



Davidson School

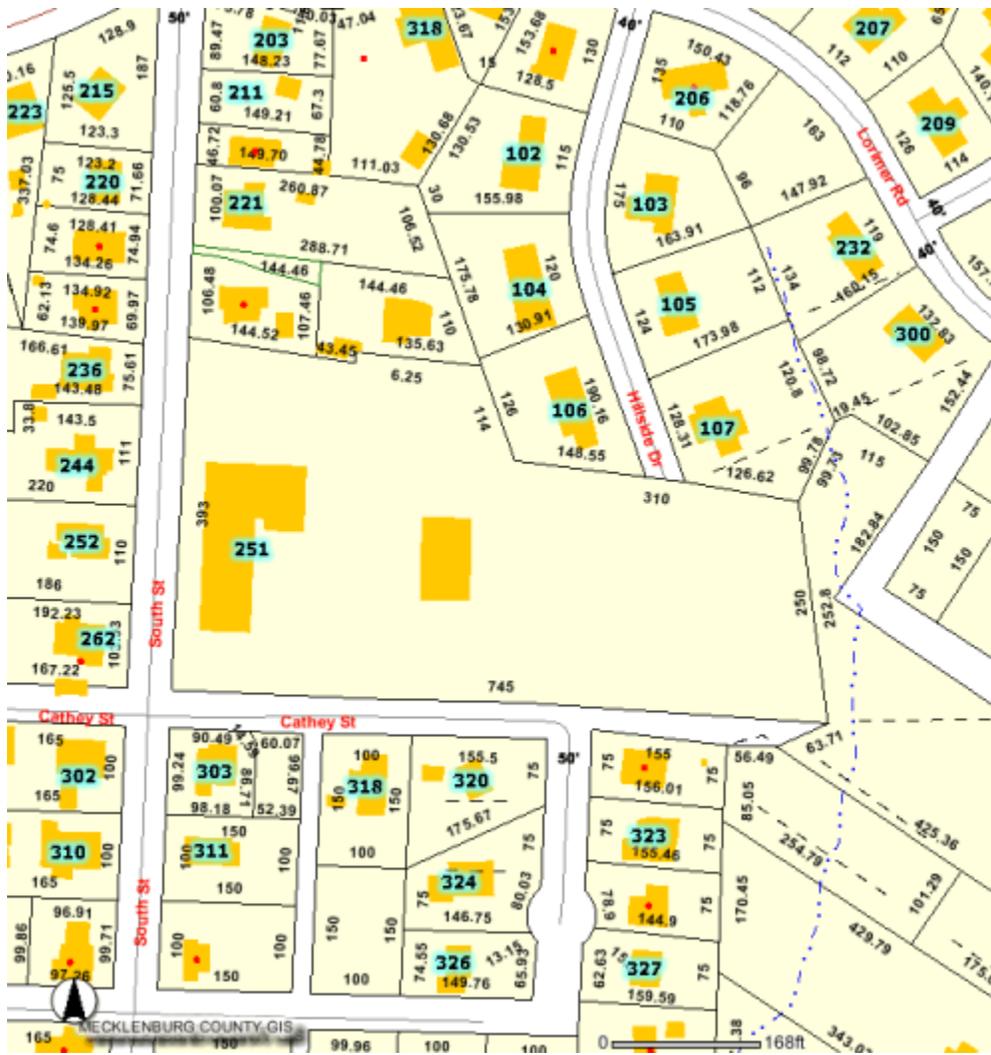
1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Davidson School is located at 251 South Street, Davidson, North Carolina.

