

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE



HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
APPLICATION FOR HISTORIC LANDMARK OR HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION

New Designation X

Amendment of a previous designation

Please summarize any amendment(s) _____

Property name Jesse Reno School

If any part of the interior is being nominated, it must be specifically identified and described in the narrative statements.

Address 4820 Howard Street, NW

Square and lot number(s) 1759/809

Affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3 E

Date of construction 1903 Date of major alteration(s) main entrance removed; date unknown

Architect: Snowdon Ashford Architectural style(s) Renaissance

Original use School Present use Vacant

Property owner District of Columbia

School Dept., 825 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 9076 (20002)

Legal address of property owner OPM/ 441 4th Street, NW, Ste 1100 S (20001)

NAME OF APPLICANT(S) Tenleytown Historical Society

If the applicant is an organization, it must submit evidence that among its purposes is the promotion of historic preservation in the District of Columbia. A copy of its charter, articles of incorporation, or by-laws, setting forth such purpose, will satisfy this requirement.

Address/Telephone of applicant(s) 5332 42nd Street, NW (20015)

 202/686-1446

Name and title of authorized representative Jane Waldmann, Board Member

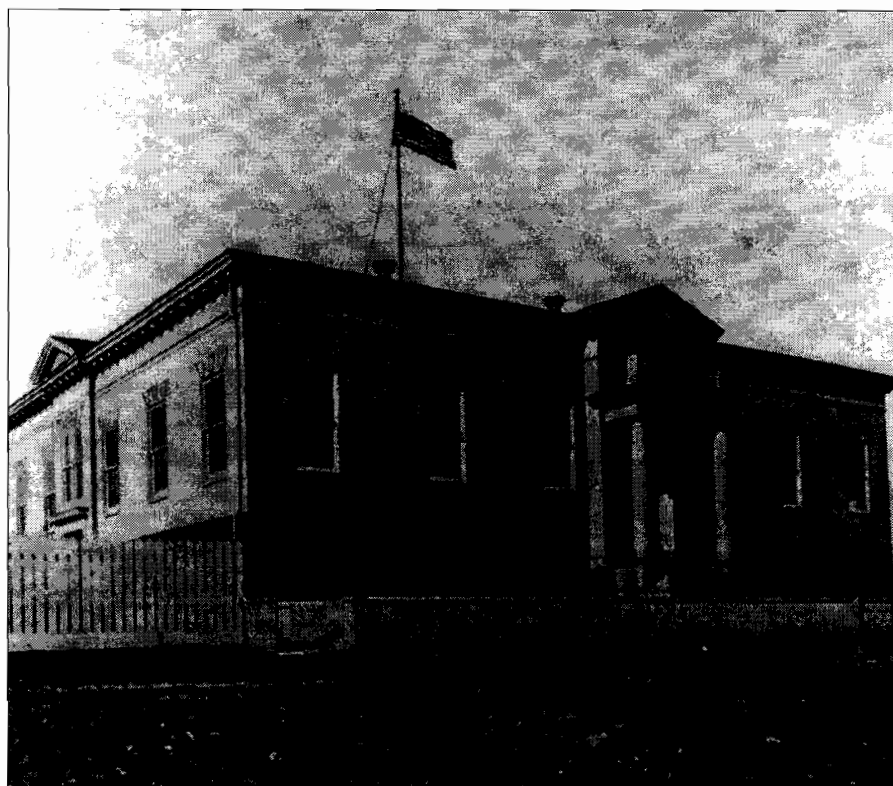
Signature of representative Jane Waldmann Date April 30, 2007

Name and telephone of author of application Carolyn Long; Jane Waldmann (202) 686-1446

Date received _____
H.P.O. staff _____

GENERAL STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Jesse Reno School, located at the corner of Howard and Fessenden streets, behind the present-day Alice Deal Junior High School (square 1759, lot 809--some maps show the square as 1882) qualifies for designation as a historic landmark and should be listed in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It meets criterion A for designation in the D. C. Inventory because it is the "site of events that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture, and development of the District of Columbia and is associated with groups and institutions that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture, and development of the District of Columbia." It meets criterion C because it "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction." These criteria also qualify the school for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.



