



HISTORIC MOUNT PLEASANT JOURNAL: LIVING IN AN HISTORIC DISTRICT

CELEBRATING THE BANCROFT SCHOOL CENTENNIAL

November 2024

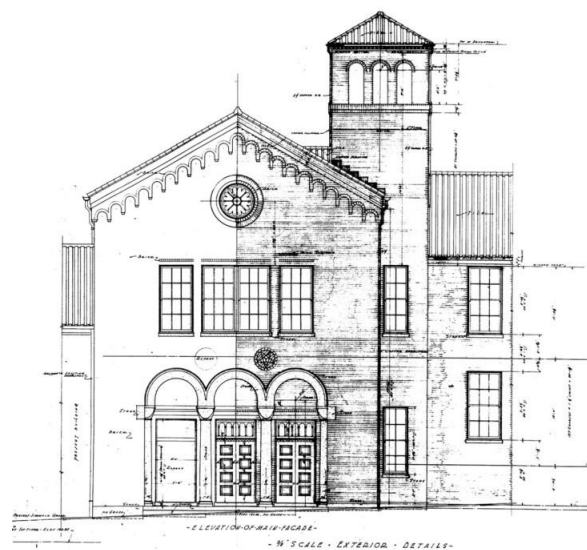
Our Historic Mount Pleasant (HMP) Journal strives to inform community members by illuminating [historic district building requirements](#), technical issues and solutions, and other aspects of the historic district, particularly its history.

A Century of Progress

As Mount Pleasant's Bancroft Elementary School celebrates the 100th anniversary of its dedication, we look back at its development and evolution into [one of the more diverse schools](#) in the District with students and teachers from more than 40 countries. The campus has been expanded five times, in 1932, 1938, 1961, 1973, and 2018 since construction of the original building, which was first occupied for the 1924-1925 school year.

Just as the Bancroft School reflects the character of Mount Pleasant today, so did it reflect the character of the neighborhood when it was built - in the midst of the Jim Crow Era and the surge in growth as streetcar lines expanded the limits of the City.

From the 1890's through late 1940's, as noted in the HMP [January 2024 Newsletter](#), neighborhood developers were aiming for a fairly upscale clientele, with rowhouses two to four times the size of a typical new house of the time. Smaller rowhouses were aimed at middle-class workers, larger ones for an upper middle-class population, and large, detached houses for the prosperous

