

HISTORIC WESTSIDE SCHOOL HISTORY

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Las Vegas was a small settlement of miners and ranchers waiting for the arrival of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad.

In anticipation of the railroad's construction, engineer J.T. McWilliams purchased and platted 80 acres of land on the west side of the proposed rail line. In January 1905, he began selling lots in this area under the name Original Las Vegas Townsite* and also established one of the earliest business districts in Las Vegas.

Land on the east side of the rail line was owned by the Las Vegas Land & Water Company, a subsidiary of the railroad which controlled the majority of the area's water rights. When the railroad arrived in 1905, the Las Vegas Land & Water Company auctioned lots off on the east side of the tracks and developed a competing, and ultimately more successful, town called Clark's Townsite.

As a result, development and services were slow to materialize on the west side. An example of this is the schools, which were all located on the east side until overcrowding and a rise in population on the west side created a need for the construction of the Branch No. 1, Las Vegas Grammar School, now known as the Historic Westside School. At the time the school was built, residents in the area were mostly Paiute Indians, Hispanics and lower-income Caucasians.

1923 BUILDING

The current Westside School real property originally was donated by Las Vegas pioneer Helen J. Stewart to the Las Vegas School District. A petition to build the school was circulated in February 1923; bonds were sold that spring, and construction began mid-summer. The building contained two rooms and was finished in 1923 to house first- and second-grade classes. It was a single story, Mission Revival concrete building. The first principal was Ms. Ruth Fyfe, serving 1924-1936. A substantial addition of two rooms on the north side was constructed in 1927-28, as construction of the Hoover Dam brought an influx of new families searching for work. African-American students first began attending in 1926; the classes were racially integrated. A kindergarten was added in 1933, and, in 1942, a small building from the Civilian Conservation Corps camp was moved to the site to house third and fourth grades. It was the sole elementary school on the West Side until 1945. Fifth grade was added in 1947. The building now comprises 5,333 square feet of space.

The original building was designed by the prominent Southern California architectural firm of Allison and Allison. Some of the significant Mission Revival features include the rectangular plan, symmetrical façade composition, curvilinear parapet, wood sash windows and doors, and projecting eaves with exposed rafter tails.

It is currently the oldest remaining school in the city of Las Vegas. It is also the first grammar school established in West Las Vegas (west of the Union Pacific railroad tracks) and the first public school attended by Native American students from the neighboring Paiute Indian Colony. Ms. Doris French served as kindergarten teacher beginning in 1933 and was appointed principal in 1943, remaining principal until her retirement in 1966. The current address is 330 W. Washington Ave., a location just north of the original McWilliams townsite.

*The area was also known as McWilliams Townsite. By late 1905, the area was also called "Rag Town" because of the number of abandoned tents left by people and businesses that had moved nearby to the newly platted Clark Townsite. Sources indicate that in the early twentieth century, this area was also referred to as Old Town. Around the late 1920s or early 1930s until the early 1940s, the area was called West Side. Today the community calls itself the Westside. The name represents more than a geographic location, but also a sense of social pride and historic importance.

BACKGROUND

The first major economic boom in Las Vegas occurred during the 1930s when the construction of Hoover Dam brought thousands of people to the valley during the Great Depression. Federal funds were responsible for much of the construction in Las Vegas. Then-mayor Ernie Cragin openly promoted racist policies by refusing to renew licenses of African American-owned businesses downtown unless owners moved to the West Side. It was during the 1930s that the student demographics at the Historic Westside School shifted to predominantly African-American and it remained so until closing in 1967.

During World War II, Las Vegas became home to the Las Vegas Army Air Gunnery School (now Nellis Air Force Base) and Basic Magnesium Plant (now in Henderson), causing an influx of civilian and military personnel to move to the Las Vegas area.

Las Vegas was designated a defense city because of the military installations. This allowed for Federal Housing Authority assistance for home buyers and several World War II housing developments were constructed using FHA standards. These developments were segregated, and discriminatory practices that continued through the 1950s resulted in further increases of the African-American and Hispanic populations in the West Side.

The Westside School became a community center for the neighborhood. The United Services Organization (USO) established a center during World War II on the north side of the Westside School campus, offering Monday evening movie screenings and Wednesday game nights. The Jefferson Pool complex and a USO recreation expansion followed in 1946.

The overall increase in population resulted in several schools being constructed throughout Clark County, one of which is the 1948 Westside School expansion or “annex.” The annex is almost identical to several other schools built in Clark County during the same time.

1948 BUILDING

By 1947, the Las Vegas Union School District developed plans for the expansion of the campus to house sixth, seventh and eighth grades. The cost of the project was estimated at \$104,000. The concrete block annex building would house eight additional classrooms and an administration room for the school campus. Designed by A. Lacy Worswick, a prolific architect in Las Vegas, the building had a G-shape plan, roof dormer vents, shaped rafter tails, an inset porch with decorative wood corbels, and wood louvers above the breezeway. It is a single-story, Ranch-style building.