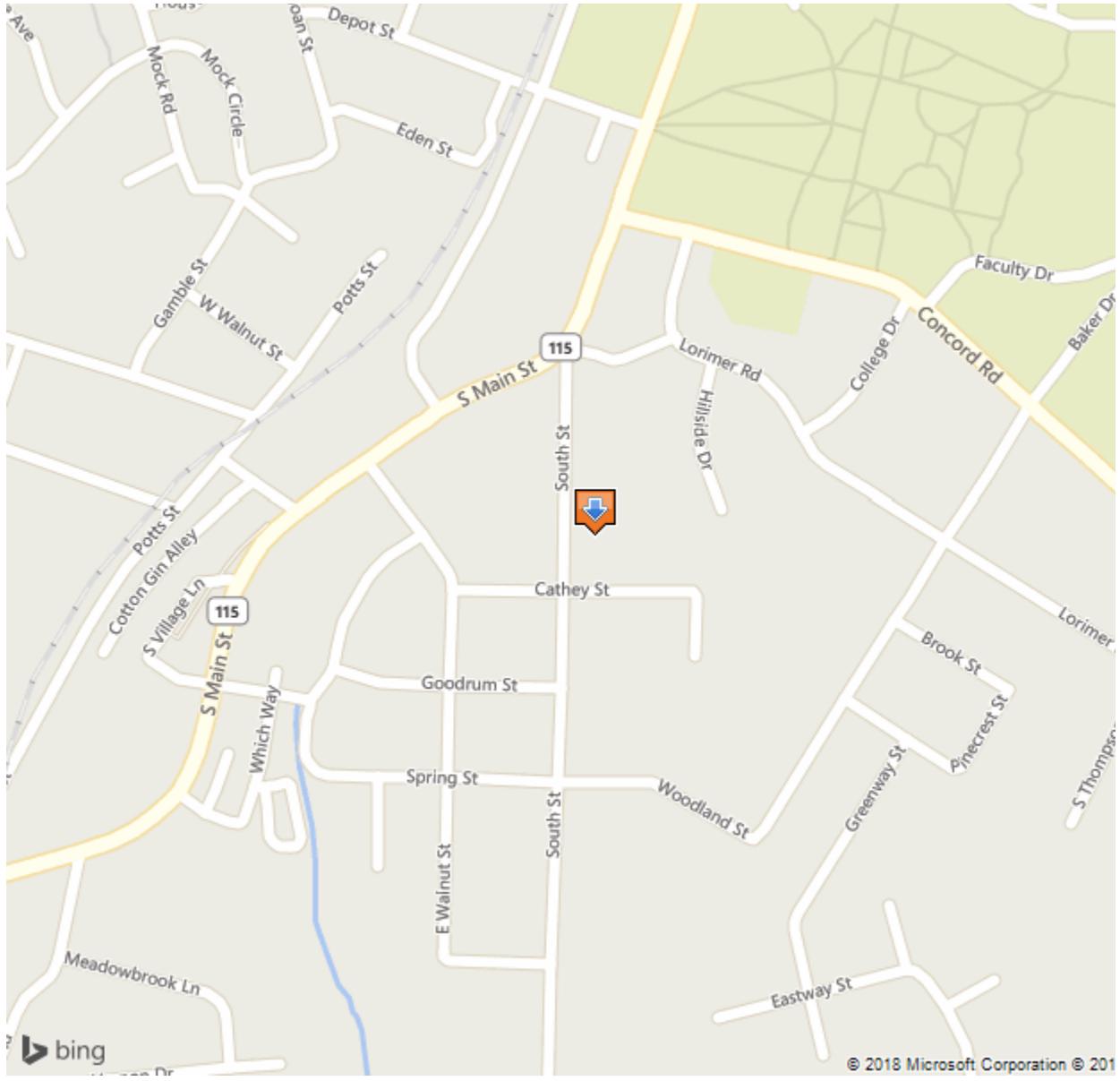
2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The present owner of the property is:

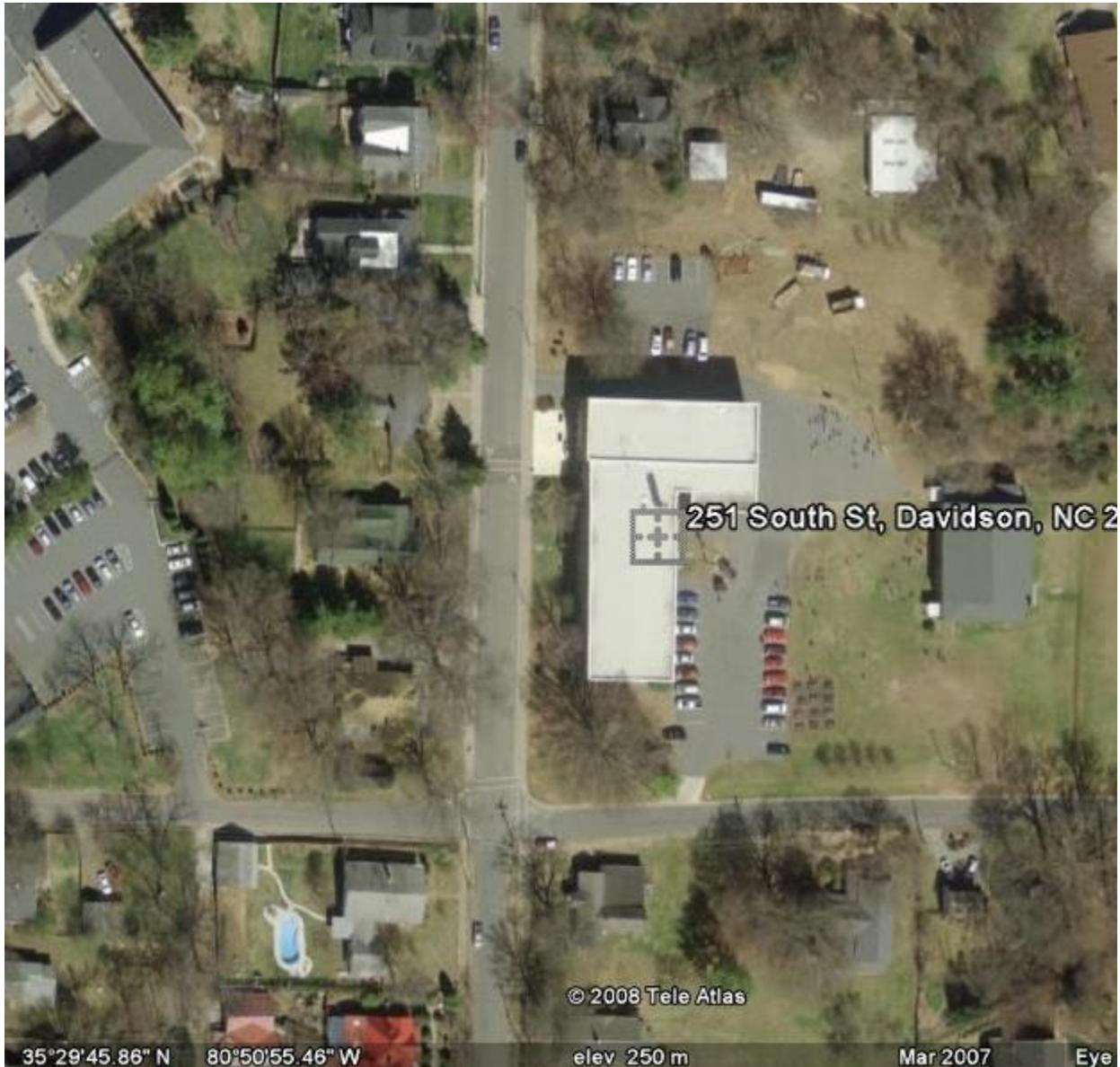
**Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools/Board of Education
Education Center
701 East 2nd Street
Charlotte, NC 28202**

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map depicting the location of the property. The Coordinates of this property are: School 35.29.45.91N. 80.50.55.76W. Gymnasium 35.29.45.54N 80.50.52.69W.