Jesse Reno School, photograph from the 1908 Report of the Schoolhouse Commission, Martin Luther King Library, Washingtoniana Division, reproduced in Helm, *Tenleytown D. C.*, 138.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Jesse Reno School was built in 1903 as a school for African American children living in what was known as Reno City or the Reno Subdivision within the village of Tenleytown. This once-thriving racially mixed community, platted in 1869, was located on the area now occupied by Fort Reno Park, the WASA water treatment facilities, Alice Deal Junior High School, and Wilson Senior High School. The school represents an important time in Tenleytown's history. Additionally, it was designed by an architect known for his school designs, Snowden Ashford, who later became the first Municipal Architect of the District of Columbia. The Jesse Reno School was built in the period when school buildings were designed by private architects with the approval of the Inspector of Buildings. The building has distinctive design characteristics, large windows for air and light and an appearance acknowledging the dignity of learning, reflecting educational principles of its time. Its four over four classrooms were the norm for its time.

Reno City

In the 1850s the site of Reno City was occupied by Giles Dyer's farm and orchard. At 429 feet above sea level, it was the highest ground in the District of Columbia. During the Civil War the property was seized by the government for the building of fortifications. Dyer's house was demolished and his peach and apple orchards were cut down by the 119th Pennsylvania Regiment and Fort Pennsylvania was erected in its place. The site was later named Fort Reno for Major General Jesse Reno, who was killed at the Battle of South Mountain in 1862.

Even as the Civil War still raged, all slaves in the District of Columbia were emancipated by an act of Congress on April 16, 1862; compensation was paid to their owners for loss of their "property."¹ Slaves from Maryland and Virginia, who were not freed until the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, fled their owners during the Civil War. These former bondspeople, known as "contrabands," began to congregate around Washington's forts, where they performed jobs like cooking and cleaning in return for food and shelter. Many remained around Fort Reno after the war and built houses from materials obtained by dismantling the fort.

The government returned the land to Dyer in 1866, and in 1869 Dyer's heirs sold it to the real estate developers Newell Onion and Alexander Butts. Onion and Butts laid out Reno

¹ Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, ed., *First Freed: Washington, D.C. in the Emancipation Era* (2002), Introduction xiii.

City, which was bounded by Belt Road, Howard Street, Fessenden, and Chesapeake. One could purchase a building lot for \$25, with a \$5 down payment. While most of the buyers were African American, some white families also established residences and businesses in Reno City. By the 1890s the streets had been laid out in a grid pattern and there were about thirty houses, a Baptist church, a Methodist Church, an Episcopal mission, the Moses Masonic Lodge, and a grocery store.



Reno City houses on the north side of Ellicott Street, uphill from Belt Road, photograph from National Park Service, 1930s, reproduced in Helm, *Tenleytown D. C.*, 201.

In May of 1862, just after the emancipation of enslaved people in the District of Columbia, Congress passed a law taxing real and personal property to fund primary instruction for African American children. This was not fully implemented until 1864, when Congress made education for blacks compulsory.² By 1871 the Reno City youngsters were making the long walk to a “colored” school at Grant and Broad Branch roads. In 1874 a school for African

² Armstrong Night School Program: “14th Annual Fashion Show in commemoration of 75th Anniversary of the Funding of Public Education for Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1939. Report of the Board of Education to the Commission 1902-1903, 64. *The History of Schools for Negroes in the District of Columbia* [[date?]] 131, Table VI Data on Elementary Schools. [[source? Are these cited somewhere, or do you have copies, and if so where did you get them?]]

American children was built on Foxhall Road, and Reno City children attended classes there.³

By the turn of the century Reno City had about a hundred buildings. The 1900 census shows that the residents were 75% black and 25% white, and that most, but not all, were unskilled laborers. But even as the community appeared to be thriving the gradual eradication of Reno City was beginning. In 1896 the Army Corps of Engineers bought land within the subdivision for construction of a water reservoir. No homes were razed at that time, but construction of the reservoir destroyed the last remains of the fort.

