



Central School  
1912 - 2014



Tacoma is home to a number of architecturally and culturally significant schools. Central School, which served as the centerpiece of city's 1911 school building campaign, is one of the district's most iconic structures. In 1968, the building was converted to solely administrative use. The fourth floor auditorium was remodeled into meeting space and classrooms became office space. Since that time the district has modestly upgraded the structure, primarily to incorporate technology upgrades. The building is typically referred to as the Central Administration Building or "CAB" for short.

Currently the district Superintendent's offices and Legal Services operate out of the top floor of the tower. Other departments housed in CAB include:

- Human Resources and Professional Development
- Finance, Business Support Services, & Payroll
- Technology Services
- Curriculum and Instruction
- K-12 Support
- Community Partnership, Academic Equity and Achievement
- Enrollment Services and Student Records
- Student Life (Athletics and Activities)
- Student Services (Special Education)
- Public Information
- Career and Technical Education
- Safety and Security
- Early Learning
- Printing and Graphics and Mailroom



The Tacoma Public School District is proud of Central School's placement on all three historic registers: the National Register of Historic Places, the Washington State Heritage Register, and the Tacoma Register of Historic Places. The district is committed to preserving the integrity of the building while adapting the interior to support the needs of modern educational services. The historic bell that called students to class remained silent on top of the fourth story for many years. Under former Superintendent Arthur Jarvis, the bell has become part of a renewed tradition: once again it peals at the start of school each year.



^ Central students Carl Jackson, Sun Chow Ling, Earl Carroll and Vertis Barrett practicing for the *Tacoma Times* City Marble Championship. Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio Collection, D14422-2, 1943.

> Students learning to make hot cocoa. Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio Collection, D14374-5, 1943.

The original Central School, built in 1883, was located at South 11th and G Streets, the site of the current Bates Vocational Institute. A rise in Tacoma's population necessitated new school buildings. In 1911, Tacoma residents passed a \$690,000 bond that provided for the construction of five new schools: Lincoln, Central, Fern Hill, Franklin and McKinley. Construction on the new Central School started in late November of 1912. The building originally housed first through eighth grades. At the opening of Central School in August of 1913 the president of the Tacoma School Board, George G. Williamson, proclaimed "The school house is the first line of fortifications of the nation, and as the cost of education increases the cost of the penitentiary and asylum must decrease." ... and... "This building we ... dedicate will add another stone to the bulwarks of free government."

Central School, widely reported by the local press as being "among the best of its kind in the West, if not the nation," had a four-story main building with an eight-story tower. The main section of the building housed twenty-four schoolrooms but was designed to accommodate a twelve room expansion at a later date. The original school bell from the old Central School, cast in 1883, was hung in the northwest cupola. J.H. Lister, owner of Tacoma's first foundry, cast the bell. His brother, David, was a member of the Tacoma Board of Education. J. H. Lister's son, Alfred, later became president of the Tacoma School Board.



^ Washington State Historical Society, TAC SCH 20, 1912.

> Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio Collection, D10714-A, 1941.





The Tacoma school system, like many urban school systems in America, was shaped by a massive influx of immigrants in the early 20th century. The neighborhood around Central School was home to a mix of Scandinavian, German, Italian, Greek, and Japanese families. By 1900 almost half the population of the United States were either foreign-born or the children of foreign-born parents. Tacoma's numbers were similar - more than a third of the city's residents were immigrants or children of immigrants. Governmental and religious agencies struggled with the best ways to integrate ethnic groups, many of whom were from rural areas. Confusion on how to use urban services, the role of sanitation, and the growth of communicable diseases (including tuberculosis) led many to believe that schools were the logical place to prevent potential problems. In 1913, the National Conference on Immigration and Americanization promoted three key issues of immigration assimilation: literacy, learning democratic values, and health and hygiene. The April 1915 edition of *Popular Educator* specifically mentioned Tacoma, noting the "foreign population" near Central School, and reported that the district was giving students "...unsurpassed opportunities to fit themselves for usefulness and good citizenship."