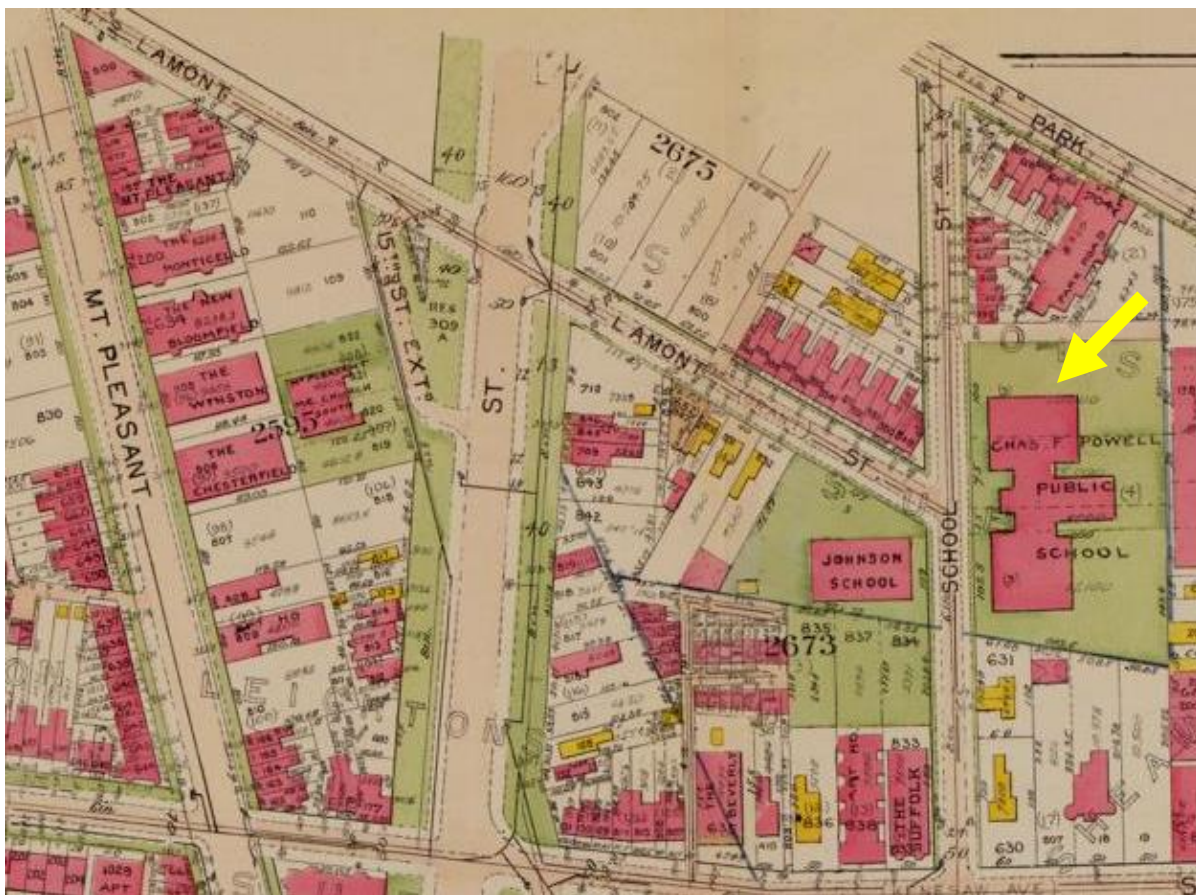


merchant class. At the time, by law or practice, [ownership of these houses](#), like access to most of the city's public facilities, including schools, parks, hospitals, theaters, and restaurants, were forbidden for Black people. It was not until 1950 that [Robert Deane](#), a prominent black doctor, was able to buy a house in Mount Pleasant. And, it was not until after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in “Brown v. Board of Education” that, despite the [objections of Mount Pleasant residents](#), the Bancroft School was finally integrated after Scovel Richardson, a prominent African American jurist, pressed for admission of his twin daughters.

Richardson, the first Black member (and later Chair) of the Federal Parole Board, lived at 1809 Ingleside Terrace N.W., just 90 feet from Bancroft Elementary. Because of segregation, before their admission to Bancroft, the twins had to walk about 1.5 miles to 3560 Warder St. NW. to attend Park View (now Bruce-Monroe) Elementary, a “colored school.”

Beginnings

Before Bancroft’s construction, Mount Pleasant’s elementary school children attended the 1909 [Powell School](#), a block east of 16th St. NW at the intersection of Hiatt Place NW and Lamont St. NW. By 1920, overcrowding at that school led to using nearly the entire building, including school offices, as classrooms. And, the problem was citywide, so plans were made to build many



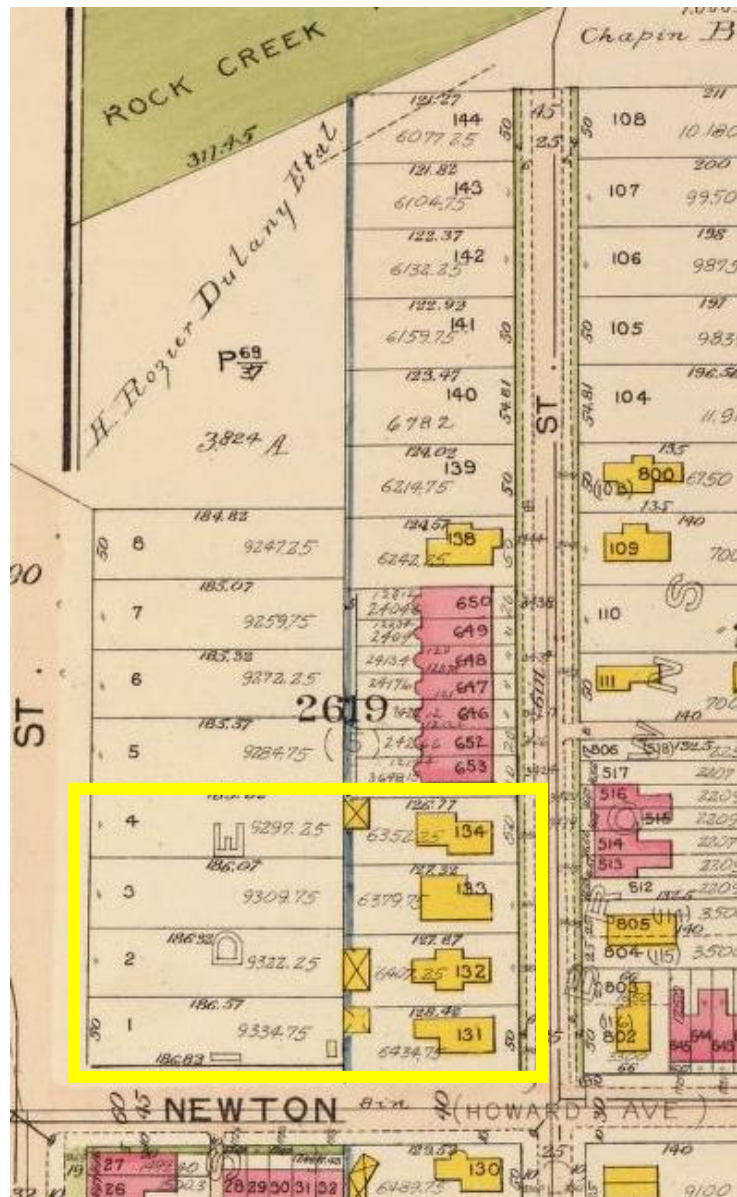
Powell Elementary School - [Plate 10, Baist's real estate atlas of surveys of Washington, DC \(1919\)](#)

