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Magnificent Achievements

The M Street High School



View of auditorium, M Street High School, 1986 (Perry School). Photo courtesy Sumner School Museum and Archives.

In his prize-winning biography of author and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois, historian David Levering Lewis described his subject's efforts to secure the prestigious position of assistant superintendent of the District of Columbia Public Schools for the "colored" schools of the nation's capital city during the first decade of this century. Although Du Bois was unsuccessful in this quest, and in any case would have chafed under the weight of bureaucratic demands, he maintained close contacts with many who administered and taught at the city's public schools that served African-American students. The jewel in the crown of the "colored" schools in Washington, DC was, as Lewis described it, "the famous M Street High School" known throughout the city and the nation.¹

In the winter of 1902-03, Du Bois spoke at the M Street High School.² For the audience, the school was a most appropriate setting for Du Bois's advocacy of academic training for African-American youth. M Street High School boasted an outstanding faculty that had been educated at the nation's leading colleges and universities in the North and the Midwest. After graduation, an unusually large percentage of its students went on to attend similarly rigorous institutions of higher learning and many later pursued illustrious professional careers. M Street High School defied the stereotype of the typical black high school under a segregated system. As one of its graduates and

M Street High School, 1986 (Perry School). Photo courtesy Sumner School Museum and Archives.



later professor of history at Morgan State University, Harry S. Robinson, stated, the M Street High School "provided excellent educational opportunities for its black youth."³

Few other public school buildings so fully exemplify both the achievements and the limitations of the segregated public schools in the nation's capital city.

The M Street High School is located on a site overlooking the busy thoroughfare of New York Avenue, just a few blocks west of North Capitol Street at 128 M Street, NW. Constructed 1890-91, the three-story brick building housed high school classes for African-American students under the dual system of public education that prevailed in the city until 1954. Its function as a high school lasted only a quarter of a century. It became overcrowded and its facilities proved inadequate to the demands of a rising enrollment. In 1916, a new high school for black students, named Dunbar High School, was completed a few blocks to the north where a cluster of black schools developed. Thereafter, the old M Street High School building was renamed the Perry School, in honor of educator Leon L. Perry. As Perry School, the building served as a junior high school for black students and then an elementary school. Today it is abandoned, but not forgotten by many long-time area residents.

The high school for African-American students opened its doors in 1870, when Congress defeated a bill sponsored by Senator Charles Sumner for an integrated school system for the nation's capital city. While reaffirming the principle of a dual system of education for the nation's capital, Congress promised equal standards and proportional representation on the governing body over the school system. Shortly thereafter, goaded by friends of those who were recently freed from slavery, Congress established the Preparatory High School for Negro Youth. High school classes for black students were located in a number of existing school buildings, including the Charles Sumner School at 17th and M Streets, NW, between 1872 and 1877.

A large brick structure generally in the Romanesque Revival style, the building was designed by the Office of the Building Inspector, the central municipal design and construction

agency, to house 450 students. The Engineer Commissioner supervised this office, among others, during a time when the city was governed by three appointed commissioners. The three-story brick building provided a number of special rooms appropriate to the offerings of the high school. They included a “drill room” in the basement, scientific laboratories, and a number of study halls at the rear of the building. A large assembly hall was situated in the front portion of the third floor, which provided a stage and rows of opera chairs. At the time of its completion, the M Street High School building was “the first colored high school ever constructed from public funds. Other houses have been put up from private subscription, but this building was built from an appropriation made for that purpose....”⁴

Within the walls of the school, the curriculum included college preparatory, business, and vocational classes. Educator Booker T. Washington espoused manual training and vocational education for the black population, a view that ran contrary to that of Du Bois, who saw such training as an attempt to restrict educational and thus future professional opportunities for black students. During the period 1901-1906, the principal of M Street High School, Anna Cooper, resisted efforts to include vocational training. Her invitation to Du Bois to speak at M Street High School bolstered her efforts. With the construction in 1902 of Armstrong Manual Training School, located in the cluster of black schools a few blocks to the north of M Street High School, the college preparatory goals of the latter school were more easily reaffirmed.

Credentials of the M Street High School faculty were formidable. Because the school system’s providing equal and relatively high salaries for all

teachers regardless of gender or race, the nation’s best black educators were attracted. These teachers faced limited professional opportunities elsewhere. The M Street High School faculty was arguably superior to the white public schools, whose teachers usually were graduates of normal schools and teachers’ colleges. With the school’s emphasis on the classics, the M Street High School and its successor Dunbar High School were viewed as the equivalent of the public Boston Latin School or other exclusive prep schools. In fact, graduate and historian Rayford W. Logan declared the M Street High School to be “one of the best high schools in the nation, colored or white, public or private.”⁵

Eclipsed by Dunbar High School, M Street High School’s reputation declined. Dunbar served as the academic high school for black students from 1916 to 1954, when the segregated system formally was abolished. Its graduates made their mark upon the city and the nation. After 1954, Dunbar High School served all high school students within its district. The elegant Collegiate Gothic building that housed Dunbar was demolished in 1977 to make way for modern sports facilities attached to a larger new Dunbar High School. It is ironic that the M Street High School building survives to this day, albeit in deteriorated condition, while its better known successor succumbed to the wrecking ball.