A number of new programs were nationally introduced during the 1910s, and the Tacoma School District closely followed national trends. Concern with hygiene and health supported the introduction of nurses, health care facilities, showers and home economic departments. Playgrounds, summer school, and other programs were developed to keep children occupied after school to help reduce juvenile delinquency. The expanded domestic science departments were tasked with teaching young females how to cook "American" meals, and address hygienic concerns. Schools became neighborhood social centers and a number of after-hours programs were available, including programs for adults. Central School with its special rooms for medical staff and tuberculosis students, expansive recreational spaces for both genders, specialized training rooms for shop and home economics, and night class offerings, epitomized national trends.

## Early 20th Century Schools: Educating Model Citizens





# The Building: Administration, Education & Recreation

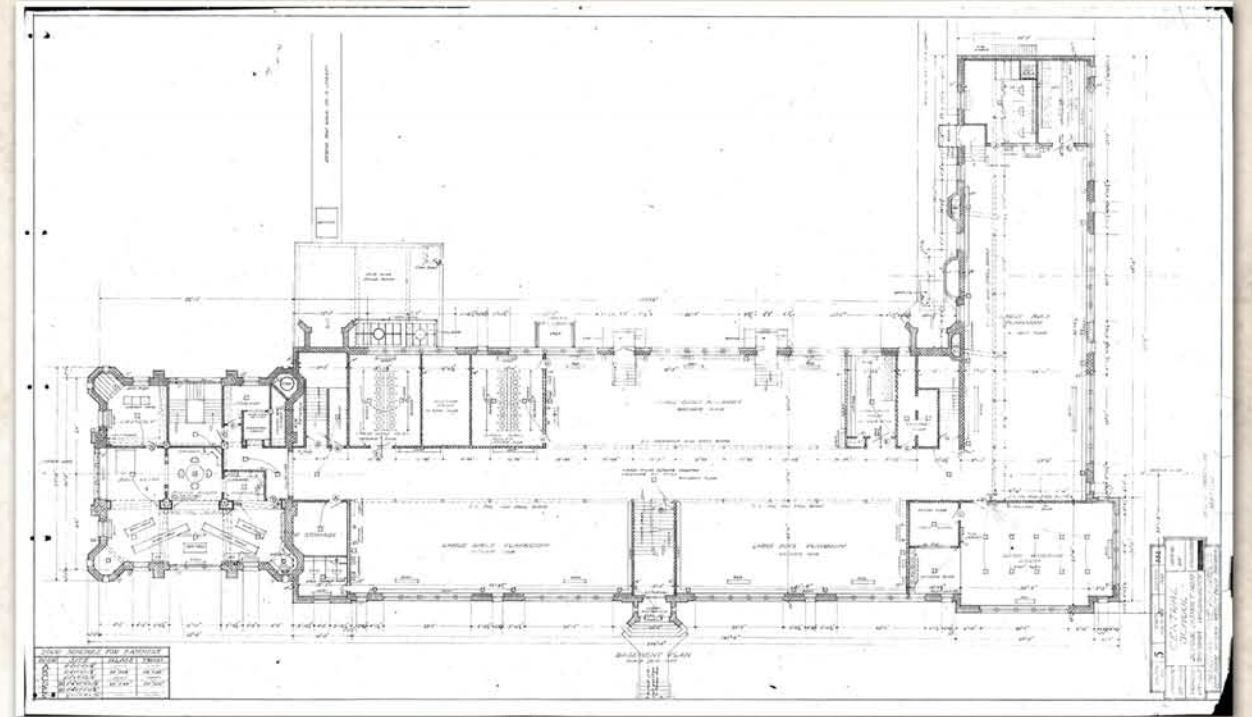
Sited to take advantage of territorial views of Mt. Rainier, the port, and Tacoma, Central School was the largest school in the city, and reported to be one of the largest in the West. It was considered modern in every possible way, and was called a "house of glass" for the remarkable number of windows and skylights that provided tremendous interior light. The modern technologies showcased in the building, combined with the sheer size of the structure led *The Tacoma Daily Ledger* to proudly proclaim: "One of the Finest Public School Buildings in America... Central Has No Superior." Central School is the only school in Washington State mentioned in the 1914 *New International Yearbook*, and the school was showcased with a large photo in the May 1919 issue of *Pacific Ports*. No expense was spared in creating Tacoma's institution of enlightenment. The building had an estimated cost of \$185,000, worth approximately \$71,464,677.08 in today's dollars.

