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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD**  
**Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 10-14**

Marjorie Webster Junior College  
1638-1640 Kalmia Road, NW (Square 2745F, Lots 815 and 817)

Meeting Date: September 22, 2011  
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League  
Owner: Lowell School, Inc.  
Affected ANCs: ANC 4A

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After careful consideration, staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate the Marjorie Webster Junior College at 1638-1640 Kalmia Road, NW to the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The nomination for the Marjorie Webster School seeks designation of the Marjorie Webster school property as a D.C. Landmark. Based upon a review of the National Register Guidelines for categorizing properties as buildings, structures, sites, objects or districts, and based upon comparable listings in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, staff recommends that the property be designated as an historic district rather than as a landmark. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing as an historic district in the National Register of Historic Places.



Introduction:

The Marjorie Webster School campus at 1638-1640 Kalmia Road is a picturesque educational complex located on Kalmia Road in upper northwest Washington, just east of and abutting Rock Creek Park. The campus is set upon approximately eight acres of land with the principal school building—a sprawling Mediterranean Revival-style “villa”—located at the top of a hill

overlooking the grounds and its associated buildings. The campus complex was established in 1928 by Marjorie Webster who founded the school seven years earlier and was actively engaged in its operation until her death in 1963. The educational complex is currently owned and operated by the Lowell School, a private day school with students in grades K-8.

### Historical Background:

The Marjorie Webster School was founded in 1920 by Marjorie Fraser Webster. Born in 1896 and raised in Chicago, Marjorie Webster came to Washington, D.C. during World War I with her family where she worked as a recreation manager in one of the city's many dormitories for women before realizing her ambition of becoming a college president. The Webster School, located in a series of row houses in the 1400 block of Massachusetts Avenue, NW was initially established as a night school for women, but quickly grew to include day classes that could result in a two-year post-high school "normal" course of study, or a one-year professional degree. From its inception, athletics were a major part of the school with the school's basketball team in particular garnering much attention in the local press. By 1922, the school was being advertised as the Marjorie Webster School of Expression and Physical Education.

In 1927-28, facing demolition of her rented rowhouse quarters near Thomas Circle, Marjorie Webster purchased a large, approximately eight-acre parcel of land well beyond the city limits where she began construction of a new school that would also include her own private residence. This parcel of land was historically part of a larger farm property that had been owned in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by John Van Riswick and his wife Mary, prominent Washingtonians whose principal residence was located at 14<sup>th</sup> and K Streets, N.W. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the farm property, called "Van View" stretched easterly from the present school site and included the Van Riswick farmhouse (still standing at 13<sup>th</sup> and Kalmia Streets, N.W.), a clustering of domestic outbuildings around the main house, and several other farm buildings scattered near the present school property.<sup>1</sup> One of these, commonly considered a spring house, but possibly an ice house based upon its location next to an ice pond as noted on the 1888 Coast and Geodetic Survey map, was located on the parcel purchased by Webster. The pyramidal-roofed brick structure still stands on the school property today. Similarly, a depression in the earth survives where the pond was once located.

The parcel purchased by Marjorie Webster for her school in 1927 was part of a larger tract of this farmland that had in the previous year been purchased by developer Edson W. Briggs and platted for residential subdivision as "Rock Creek Estates." The 100-acre Rock Creek Estates development included a curvilinear system of streets that followed the natural terrain, and earned Briggs praise in the local press for "preserv[ing]...not only the trees, but the brooks, hills and dales throughout the property." In keeping with this sylvan theme, Briggs named the streets in his subdivision after trees and flowers: myrtle, orchid, poplar, jonquil, juniper, holly and kalmia (kalmia being a species of evergreen shrubs). Lots within his subdivision were relatively large 1/3-acre suburban lots with 100-foot-wide street frontages.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to becoming part of the Van Reswick estate, these buildings formed the "old Fenwick homestead." This property may well have been associated with Mary Van Reswick, whose maiden name was Fenwick.

The subdivision plat for Rock Creek Estates included at its southern edge, the parcel of land which would be purchased the following year by Marjorie Webster for her school. Unlike the surrounding land that was subdivided into lots, this parcel was left unsubdivided. Briggs may have intended to leave the parcel with its pond and springhouse/icehouse as a neighborhood park and amenity, or perhaps he had already negotiated the deal with Webster prior to submitting his plat to the surveyor's office. In either case, the establishment of a women's college on open land with picturesque buildings could only have been perceived by Briggs as an enhancement to his fledgling Rock Creek Estates.