It was only in 1903 that a school was built to serve the children of Reno City. The Jesse Reno School had the capacity for 160 pupils kindergarten through eighth grade. The four large rooms on the ground floor were used for home economics and manual training classes, assemblies, activities, games, and storage, and academic classes were taught in the four rooms on the second floor. Mr. Shippen, formerly a teacher at the school on Grant Road, was the first principal, and from 1908 till her retirement, the principal was Violet Tibbs. The teachers were Gertrude Tibbs, Martha Crumwell, Miss McEady, Miss Bates, Miss Donnell, Miss Fortune, and Miss Hawkins. After graduation from Reno, students went downtown to Armstrong High School.⁴

Between 1917 and 1927 Reno also served as a night school for African American adults, offering one academic class and two industrial classes to a total of sixty-eight students.⁵

The Removal of Reno City

During the early twentieth century a move was instigated to remove the Reno City community because the white residents of the affluent neighborhoods that were growing up around it viewed the area as a "rural slum." This effort was led by a man named Harold Doyle, an employee of the Chevy Chase Land Company that owned much of the surrounding property. Doyle was also a leader of the Chevy Chase Citizens' Association, which argued that the new white neighborhoods needed parks and schools and the clearance of the Reno Subdivision would eliminate a nuisance and create space for these amenities.

In 1928 the National Capitol Parks and Planning Commission acquired land on which

³ Judith Beck Helm, *Tenleytown D. C.*, 93-94.

⁴ *Ibid*, 139-140.

⁵ *Origins*, 28.

to build Alice Deal Junior High School for white students. Additional property was taken for construction of another underground water reservoir. Both of these projects necessitated destruction of homes. In the 1930s more homes were demolished to make way for ball fields for Wilson Senior High School and for the construction of Fort Drive. Homeowners were paid for their property, but those who refused to sell received nothing at all when their property was condemned. The government continued to acquire small parcels of land throughout the 1940s and early 1950s until all the houses, churches, and the Masonic Lodge were gone.⁶

By 1945 somewhere between six and twenty-two students were attending Jesse Reno School, with “no prospect of increase.” In 1947 only sixteen students were enrolled. The school officially closed on October 15, 1950, at which time there were only six students.⁷ Once again, until the District of Columbia’s schools were desegregated following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, African-American pupils were obliged to travel east of Rock Creek Park to attend school.

Fortunately, the Jesse Reno school building was not razed in 1950. In November 1950, the temporary use of the building for Civil Defense was approved, and in the 1980s it was used briefly as a the Rose School for students with special needs. The school has been vacant and boarded up in recent years.

ARCHITECT

In 1912, Snowden Ashford, provided to the DC Chapter of the American Society of Architects, at their request, a “brief history” of his life. The following is taken from that history.

Snowden Ashford was born in Washington, DC in 1866. He attended a number of schools in his early years and ultimately attended Lafayette College where he studied graphics and engineering. Following completion of his studies, he was appointed City Surveyor of Williamsport, PA. In 1887 he returned to Washington, DC and worked for two years in the

⁶ In 1977 a “Neighborhood History Project” was undertaken by the Neighborhood Planning Council, predecessor to today’s Advisory Neighborhood Council, and surviving residents of the Reno City community were interviewed; these interviews are now available at the District of Columbia Historical Society Library. In 1981 American University history student Neil E. Heyden wrote a paper titled “The Fort Reno Community: The Conversion and Its Causes.” Heydon’s primary sources were the Neighborhood History Project interviews, the Fort Reno Land Acquisition Papers and the Minutes of the National Capitol Parks and Planning Commission, Natural and Legislative Branch (National Archives Record Group 328). Judith Beck Helm made use of these sources in writing her discussion of Reno City and the Jesse Reno School in *Tenleytown D. C.*, 199-205.

⁷ Helm, *Tenleytown D. C.*, 198.

office of Treasury architect A.B. Mullett as an architectural draftsman. For the next two years, he worked under John Smithmeyer, architect of the Library of Congress. He left that position for health reasons and moved to West Virginia, but in 1892 returned to the District and established his architectural practice.

Ashford was a founder and one of the first officers of the Washington Architectural Club, and in 1893 joined the Washington chapter of AIA in which he held several offices. In 1895 he was appointed Principal Assistant in the Office of the Inspector of Buildings where he prepared plans for “most of the schools, engine houses, police stations and other city buildings.” In 1897 he advocated for commissioning architects in private practice, under the architectural supervision of the Inspector of Buildings, to design municipal buildings. The recommendation was adopted.

Snowden Ashford was appointed Inspector of Buildings in 1901. In 1906 he prepared, at the direction of the Engineer Commissioner, a report for Congress on the condition of school buildings in the District. In 1908, he chaired a committee of architects, engineers, builders and businessmen to expand the building code particularly with regard to the use of increasingly available concrete and fireproofing materials. The office of Municipal Architect of Washington, DC was created in 1909. Snowden Ashford was the first to hold that office. In 1911 the Board of Education specifically commended him on the “excellent design and safety of his buildings.”