The sub-basement of the building had a driveway that opened onto 7th Street. This provided access to a garage and a storage area for school desks and supplies in addition to a mechanic's office and heating plant. The next floor (at times referred to as the "basement" even though it was at or above grade depending on which side one was on) provided space for four playrooms where children were divided by grades and gender. These playrooms, which opened directly onto a playground at the rear, alleviated parent concerns about older and younger children playing in the same areas.



The basement originally housed a large domestic science department, and was equipped with a modern laundry, a model bedroom, a pantry, cold storage cupboards, and a cooling closet. A woodworking workshop for boys was also on this level. The upper floors had classrooms. The auditorium, located on the fourth floor, had roll-up partitions that allowed the space to accommodate 400 students. All classrooms were connected by telephone to the principal's office, a modern marvel at the time.

The tower served primarily administrative and medical services. The fourth floor housed rooms for the district doctors, nurses, and dentists. It also provided space for a special open-air room on the south end, developed for students with tuberculosis. While not finished at the same time as the rest of the school, this room was designed to be open on three sides and was intended to provide fresh air for the sick children.



This feature, which was common in Chicago and eastern cities, was a modern design for working with sickly students. Outdoor study and recitation periods were interrupted with breathing exercises and physical activity. The use of an open-air school was first documented in Charlottenburg, Germany in 1904. Central's inclusion of such a space shortly thereafter showed interest in current educational philosophies. Rooms for the Board of Education and the district superintendent were on the upper floors of the tower. The very top floor housed an "architectural office," which presumably provided space for architect Frederick Henry Heath and his assistants to work on plans. Heath helped design more than a dozen schools for the Tacoma School District. The combination of the district administrative offices with educational spaces seems to be a unique feature - it is not found in other school districts in the region.



^ Music teacher Lennard Anderson with a class of 6th graders. Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio Collection, D31849-2, 1948.

^ Tacoma Public Library, original construction blueprints for Central School, 1912.

> Film repository at Central Library. Richards Studio Collection, D62682-1. Tacoma Public Library, 1951.

> Mr. Lennard Anderson, director of music at Central, reviewing music with 5th grade students Jean Needham, Francis Moore, Ryo Inouye, Darrell Strain, Jeanine Miller and Marlys Bod. Tacoma Public Library, Richards Studio Collection, D31849-1, 1948.



# The Architects: Heath & Gove

The Tacoma-based architectural firm of Heath & Gove designed Central School. Frederick Henry Heath was responsible for a number of significant buildings ranging from private residences, commercial buildings, and fraternal lodges, to churches, hospitals and school buildings. He completed more than 600 projects during his lifetime.

Heath was born April 15, 1861, in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. He moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1881 and served as a draftsman for the architect Warren H. Hayes from 1883-1893. Heath moved to Tacoma at the end of 1893 and in 1896 opened his own architectural office. By 1901 he had become a partner in the firm of Spaulding, Russell & Heath. After the departure of Spaulding, the firm became Russell & Heath. By 1903, Heath once again worked independently. Heath later partnered with Luther Twichell, another former draftsman of Hays, to create the firm of Heath & Twichell, which operated from 1908 to 1910.

In 1912 Heath partnered with George Gove to create the firm of Heath & Gove, which lasted until the end of Heath's life. Little is known about Gove. Born in 1870, he was a native of Rochester, Minnesota. He arrived in Tacoma in 1908, likely to join his brother. In 1914 the firm expanded with the addition of Herbert A. Bell, a local architect who had served as a draftsman for Heath. Bell died in 1951, Heath in 1953 (at the age of 91), and the firm dissolved with the death of Gove in 1956. A number of significant Tacoma architects worked for the firm early in their careers, including Roland Borhek, Silas Nelson, Frederick Shaw, Charles Pearson and John G. Richards.

In 1903 Heath supervised the remodel of the burned out Tourist Hotel (originally designed by Hewitt & Hewitt in 1890) into Stadium High School. In 1906 Heath designed the Stadium Bowl and was honored with life admission to events held there. A period newspaper reports that this work eventually led to a contractual relationship with the Tacoma School District, including a salary of \$2,500. His formal relationship with the district started between 1903 and 1905 and ended by 1920.