According to the Las Vegas Review-Journal at the time the project was anticipated:

The Westside project calls for the construction of concrete block buildings... The new structures will be erected in a quadrangle to the west of the present building. The old CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) buildings, now at the rear of the school yard, will be dismantled and the space used for part of the new classrooms. The classrooms, each provided with ample windows for natural light will be connected by canopies and of single story construction. The buildings will have asphalt shingle roofs. Each classroom will be of 22 by 30 feet in size. Lavatories facilities for boys and girls are included in the new

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program. The administration building, which will face south, will contain the Principal's office and restrooms for teachers.

Begun in 1947 and completed in 1948 by Lembke Construction Company, the new building cost came to approximately \$128,000. By 1949, the school, now called the Westside School, would be the third school in Las Vegas with eight complete grades and it had an enrollment of 535 students. In May 1949, 27 students graduated in the first eighth-grade commencement class.

A small addition was constructed in 1960 to the annex building. The current annex building comprises 11,562 square feet with an address of 350 W. Washington Ave.

POST SCHOOL DISTRICT HISTORY

The buildings served as an elementary school until closed in 1967. Dr. James L. Pughsley was the last principal. By 1974, School Board Trustees had declared the Westside School to be surplus property and ordered it sold. It was purchased for use by the Economic Opportunity Board with grant funds for \$25,000.

In 1977, the annex underwent a major renovation including removal and replacement of interior walls, office partitions and other finishes to accommodate offices of the Economic Opportunity Board of Clark County. Original window openings were infilled and courtyard wood canopies were added at the same time.

Efforts to save the school for historic preservation were begun. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, the state register in 1981, and the city of Las Vegas register in 2010.

During the 1980s and '90s, the building was leased by the Economic Opportunity Board and other agencies.

The 1923 building was renovated in the 1980s with a roof stabilization and in-kind replacement of existing wood casement and double-hung, wood sash windows. Interior walls and other finishes were removed and replaced at the same time to accommodate the offices and broadcasting rooms of the KCEP radio station.

The city of Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission, whose mission it is to preserve historic buildings, began to pursue funding to restore the Historic Westside School in 2005.

Ricki Y. Barlow, Ward 5 councilman beginning in 2007, envisioned a master plan to restore the school as a community gathering place and gateway for West Las Vegas, and began to work toward that goal.

A standing seam roof was installed on the 1923 building in 2005, and a new compatible asphalt shingle roof was installed on the annex in 2007.

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MASTER PLAN/COMMUNITY OUTREACH

In 2010, the city of Las Vegas began the public outreach process for the master rehabilitation plan of the school. A stakeholder committee was created with community members and staff. The committee met monthly for over a year and several community meetings and events were held in which preferred uses were established. Oral histories of alumni were recorded and some alumni donated artifacts to the Nevada State Museum for archiving for future exhibits.

In 2011, KME Architects were brought in to draft the master plan. It was important to the community to have some sort of meeting space and exhibit space for historical exhibits, as well as light retail and office uses, and all of this went into the plan.

KME worked with the State Historic Preservation Office and the city's Historic Preservation Commission on the rehabilitation treatment plan, which would respect the historic architecture but maintain the buildings' relevancy and flexibility for new uses.

The 2015-2016 renovations brought modern improvements, such as natural gas-powered air conditioning, up-to-date electrical wiring, insulated windows, 16 secured covered parking spaces, three electric car charging stations, three bike racks, and an artistic steel gate designed by Zak Ostrowski.

Refurbishing the school involved painstaking historical research, allowing workmen to restore floors, windows and walls to their original look. Lighting fixtures no longer available had to be duplicated and approved by historic preservation experts from the Las Vegas Historic Preservation Commission, the State Historic Preservation Office and the National Parks Service, since the school is included on the city of Las Vegas Historic Property Register and the state and National Register of Historic Places. The same was true for the school's entrance doors and built-in cabinets. Old carpet, padding and tiles were removed to reveal the school's original Douglas fir wooden flooring, and the complex's exteriors were returned to their original mint green.

21ST CENTURY REHABILITATION FUNDING

The Nevada State Commission for Cultural Centers and Historic Preservation provided funding for the new roof in 2007, and the Commission for the Las Vegas Centennial provided \$550,000 for structural, mechanical and electrical surveys of the school site, and for development of a restoration and program plan for the school. The \$12.5 million cost for renovating the historical structures in 2015-16 was funded by the Commission for the Las Vegas Centennial, the city of Las Vegas Redevelopment Agency and the city of Las Vegas, which also made use of \$4 million in gap financing supplied via a federal program called New Markets Tax Credits through U.S. Bank.

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Sources for this summary include the Historic Westside School and Variety Early Learning Center Master Plan of December 2011; "Westside School: Alumni Stories - Our School, Our Community, Our Time (1923-1967)"; The Shoebox Photo Collection at ccsdarchives.org; and the National Register of Historic Places registration form, as amended July 27, 2015.