new schools, including a [new elementary school](#) in Ingleside, as Mount Pleasant was sometimes known.

The result was construction of the original, eight room Bancroft School at Newton and Mount Pleasant Streets NW, which, as the map at right shows, was already occupied by houses. The original site was purchased for \$20,000 in 1922 with construction beginning in 1923. Over the years, all of the remaining houses to the north of the school were demolished for expansion. Designed by architect, Albert L. Harris, the School was expected to cost \$140,000 and be completed in January 1924, but unstable subsoils raised the cost to \$162,260 and extended the work until August, when it was informally turned over to the board of education. At the time, the [Washington Times](#) wrote that “School officials look to it to relieve congestion where considerable relief is needed.”

George Bancroft (1800-1891) was a widely-admired historian, former secretary of the Navy, founder of the U.S. Naval Academy, and a longtime resident of the District.

In 1925, Powell was converted from an elementary school to a junior high school. Today, it is the site of the Bell High School soccer field.



The Dedication

On the afternoon of November 18, 1924, the new Bancroft Elementary School was formally dedicated with the municipal architect turning the keys to the building over to school officials. As noted in the [Washington Times](#), “Colonel W. E. Rogers gave a few reminiscences of the neighborhood... The history of the school was outlined by Robert L. Haycock, assistant superintendent of schools, and Dr. Frank W. Ballou, superintendent, spoke on ‘What’s in a Name for a School?’ Mrs. Jessie Fant Evans brought the appreciation of the mothers

Bancroft Elementary School site before construction - [Plate 10, Baist's real estate atlas of surveys of Washington, DC \(1919\)](#)

for the new school to the officials. James T. Lloyd, president of the Board of Education, presided. Invocation and benediction were pronounced by Rev. W. A. Morgan. The musical program

included a solo by Mrs. Mary Sherier Bowie, soprano, and a song, 'To the Bancroft School,' by 10 fifth-grade pupils."

Superintendent Ballou's speech regarding school names may have been a reference to the [year-long struggle](#) between the three-member Board of Commissioners and the Board of Education over the naming of four new public schools.



Within six months, at a meeting of the [Mount Pleasant Citizens' Association](#), there were already calls for a new addition to the Bancroft School and for "erection of an additional school in that section of the city." In January of 1926, responding to overcrowding of schools, the city announced a major building program, including "Construction of an eight-room addition to the Bancroft School, including the necessary remodeling of the present building."

Perhaps the overcrowding slowed down for a while, but in 1931, the DC Teachers Union was calling for major improvements to working conditions and for the construction of more space to reduce overcrowding and inadequate facilities. According to the [Evening Star](#), among the first needs was "an addition containing eight class rooms, industrial art rooms and a combination assembly hall-gymnasium at the Bancroft School." Delegates of the Bancroft Parent-Teacher Association and the Mount Pleasant Citizens' Association pointed out that "all of the Bancroft School's class rooms were filled to capacity, that the school serves a large territory... and that at present the pupils of that school have to go to the Cooke School for industrial art work." They also noted that "many pupils now at the Cooke School would prefer to attend Bancroft in order to avoid crossing Columbia road, an arterial highway, but who may not do so at present because of the congestion at Bancroft."