5. Current deed book reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 824 on page 576. The tax parcel number of the property is 00701319.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth-in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4.:

Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Davidson IB Middle School possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The site of the Davidson School has been associated with public education for over one hundred years.

2) The 1937 Davidson School Gymnasium is a fine example of the later New Deal public works projects that were accomplished in Mecklenburg County.

3) The 1948 Davidson School was designed by local architect Louis Asbury, and is an important example of early post-war Modernist architecture.

4) The Davidson School has an exception degree of integrity in terms of historic school buildings in Mecklenburg County.

5) The Davidson School is a significant artifact, useful in understanding the history of the Town of Davidson. The 1948 school building is one of the best preserved public buildings in the town, and it was central to the education of many of the town's residents.

9. Ad Valorem tax appraisal: The current assessed value of the property is \$3,690,500.

10. Portion of property recommended for designation: The exterior and interior of the Davidson School, Gymnasium and the 5.1 acres of land associated with the tax parcel.

11. Date of Preparation of this Report: September 1, 2008

Prepared by: Stewart Gray

A Brief History of the Davidson School

The site of the Davidson School has been associated with education since 1893. A prominent Davidson family, the Sheltons, donated a lot on South Street in 1892 for a school that opened the next year and was known as the Davidson Academy. This school operated as a hybrid private/public school. Tuition was required for the fall and spring school terms, while the winter session was free of charge. ¹ It appears that the nature of the Davidson Academy changed in 1911 with the state legislature voting to add Davidson to a list of North Carolina communities with established graded schools supported by taxes. The Davidson Special Charter District included the town's white and African American schools, and was controlled by a Board of Trustees. This situation continued until October of 1932 when a committee of the Board of Trustees requested that the Mecklenburg County Board of Education take over the Davidson schools. The takeover occurred in February 1933 when a deed to the property was tendered, and five of the six acting school trustees became committeemen of the newly formed Davidson School District.² The Davidson School at that time consisted of the two-story brick Davidson Academy building, a detached wooden cafeteria building, and a janitors house.



Davidson Academy in 1923 with new addition being built

The addition of the Davidson School to the larger Mecklenburg County system was part of a process that moved the education of young people from a strictly local affair in the late 19th century, to a system that by 1934 became dependent on Federal money. It appears that even before the merger of the Davidson School into the larger Mecklenburg Board of Education, the “Davidson School Board” had applied to the Civil Works Administration for funding for a Gym/Community House. In February 1934 the Mecklenburg Board of Education decided to pursue this funding. ³

The construction of the nearby 1934 Long Creek School Gymnasium was typical of early New Deal public projects. That project required the participation of the local rural community in the form of money, labor, and materials. And it appears that the “Davidson School Gym/Community House” was conceived of in a similar way.⁴



Interior of the 1934 Long Creek Gymnasium

At the Davidson School, the CWA and the local community were to provide labor and material. It was estimated that the building would cost the board \$9,000, with \$5,500 coming from the town of

Davidson. Perhaps the building's dual use as a community center was agreed upon to ensure more local funding. ⁵

However, the CWA program ended in the March 1934, and in just a few years the nature of public works projects in Mecklenburg County had changed significantly. Planning for the gymnasium continued, but gone was the reference to a "Community House." Also gone were any mention of local labor and material. In 1936 the cost for the Davidson gym, estimated at \$17,000, was bundled with county-wide school building needs that totaled \$268,000. The Board of Education applied to a different agency, the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (FEA) for funding of 45% of the cost. ⁶ In 1937, four years after the funding for the gymnasium was first requested from the Federal government, construction planning for the building began in earnest.