Over the years, a number of new uses have been proposed for the M Street High School building, a testimony to its significance in the eyes of the community. Most recently, an advocate for a community health center proposed that the building be used to house this facility. A recently-appointed commission to study and make recommendations about the revitalization of New York Avenue may also suggest ways in which significant historic properties along the thoroughfare, including M Street High School, might be reused. However, while M Street High School was situated in the midst of strong community ties at the beginning of the 20th century, its surroundings today are similar to those of other central cities that suffer from disinvestment and abandonment.

As the public and private sectors debate the future of central cities, the importance of older and historic school buildings should not be overlooked. They are great assets to their communities because of their architectural and historical significance. They often are of architectural distinction and were built for the ages. Many individuals define themselves according to the schools they attended and maintain strong emotional ties to the buildings that house these memories.

The history of the M Street High School enriches the story about African-American education, segregation, the strivings of the African-

Dunbar High School. Photo courtesy Sumner School Museum and Archives.



American middle class and the history of Washington D.C. It is a part of the national historical themes of public education for African Americans and other minority groups. The school offered a top-rated classical education for students under a system of racial segregation, even though the physical facilities were inferior to those for white students in the city. Within a radius of several city blocks, the cluster of historically-related elementary, vocational, and high schools represent the range of educational facilities available to African-American students under the segregated public school system. The interpretive possibilities of M Street High School and its related institutions are extraordinarily rich.

Despite the inequities of the segregated system, M Street High School offered an enviable curriculum that was known throughout the nation. For academically-inclined black students, the school had no peer. Its graduates left a legacy of "magnificent academic achievements."⁶ Today, the lessons provided M Street High School are still vital. The building can continue to instruct and inspire the

public, as policy makers and community leaders seek to upgrade public education and offer outstanding educational opportunities for all students.

Notes

- ¹ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of A Race* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), p. 249.
- ² Henry S. Robinson, "The M Street High School, 1891-1916," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Vol. 51, 1984, p. 123.
- ³ *Ibid*, p. 119.
- ⁴ "Colored High School, Contractor McCartney Completes His Work Within the Specified Time," *Washington Post*, September 11, 1891, p. 2.
- ⁵ Rayford W. Logan, "Growing Up in Washington: A Lucky Generation," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Vol. 50, 1980, p.503.
- ⁶ Henry S. Robinson, *op cit.*, p. 123.

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The African-American Discovery Trail

A Boy Scout Project in Washington, DC

The African-American Discovery Trail is a hiking trail entirely within the District of Columbia. Totalling about 17 miles, it passes 31 sites significant to African-American history in Washington—houses of well-known persons, churches, schools, parks and statues, cemeteries, and national monuments.

Just as interesting are the neighborhoods to walk through—Georgetown, still looking much as it did in the early 19th century; Anacostia, with its historic Uniontown district ("no coloreds or Italians" was the original covenant in the 1870s); Capital Hill; downtown Washington; LeDroit Park, home to many well-to-do African Americans at the turn of the century; and especially U Street, the "Black Broadway" of Washington in the 1920s and '30s. Although the trail commemorates African-American history, it is not confined to African-American figures, but includes a number of white friends who supported the life of the black community in Washington and the nation as well.

The history of the trail itself is interesting. Boy Scout Troop 98 has met regularly in northeast Washington, DC, for over 50 years, and maintains one of the most active camping schedules in the area. The troop numbers about 15 scouts and has long been racially mixed. Every year the troop takes a hike of at least 20 miles, using various historical trails established throughout Washington.

In 1988, the troop learned that the National Park Service had just adopted the Black History National Recreation Trail originally proposed by an earlier scout, Andre Hutt, as his Eagle Scout project in a different troop; and it decided to be the first troop actually to hike the trail. In visiting the sites, we realized that we were passing many other interesting places; and we drew up a longer trail as a troop project. Seven years and several hikes later, the National Park Service, working with the Parks and History Association and the Humanities Council of Washington, DC, have made this trail a reality.

Scouts walking the African-American Discovery Trail. Photo courtesy Boy Scout Troop 98.

—Hayden M. Wetzel,
Troop 98 BSA