In moving out of rented quarters downtown to Kalmia Road, Marjorie Webster fully committed herself to the building and operation of her school that lasted her lifetime. During the spring and summer of 1928, Webster built the Mediterranean Revival-style school building along with her own residence on the property where she lived and worked with the students as founder, president and campus resident. The move away from downtown to the suburbs also signaled a shift in emphasis in the school from part-time students attending individual classes to full-time day and boarding students, along with an increasing educational seriousness that matched that of the school's athletics. In 1933 and based upon more rigorous academic standards, Ms. Webster re-named her school the Marjorie Webster Junior College. Over the course of the next several decades, the Webster School expanded both in terms of its building infrastructure and enrollment. According to school records, enrollment at the school was capped at 250 because Ms. Webster wished to have a personal acquaintance with each student.

Marjorie Webster Junior College continued to prosper for some years after the death of its founder in 1963. However, during the mid-1960s, the publicly-funded community college movement created overwhelming competition for junior colleges and by 1971, the Marjorie Webster Junior College folded and was sold to an educational research firm. The campus later was purchased by the federal government and used to house the National Fire Prevention and Control Administration. From 1983 to 1995, the campus became the northwest campus of Gallaudet College, which was faced with expanded demands for the education of deaf students as the result of the Rubella epidemic of 1963-1966. The campus is now home to the Lowell School, a private elementary school for students in grades K-8.

### Architecture:

The Marjorie Webster Junior College is a picturesque campus with Mediterranean Revival-style buildings set upon the hilly terrain. The buildings, the mature shade trees and open grassy and marshy areas crossed by a stream together present a scenic and tranquil country atmosphere in the midst of the suburban residential neighborhood. The campus property includes five buildings: 1) the main school building (1928), 2) the Marjorie Webster House (1928), 3) "Parkside" (formerly Memorial Hall) (1950), 4) Fraser Hall (1965-67), and 5) a springhouse or ice house (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century).

The main school building built in 1928 and designed by architect/engineer Colonel P.M. Anderson whose career focused on industrial and institutional buildings, is reflective of a Mediterranean country "villa" commanding its site upon a hill. The school building is long and low-lying, characterized by its stuccoed wall surfaces and its red tile roof, and by asymmetrical

massing created by projecting towers, bays and pavilions. The octagonal clock tower and belvedere at the northeastern corner of the building is particularly reminiscent of Mediterranean hilltop villas, where such features provide both a vantage point to and from the neighboring villages or towns. The gym wing, which extends at an obtuse angle away from the main school block from the clock tower, features a campanile at its rear similarly indicative of Mediterranean hill town buildings. The main school building has been expanded, in particular at the rear, where two non-descript and functional wings extend as appendages towards the rear of the property out of view of the public.

Marjorie Webster's house, set below the school building and constructed simultaneous to it, is similarly executed in a Mediterranean Revival style as designed by Colonel Anderson. Reflective of this style, the house is characterized by its stucco walls and red tile roof. The dwelling is a smaller domestic "villa" form with a central two-story gable-fronted pavilion flanked by side wings, all lit by round-arched window openings.

The building designated as "Parkside" is a three-story, rectangular block structure constructed in 1949-50 as a dormitory, but also housing a theater, a science laboratory and a radio and television studio. The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century building reflects a Modern, minimalist design aesthetic typical of the period, while also making historicist references to the original school buildings in its use of stucco and red tiles in the pent roof at the cornice beltcourse.

Fraser Hall, built 1965-67 and located slightly downslope on the north side of the main building is a U-shaped, courtyard building designed in a Mediterranean Revival style like its predecessors and characterized by stucco walls and a broad, red tiled roof.

The springhouse/ice house, located in front of and below the main school building, and set into the base of the hill, is a square-in-plan brick structure covered with a pyramidal roof clad with wood shingles. The springhouse/ice house pre-dates 1879 and, if indeed an ice house, is the only known ice house in the city, and if a springhouse is a rare surviving building type in the city.

#### Evaluation:

The Marjorie Webster Junior College meets D.C. Designation Criteria A (Events) and B (History) and National Register Criterion A as the site of a private educational institution which focused on the educational needs of working women. The Webster School, established as the Marjorie Webster School of Expression and Physical Education, initially played an important role in the development of women's athletics by offering training in the administration of women's recreation programs and athletics. The Webster school provided instruction in the fields open to women, implementing over the years, an increasingly rigorous educational focus that kept pace with the times.