1937 Davidson School Gymnasium

The Davidson gymnasium may have been envisioned as a grassroots or community-based project, but the construction of the Davidson School Gymnasium was accomplished in a more standard fashion, relying on an architect to design the building and manage a general contractor during the construction process. However, the New Deal's philosophy of invigorating the economy by putting as many people to work as possible can still be seen in the construction of the Davidson School

Gymnasium. It appears that in 1937 the Board of Education was involved in putting nearly all of Charlotte's architects to work. Under the guidance of William H. Peeps, the "secretary of the Charlotte Architects Associated (sic.)" work on school projects was divided up among a virtual "Who's Who" of Charlotte architects including: Peeps, Willard G. Rogers, Martin Boyer, Charles Connelly, Lucian Dale, M. R. Marsh, Walter Hook, and C. C. Hook.⁷ With the notable exception of Louis Asbury who closed his office from 1935-1939, this list included nearly every prominent architect in Charlotte. It appears that the "make-work" philosophy associated with the earlier New Deal programs had trickled-up to the professional class. Regardless of how this was perceived or transpired, the Davidson School Gymnasium was part of a major Federally-supported building program taking place in the Mecklenburg school system in 1937.

Peeps assigned the Davidson gymnasium project to Willard G. Rogers (1863-1947). Rogers was a native of Cincinnati. He moved to Charlotte about 1900, where he was employed as an architect for industrialist Stewart W. Cramer. In 1910 he partnered with leading Charlotte architect C. C. Hook. This partnership led to Roger's most significant commission, the 1914 Charlotte Masonic Temple. When the Temple burned, Rogers was again hired to rebuild the building which re-opened in 1938. Rogers started his own practice in 1916 and went on to design many prominent commercial and institutional buildings, including the 1918 Gastonia First Baptist Church, the 1924 Catawba County Courthouse, and the 1926 Addison apartments in Charlotte.⁸

The Davidson Gymnasium was one of three projects assigned to Rogers in northern Mecklenburg in 1937. He was also responsible for designing and supervising the construction of a new building for the Davidson Colored School (now the Ada Jenkins Center) and a new 12-room school building for Cornelius. For the Davidson School Rogers designed a classically-inspired gymnasium building with arched windows and solid masonry walls, large enough for basketball, the main floor surrounded on three sides with built-in wooden bleachers. Rogers had two sets of plans for the gymnasium, Plan 1 and Plan 2. We do not know the

difference in the plans except that if budget allowed, the more expensive Plan 1 would be built. At their March 10, 1937 meeting the Board of Education instructed all of the architects to get their plans approved by all of the agencies in Raleigh (perhaps that is where the FEA money was administered) so that bids could be procured. Bids for the Davidson Gymnasium and for most of the other projects being considered came in too high.⁹ To help control costs, and because there were so many projects commencing at the same time, the members of the Board of Education were individually assigned projects to help oversee. Mr. Potts was assigned the Davidson projects as well as work at the Cornelius, Huntersville, and Long Creek Schools.¹⁰ Measurers were taken to reduce the costs of the Davidson Gymnasium. Common bricks replaced glazed brick; a proposed furnace was canceled; and plans for a new principal's house were abandoned. Other projects also suffered through cost-cutting.¹¹ A proposed auditorium at the new Davidson Colored School building was canceled; but when these savings were realized, the canceled furnace at the Davidson Gymnasium was put back into the project.¹² It appears that the building went into service during the 1937-1938 school year.

Edith Cashion, who attended the Davidson School from 1937-1948, remembers using the gymnasium. She remembers that it was cold and that the community held square dances in the building. But most importantly, the gymnasium hosted the basketball games. With no football team, the boy's and girl's basketball teams were very important to the school. Cashion remembers that Davidson's teams were very good. Cashion and schoolmate Martha Fulcher Montgomery both attended classes in the old Davidson Academy building. They remember wooden desks and dark, oiled wooden floors. In addition to the new gymnasium, the campus at that time included a wooden-framed cafeteria building run by a Mrs. Griffith, and a frame Boy Scout Hut. Also on the property was a house for the janitor. This arrangement of buildings served the school through the Second World War.¹³

“Wartime” conditions with shortages in material and labor had made it impossible to keep Mecklenburg schools in repair. A report to the Board