On [Tuesday, November 7, 1933](#), almost 1,000 residents attended the dedication of the new, 10-room addition to Bancroft School under auspices of the school's Parent-Teacher Association, with Dr. Frank W. Ballou, superintendent of schools, guest of honor. A musical program was presented by the MacFarland Junior High School Orchestra. The addition housed eight classrooms and two rooms for instruction in Industrial arts.

Typical activities at the Bancroft School in the 1930s included their annual open house, [Hobby Night](#). The 1936 open house was quite an event. As the Evening Star reported,

"It seemed to many of us to constitute democracy at its best—that something we are proud to call Americanism... [The principal, Miss Lind] believes that 'the measure of effectiveness of any school program is the way that it affects the life of the community.'

Without community understanding, Miss Lind believes the school's influence ends at 3 o'clock...

"Another tenet of Miss Lind's educational philosophy is that 'each privileged community shall adopt an underprivileged one.' The Bancroft School neighborhood has done just this. The spirit of Christmas giving goes on all the year around here. As a result of it, during the term 1,000 less-fortunate families – carefully and understandingly investigated – have been recipients of Bancroft's helping hearts and hands."



That December, the [Washington Times](#) described how "Sixteen hundred underprivileged youngsters in the District of Columbia will believe there really is a Santa Claus when each receives a gaily wrapped toy and a personal Christmas card from that same classroom. They won't know that the children attending the school have donated their own toys so that less fortunate youngsters may have a happy Christmas."

Changing Times

As the years went on, the neighborhood was changing. As [Mara Cherkasky](#) writes, “Mount Pleasant's status as a fashionable streetcar suburb waned during the Great Depression (1929-1941) and further during World War II (1941-1945). The generation that had built the grand residences was gone, and some of these houses became homes for the elderly or other types of institutions. Many dwellings... were converted to apartments and rooming houses to accommodate the thousands of young people flooding into Washington to work for the expanding government.”

During World War II, Bancroft School students were one of the most successful collectors of paper needed for the war effort. There were also meetings of Mount Pleasant defense organizations like the particularly exciting one described in the [March 06, 1942 Evening Star](#):

“Spectators narrowly escaped injury from flying fragments of an incendiary bomb last night at a fire-fighting demonstration sponsored by the Mount Pleasant Citizens' Association and the Civilian Defense Committee. Bearing out a warning of Deputy Warden Raymond J. Bowen that such bombs are treacherous and must be approached with the greatest caution, the incendiary exploded before Demonstrator Arthur E. Kimberly had turned his pump hose upon it... The balance of the demonstration... passed without incident, as had a previous exhibition of extinguishing the fire through the use of sand.

“A capacity crowd of over 600 filled the Bancroft School Auditorium before the demonstration outside to hear [a] foreign commentator for The Evening Star, declare, ‘It can happen here! There is a possibility, and a strong possibility... that we shall be bombarded within a comparative short time...’

“Mr. Bowen... said 515 wardens and fire watchers had been on duty in Mount Pleasant during Tuesday's blackout, and asserted the blackout had been ‘under perfect control all night long.’ Explaining the failure of the Mount Pleasant Library to turn off its lights, he said the library was an official building of the District government and therefore was exempt from blackout.”

Throughout its history, the Bancroft School has participated in health programs for its students, including inoculation programs in its early years and a fluoride treatment demonstration project announced in 1948. With mimeographed permission slips from the parents or guardian, pupils could have their teeth treated by the DC dental bureau in co-operation with the United States Public Health Service. The [Evening Star Page](#) describing the program also had this ad:



The first fluoride applications were given in [June 1950](#) “for white children at the Bancroft School... and for colored at the Grimke School. Vermont avenue and T street N.W.” In November of 1950, the [Evening Star](#) reported that the DC schools fluoride program, the first citywide program in the country, was so successful it would be continued and that “a plan was under way to use sodium fluoride in drinking water to cut down tooth decay in children. It also will have a beneficial effect on the teeth of older persons, but not as much as on children, it was said.”