In addition, the campus, established on former farmland and retaining remnants of the city's agrarian past in its springhouse/icehouse, provides an excellent reflection of the development trend in this city of former farmsteads and estates becoming institutional campuses.

The Marjorie Webster School meets D.C. Designation Criterion C (Individuals) and National Register Criterion B for its association with Marjorie Fraser Webster (1896-1963), a notable figure in the development of education for women in the city. Often cited as the youngest woman to found a college and the youngest woman to serve as a college president, Ms. Webster became an important figure in women's business and professional circles and was a strong promoter of women's sports.

The Marjorie Webster School campus, consisting of a cohesive collection of campus buildings also meets D.C. Designation Criterion D (Architecture and Urbanism) and National Register Criterion C (Architecture). The property provides an excellent example of a small educational campus consisting of historically related buildings sharing a similar and distinctive architectural style. In addition, the springhouse/ice house is a rare surviving example of its type in the city.

Although no identification survey has been conducted to-date, it is possible, given the property's location and land use history, that intact prehistoric and/or historic archaeological resources may be present. A geo-archaeological survey on the property would determine whether intact soils horizons are present beneath fill that would likely contain archaeological deposits.

#### Period of Significance:

Staff recommends that the Period of Significance for the Marjorie Webster Junior College campus extend from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to reflect the area's use as a farmstead through the 1928 establishment of the Marjorie Webster school campus until 1963 and the death of Marjorie Fraser Webster. Although the Marjorie Webster Junior College survived its founder's death, remaining in operation until 1971, the school was principally a product of the vision of Marjorie Webster and reflected her academic and athletic ambitions for young women in Washington for four decades. Between 1983 and 1995, the campus played an important role in the education of the deaf when it became the Northwest Campus of Gallaudet College. However, Gallaudet College has already been appropriately recognized for its major contribution to the education for the hearing impaired by being listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places. Further acknowledgement of the role that the school played in the education of the deaf as part of the 1963-1966 Rubella epidemic would be better made in an amendment to the Gallaudet College nomination.

#### Contributing Status:

**Main School Building, 1928 (Contributing):** The main school building was constructed during the Period of Significance and embodies the distinctive characteristics of a country "villa" executed in an early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean Revival style of architecture. The building's siting, its asymmetrical massing, projecting towers and belvedere, and its use of materials all reflect the "villa" dwelling form and style and contribute to the picturesque feel of the college campus.

**Marjorie Webster House, 1928, (Contributing):** The Marjorie Webster House was constructed during the Period of Significance and embodies the distinctive characteristics of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean Revival-style of architecture. The dwelling is also significant as the

primary residence from 1928 to 1949 of Marjorie Webster, founder and president of the junior college, and campus resident for over twenty years.

**Parkside, 1949-50, (Contributing):** Parkside was constructed during the Period of Significance to meet the growing residential, academic and extra-curricular needs of the school and thus contributes to the historic district. Despite this historical relevance, however, the building's architecture lacks the distinctive characteristics of the Mediterranean Revival-style for which the college campus is significant. Furthermore, the building's siting at the edge of the campus along 17<sup>th</sup> Street blocks a view to the grounds from that perspective and obstructs a view to the park from the campus.

**Fraser Hall, 1965-67 (Non-Contributing):** Fraser Hall was built beyond the end date of the Period of Significance and is thus considered non-contributing to the campus property. The building was constructed after Marjorie Webster's death and, it could be argued that since the dormitory building allowed for greater enrollment at the school, it was not part of the founder's vision which was that of an intimate school where she was acquainted with all of her students. Still, the stucco-clad Fraser Hall is not without its merits; it is designed in a Mediterranean Revival-style in keeping with the architectural style of the original school buildings and in that way is compatible with the campus complex.

**Ice House/Spring House, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Contributing):** According to historic maps including the 1879 Hopkins and 1888 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map, the brick outbuilding commonly called a spring house, but possibly an ice house appears to have been part of the "Old Fenwick Homestead." By 1894, the Fenwick farm had become part of the Van Riswick property which extended easterly and included a domestic house site at the present-day intersection of Kalmia Road and 13<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W. The springhouse/ice house is thus associated with the still-standing Second Empire-style residence and provides valuable insight into the pre-suburbanization of the historically rural Washington County.