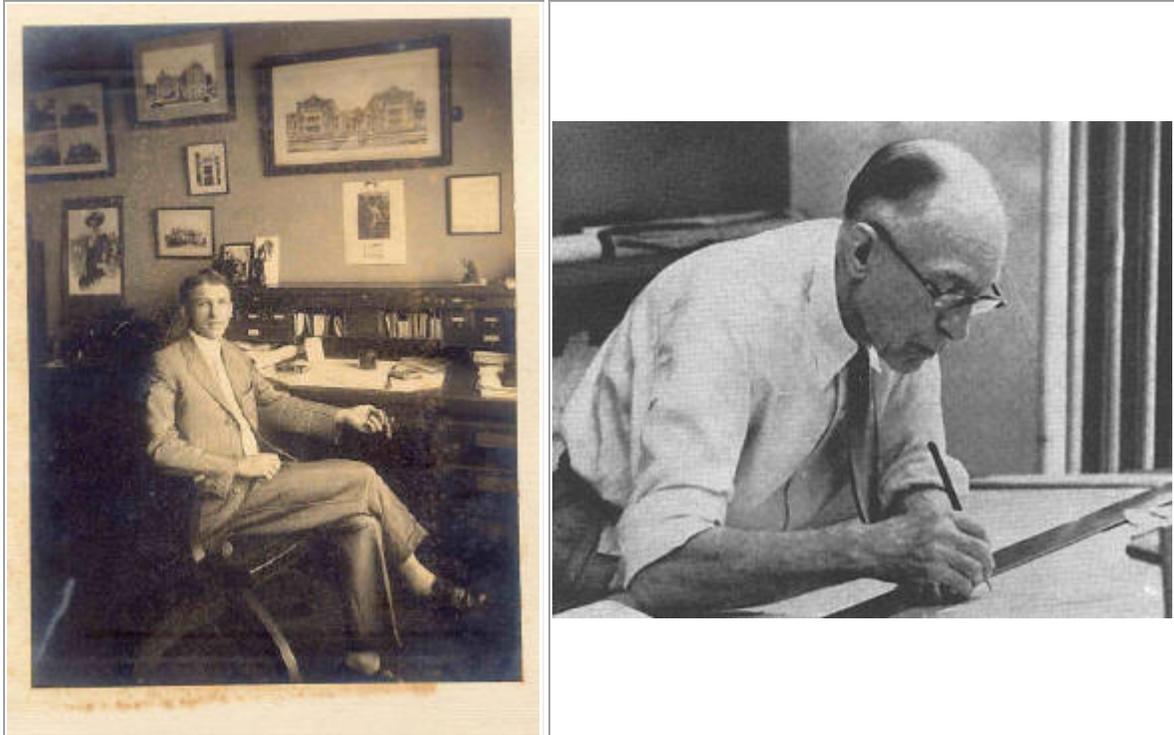
of Education stated that its schools were “now in very bad condition.”¹⁴ To address this circumstance, in February 1946, the Mecklenburg Board of Education requested the substantial sum of 5.972 million dollars in a bond package to fund city and county schools. At the same time the school superintendent was authorized to increase fire insurance by 25% or so that buildings would be insured for 90% of their value. However, budget restraints must have been too great. On April 8, 1946, the B.O.E. decided not to alter its present coverage for the 1946-1947 school year or seek more money for insurance premiums, even though it was aware that the school’s buildings were “not insured for more than 50% of the present value...” This would prove to be a bad decision. On July 15, 1946, during an electrical storm, the 1893 Davidson Academy building, the principal building of the Davidson School, burned severely.