At the time he wrote the summary, Mr. Ashford noted that he had been designing and supervising plans for school buildings for approximately sixteen years during which time he had overseen plans for seventy-four school buildings. He went on to claim: “It can be safely said that he has had experience with more schoolhouse work than any other architect in the United States.”

Other articles report Ashford’s view that school buildings should be properly lighted and ventilated, views shared by his predecessor, Adolf Cluss and successor as Municipal Architect, Albert Harris. Ashford was also a fervent believer in up to date fire prevention features; he is known to have patented a fire escape.⁸ All three architects believed that the design of school buildings should reflect the importance of education.

Ashford suffered criticism in the years 1906-8, first from Captain John Oyster, who made unannounced school inspections and claimed to find serious defects. The DC Commissioners supported Ashford. The deaths of two construction workers on an apartment building project led to Ashford’s suspension and President Theodore Roosevelt’s demand for

⁸ S. J. Ackerman, “North Hall: Snowden Ashford and his Ordeal to Add to a Classic,” *The Capitol Hill Current: Voice of the Hill*, 1/10/2006:pp. 11-12.

accountability. Ashford was quickly reinstated. During this troubled period, Ashford continued to work on North Hall, an addition to Eastern Market designed by Adolf Cluss. The 1913 addition (razed), to accommodate motorized vehicles, to the Tenleytown Firehouse was designed by Snowden Ashford

In 1921 John Oyster, Ashford's nemesis, was appointed a District Commissioner. Ashford resigned as Municipal Architect. Perhaps Ashford had the last word: he won the contract to design Eastern High School. Snowden Ashford died in 1927.

The builder of the Jesse Reno School is unknown.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Jesse Reno School is an 80 foot square building in the Renaissance style. Built on a brick foundation the walls are covered in pebble dash and the trim is wood. It is a simple four classroom building, each room opening off the central hallway. The current roof is asphalt shingle.

Additional rooms in the basement were used for other purposes such shop and home economics classes. Originally the east (main) elevation had a central projecting bay with a portico (photograph in Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1904-05.) On either side of the entrance are three tall windows marking the main floor classrooms. Below the main floor level are three smaller windows providing light to the basement. The portico and bay have been removed and the entrance covered with pebble dash. There is a small window in that space.

The central bay projections on the other three facades, slightly shallower than the one that was on the east façade, remain. Over the central bay on each façade is a triangular pediment. There is a modillioned cornice and wood stringcourse, both in seemingly good condition. The north and south (which became the entrance) facades of the building each have a double window over a center double door, flanked by 3 window bays on each side at the first floor level and six windows on the basement level. The west façade has seven windows at the first floor level and seven windows at the basement level. Two of the latter are bricked in. The windows are six over six and all are now hidden by protective grating. Decorative keystone lintels above the windows are no longer extant.

On the east side there is a retaining wall and at the north and south ends of the building a few steps leading to a concrete path running along the front to the concrete steps to the original entrance.

The building is covered with graffiti, and the surrounding area is littered with trash.

The school has been vacant for several decades and the lack of maintenance is unfortunately evident. Nevertheless it has good bones and should be restored and preserved.

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Other sources:

Vertical files: American Institute of Architects

The Sumner School Library

Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Library

Attachments

Architectural Description from School Survey

Map

Photographs

DC Government Real Property website print-out for square 1759

SCHOOL BUILDING SURVEY
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
D.C. Public Schools
D.C. Historic Preservation Division

Building name (current) Reno School

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

Dimensions
Height (stories) 1 Basement: Yes No
Width (bays) 7 Depth (bays) 7
Size: width 80 ft length 80 ft height

Shape Square

Facade composition The original main elevation on the east was composed of a central projecting bay with an entrance portico. On either side of the central bay are three bays marking the location of a classroom. The exterior is covered with pebble dash and topped with a modillioned cornice.

Main exterior materials Pebble dash

Exterior trim materials Wood

Foundation material Brick

Windows 6/6 light sash with security grate windows

Doors The original door on the east elevation is now sealed and covered with pebble dash. A side door on the south elevation now serves as the main entrance.

Projections The central bays of all elevations of the building project slightly from the main building line. The central bay on the east elevation, the original location of the main entranceway, projects farther than the central bay of the other elevations.

