time; their significance is not wholly captured in being the umpteenth example of an architectural type. Morse's period of significance could be terminated at the end of its original use as an elementary school, but there is no compelling reason to exclude its continuing educational use to 1975. There is little practical difference to the determination; alterations that had occurred by 1975 were largely themselves wiped out by the thorough renovation of the 1980s.

Integrity

The public-school multiple-property document's registration requirements of this school type include that,

They must convey in their exterior design and interior floor plans the key signatures of the Building Inspector's design approach. The exterior must be of pressed brick. The major decorative features must be retained, e.g., pressed brick, terra cotta, and stone foundations and string courses. The customary projecting pavilions and towers must be intact. Although additions may have been appended to the original structure, the appearance of the main block as an entity must be intact....

The Morse School retains sufficient historic integrity for designation, considering that the most important exterior features are mostly retained, and few buildings are landmarked—and therefore protected—for their interiors. The most noticeable exterior alterations are the painting of the brick and Africare's construction of a tall, glassy entry pavilion/stair tower in place of the original side entrance. While it is a major change to the building's appearance, it is not incompatible with the multiple-property document's acceptance of additions—in this case, a small side addition not dissimilar to the hyphens that have often connected historic schools to later wings.

Within the constraint of the masonry bearing walls, the interior was gutted in the 1980s, and that is likely to pose an issue for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, which has is keenly interested in historic integrity throughout, especially when approaching the question of listing an additional school.

Boundary

The most appropriate boundary would be that of the school's historic parcel since construction, the former assessment and taxation Lot 805. The side yard had historically been the playground. But the applicant recently subdivided the lot to remove the subdivision and construction of neighboring rowhouses from the Board's purview, proposing instead the school's smaller present lot, which is what has been legally noticed.