It appears that nearly everyone who lived in Davidson saw the 1893 Davidson Academy building burn or at least saw the smoke.¹⁵ Martha Fulcher Montgomery and Edith Cashion are alumni who had classes in the old building. Neither was surprised that the structure burned, noting that the interior of the two-story building was largely dark, dirty, oiled wood, and was full of wooden desks and chairs. Some of the solid brick exterior walls had survived the fire, and on July 19, 1946, the Board of Education decided to completely demolish the rear of the building and to try to stabilize the remainder of the building, with the idea that it could be rebuilt, possibly as a temporary way to house the students. In the meantime, it was decided to partition the gymnasium into classrooms. However, it soon became apparent that none of the 1893 Davidson Academy building could be saved. The surviving material would be sold as salvage. Attention turned to the problem of housing students for the upcoming school year. Two thousand dollars was spent adding toilet facilities to the gymnasium and to “one of the society halls” on the Davidson College campus.¹⁶ Edith Cashion recalls that the older students were taught in the first-story rooms of both the Eumenean Hall and its counterpart the Philanthropic Hall on the college campus but that the Davidson School students were not allowed on the second stories which feature fine furniture, chandeliers, and decorative

woodworking. The basement of the nearby Davidson College Presbyterian Church was also used. Where there had been a cafeteria available at the old school site, Martha Fulcher Montgomery remembers Davidson School students going home for lunch. Elaine Caldwell McArn recalls students in the seventh and eight grades using the nearby Methodist Church for classes. ¹⁷

In October 1946, a delegation from Davidson with spokesman J.C. Bailey urged the Board of Education to: build a new building on the same site, open the new school building by 1947, purchase more land for the new building, and be sure that the new building would be large enough to accommodate the present and future needs. ¹⁸ The Board responded by directing the school superintendent to hire architect Louis Asbury for the project, to pursue the purchase of adjoining land, and to seek Federal Works Administration (FWA) funds for the cost of the architect. The project did not proceed quickly.

An adjoining lot containing the home of J. M. Potts was sought to expand the school site. In January 1947 the Board of Education had authorized spending up to \$10,000 for the property, but after long negotiations, no agreement could be reached. In March 1947 the Board approved a contract with Asbury that paid the architect 6% of the construction costs for designing the building, supervising construction, and representing the Board of Education's interest. Gaining the additional land continued to be problematic, and in April the Board directed Asbury to move ahead with plans for just the existing school property. In May, frustration with the slow pace of the project was demonstrated when a large delegation from the town requested the "immediate erection of a 'fire proof' building." ¹⁹ Negotiations with Mr. Potts continued until June, 1947, when Mr. Potts agreed to sell his lot for \$7,980 and move his house to a nearby parcel. With all of the impediments cleared, the Board of Education met in special session on July 8, 1947, nearly one year after the 1893 Davidson Academy building had burned, to approve spending \$245,690 on the new building.



Two photos taken of Louis Asbury during his forty-eight year career

Born in Charlotte in 1877, Louis Asbury was arguably the most important local architect of his time. Educated at Trinity College and M.I.T, Asbury studied architecture in Europe and then returned to Charlotte and became the first North Carolina member of the American Institute of Architects. He practiced in North Carolina from 1908 until his retirement in 1956. Asbury designed a wide array of buildings including homes, commercial buildings, and government and other institutional buildings. Among his notable surviving designs are the 20-story First National Bank Building (1927), the Mecklenburg County Courthouse (1928), and the Myers Park United Methodist Church (1929).²⁰

Asbury, who partnered with his son in 1939, designed an L-shaped, two-story, 32,000 square-foot building for the Davidson School. Asbury's design surely addressed the citizens' desire for a fireproof building. Solid masonry walls supported steel trusses, and concrete floors replaced the oiled wooden floors of the old building. In terms of public education buildings, the new Davidson School was surely a showplace. Little non-military building of any type was constructed