Roof Gable roof. Wooden modillioned cornice.

Stairs The original entranceway on the east elevation was reached by a concrete stairway.

Alterations and additions The location of the main entranceway was moved from the east to the south elevation and the original projecting portico removed. The pebble dash has been patched. Heavy security grates cover all windows.

Size of site 47,480 sq ft Orig. value of site \$3,000

Orig. cost of building \$23,849 Total cost \$26,849

Related outbuildings The Reno School is located along Howard Street, N.W. in a patch of trees, to the rear of the Alice Deal Junior High School.

Landscape and streetscape features The building is located in a heavily wooded site.

Condition of exterior Fair

Interior floor plan Four classrooms are located on the first floor, each opening off a central hallway.

Condition of interior Good

Mechanical systems

Comments

SCHOOL BUILDING SURVEY
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
D.C. Public Schools
D.C. Historic Preservation Division

Building name (current) Rose School
(historic) Reno School
Address Howard & Fessenden Streets, N.W.
Date of design 1903 Date of construction 1903
Square 1882 Lot 802 Current owner D.C. Dept. Administrative Services
Use (current) special education Use (historic) school
Architectural style Renaissance
Primary material Pebble dash
Architect Municipal Architect Snowden Ashford
Builder Unknown
Located in historic district: Yes _____ No X
D.C. landmark: Yes _____ No X

Historical summary

The Reno School was built in 1903 to serve the black population centered in the Tenleytown area of the District of Columbia. The building was last used for students in 1950 and later was used by the Civil Defense Office. Today, it houses special education classes sponsored by the D.C. Public Schools, the D.C. Department of Human Resources, American University, and George Washington University.

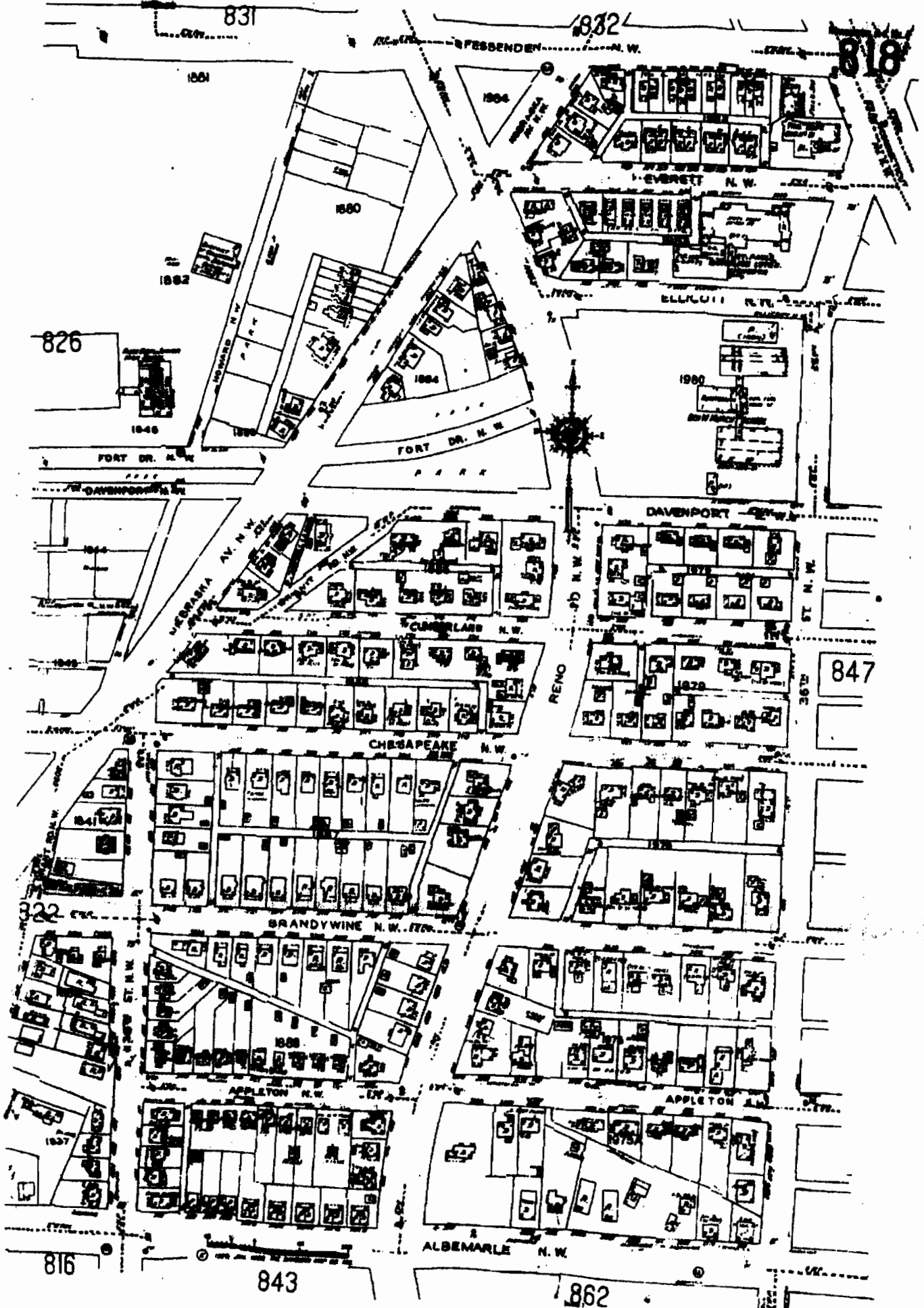
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MAR 14 1990