By the mid-1960s, overcrowding, even with three temporary classrooms in the school yard, and a lack of resources were again negatively impacting the students and staff at Bancroft. A modernization costing \$1.5 million was planned, but construction didn’t start until the summer of 1974. Three years later, in 1977, construction was finally complete.

The new wing had a “learning center” for 90 students, a pre-school classroom for 40 3-and 4-year-olds, space for adult education and offices for the PTA and neighborhood groups. The existing buildings were remodeled to add a new library, a remodeled auditorium/gymnasium,



1958 Bancroft School sixth-grade class (Collection of Grace Tamborelle), from Mara Cherkasky’s, [“Images of America, Mount Pleasant.”](#)

folding partitions instead of walls in many places, new plumbing, and more office space.

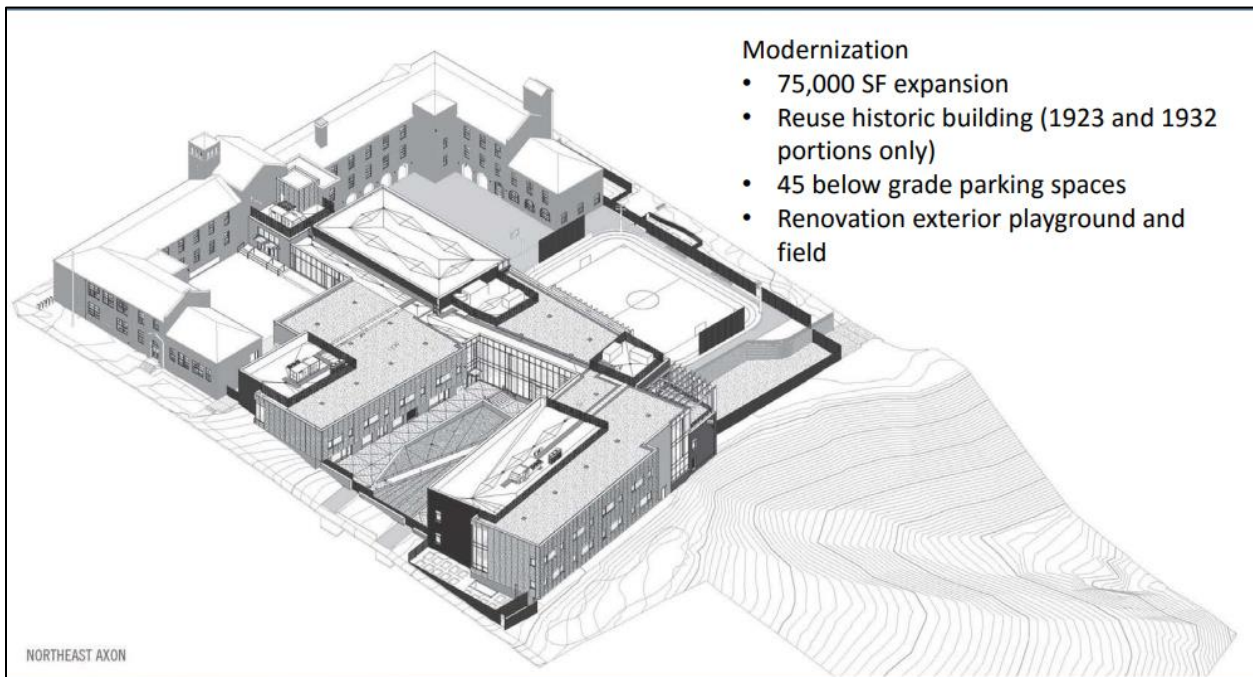
The [Washington Post](#) wrote that “those who said they felt most relieved by the new addition are the teachers and the 609 students. The days of two teachers and 50 students in a classroom are over, as are the times of four classes being held simultaneously in the auditorium.” Deputy superintendent Marilyn Brown said the school was noted for its diverse cultural background and hoped the improvements would allow the institution to take better advantage of the situation.

Celebrating Today

Thirty years after the last renovations and expansion, we are celebrating the Bancroft School's centennial in a bilingual, state-of-the-art facility; completed in 2018, with new classrooms and courtyards in what the designers call, "[an environment embedded in nature.](#)"



Bancroft Elementary School today. Photo: [Fielding International](#)



Bancroft School campus from the northeast in a [NCPC presentation](#). Drawing: [Ayers Saint Gross](#)