during the War, and the contrast in style and construction between the new school building and school's gymnasium, built just one decade earlier, was dramatic. Whereas the gymnasium featured a restrained classically influenced style that had been employed in institutional buildings for at least half a century, the new building featured a Modernist design that highlighted simple functional lines and industrially produced building materials, most especially the large prominent ribbons of aluminum windows across the façade and rear elevation. Functionally the new building offered large classrooms well lit with natural sunlight and rows of modern fluorescent lighting, wide halls and stairwells, dedicated offices for the staff, a large auditorium, and a modern cafeteria in the basement. Asbury may have faced some limitations in producing a modernist designed due the availability of material. In contrast to the metal ribbon windows, tall traditional triple-hung wooden sash were used on the auditorium. While many Modernist slab doors were used in the design, including some with round porthole windows, many secondary doors were frame-and-panel doors that would have been typical on most early-twentieth-century school buildings. But despite these compromises, the Davidson School represented a definite break with the past. Like the later Second Ward Gymnasium (1949), and the radical Dr. Elmer Garinger High School (1958), both built in Charlotte and both designed by Modernist architect A.G. Odell, the Davidson School served as a demonstration of progressive school design.

In June 1948 the Board of Education expressed its appreciation to Davidson College, Davidson College Presbyterian Church, and the Davidson United Methodist Church for the use of classroom space and agreed to paint and renovate the rooms that were used. In anticipation of the new school opening, the old frame cafeteria, the “scout hut”, and a janitor’s house were moved off of the property. ²¹



On September 15, 1948, the Board of Education met in the new Davidson School to inspect and approve the building. The building was approved with the understanding that the plumbing and lighting would be finished, and that some issues involving painting, doors, and drawers would be addressed. The opening of the school was unfortunately delayed due to a polio outbreak. When it finally opened around the first of October, many elements of the school were still not finished including the lighting and the seats for the auditorium. Money for library books was not approved until January 1949. Despite these delays, students enjoyed the new school building. Martha Fulcher Montgomery remembers the new building as modern and luxurious, with high ceilings and nice bathrooms. Edith Cashion remembers the building as “new, modern, and clean.”

The building served grades 1-12. Alumni remember that the auditorium was used for choral concerts, plays, and weekly assemblies. While the Presbyterian church was being re-built, services were held in the auditorium, including a wedding. The cafeteria was the site of an annual Halloween carnival hosted by the fire department. High school students moved to the new North Mecklenburg High School in Huntersville when it opened in 1951. John M. Alexander Junior High School opened in 1960, and after a few transitional years, the Davidson School became the

Davidson Elementary School. In 1994 a new elementary school was built farther south on South Street. The 1948 building now serves as an magnet middle school.

Architectural Description

1. Beaty, Mary D. Davidson a History of the Town from 1834-1937. Davidson, North Carolina: The Briarpatch Press. 1979 (p. 63-64).

2. Mecklenburg County Board of Education Minutes, 2-6-33. Davidson School District Trustees in 1933 included: JR Withers, JJ Withers, A Currie, JM Douglas, RD Mooney, and JM McConnell. All continued as school district committeemen except for Douglas.

3. Mecklenburg County Board of Education Minutes, 2-6-34

**4. See the Survey and Research Report for the Long Creek School Gymnasium:
<http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rlongcreekgym.htm>**

5. BOE Minutes, 2-6-34

6. BOE Minutes, 7-8-36

7. BOE Minutes, 3-10-37

8. Information on Willard Rogers can be found on the following documents produced by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission: www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rrogershouse.htm; www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rmasonic.htm; <http://www.cmhpf.org/surveys&rwalkerLucien.htm>;

9. BOE Minutes, 5-14-37

10. BOE Minutes 5-21-37

11. BOE Minutes 6-23-07

12. BOE Minutes 10-05-37

13. Interviews with Edith Cashion and Martha Fulcher Montgomery were conducted in the summer of 2008.

14. BOE Minutes 6-28-46

15. Everyone interviewed for this report either saw the smoke, came to the site, or were out of town when the building burned.

16. BOE Minutes 9-17-46

17. Interviews with Elaine Caldwell McArn were conducted in the summer of 2008.

18. BOE Minutes 10-22-46

19. BOE Minutes 5-5-47

20. See the Survey and Research Report First National Bank Building, <http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rFirstNatl.htm>;

21. BOE Minutes 6-28-48