Architectural summary

The Reno School is a simple four classroom building of one floor over a raised basement. The main elevation on the east has a sealed entranceway. The current entranceway is on the south. The east elevation originally had a projecting portico leading to the building's main entranceway. The portico supported a balustrade located just below a triangular pediment. The windows were ornamented with keystone lintels. Over the years, the pebble dash exterior has been patched. Air conditioners have been placed in the windows and security grates placed over the windows. The building's modillioned cornice remains in good condition.

Sanborn Bldg & Map Atlas of Washington, DC
Book 3 Vals 17m ed. 1999



JESSE RENO SCHOOL

4820 Howard Street, NW (corner Howard and Fessenden Street, NW)



East façade looking west – center bay originally had portico and main entrance



North façade looking south



West façade looking southeast



South façade looking northwest



East façade looking west – steps to original front entrance



Stone steps at south end of walkway along east façade of school – lead to front steps to former main entrance.

April 2007



MAYOR
Adrian M. Fenty



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1759 0032	4824 NEBRASKA AV NW	ALEXANDER DERENA	CHEVY CHASE	A	13	\$502,270.00
1759 0804	3903 CHESAPEAKE ST NW	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	CHEVY CHASE	A	89	\$1,398,380.00
1759 0807	NW	UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	CHEVY CHASE	A	191	\$19,524,710.00
1759 0808	DONALDSON PL NW	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	CHEVY CHASE	A	89	\$242,740.00
1759 0809	4820 HOWARD ST NW	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	CHEVY CHASE	A	83	\$746,510.00
1759 0810	DONALDSON PL	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	CHEVY CHASE	A	89	\$11,051,860.00
1759 0811	3815 FORT DR	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	CHEVY CHASE	A	83	\$11,166,710.00
1759 0813	4822 NEBRASKA AV NW	CAROL M JORDAN	CHEVY CHASE	A	13	\$488,270.00
1759 0814	4820 NEBRASKA AV NW	DALE S DRACUP	CHEVY CHASE	A	13	\$441,130.00
1759 0815	4818 NEBRASKA AV NW	ROY G CRAREY	CHEVY CHASE	A	13	\$437,140.00
1759 0816	4816 NEBRASKA AV NW	JILL A DONAHUE C/O UNIT #409	CHEVY CHASE	A	13	\$473,060.00
1759 0817	4814 NEBRASKA AV NW	TODD HANSEN C/O SUITE 135	CHEVY CHASE	A	23	\$570,410.00
1759 0818	4808 NEBRASKA AV NW	RENATA COOPER	CHEVY CHASE	A	12	\$935,440.00
1759 0819	BELT RD NW	RENATA COOPER	CHEVY CHASE	A	94	\$74,360.00
1759 0820	NEBRASKA AV NW	C L GROSSMAN	CHEVY CHASE	A	94	\$92,710.00
1759 0821	4802 NEBRASKA AV NW	C L GROSSMAN	CHEVY CHASE	A	12	\$703,430.00
1759 0822	4800 NEBRASKA AV NW	LAWRENCE P GOLDMAN	CHEVY CHASE	A	12	\$754,650.00

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