Heath developed a "Unit School" plan to address growing school populations and constant building additions. The basic plan was a two-story design with a daylight basement and classrooms flanking a central corridor. The school was a four-classroom module, with two units per floor. Adding a second module created an eight-classroom design, and so on. Heath designed Fern Hill, McKinley, and Washington Elementary Schools using this plan, with early additions following this model as well. The Unit School seems to be indicative of a broader national approach that shows up in school literature at this time. Central School, however, does not showcase the unit system, likely due to its large size and the unique administrative tower.



▲ Frederick Henry Heath, Metro Parks, 1914.

**Heath is known to have designed 18 school buildings for the Tacoma School District. Dates listed are for the start of construction.**

## Schools still standing:

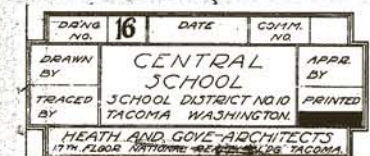
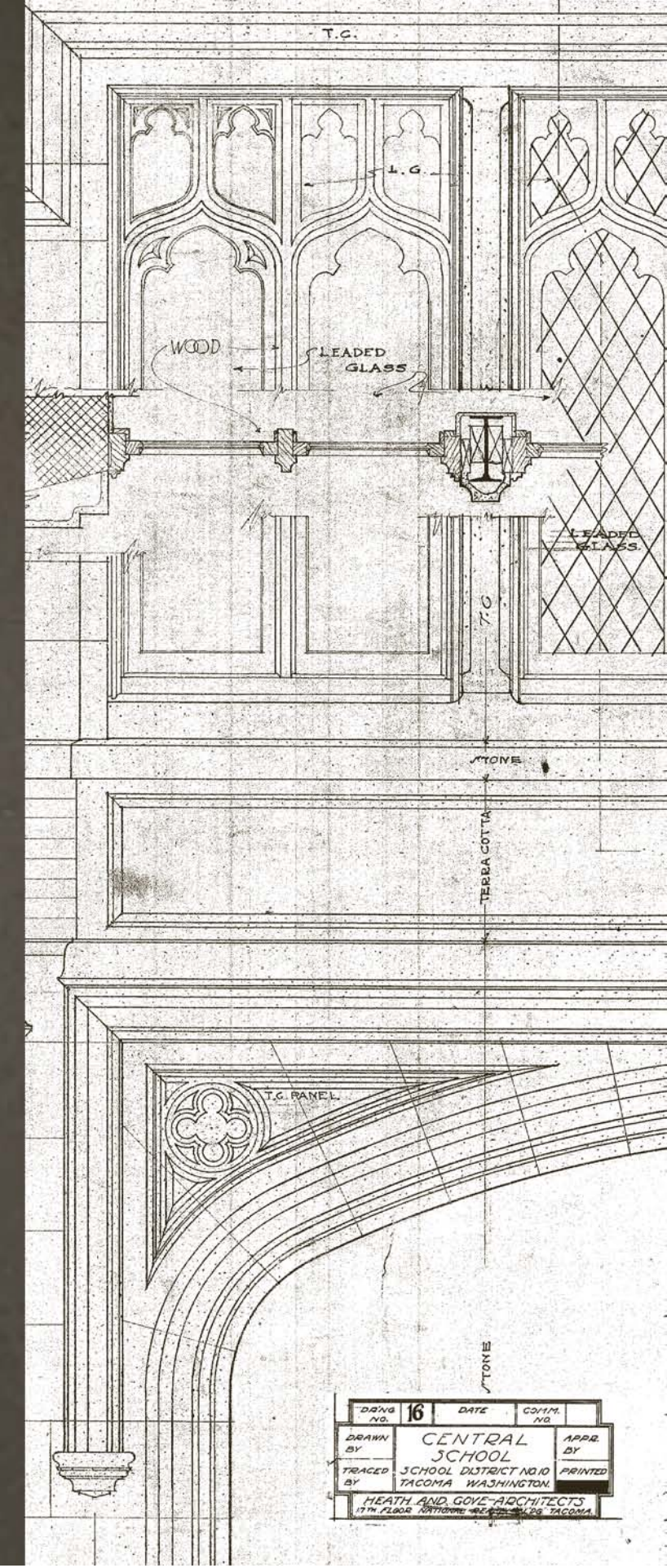
- Washington School  
3701 North 26th Street (1906)
- John Rogers School  
1301 East 34th Street  
(1907, no longer owned by the district)
- McKinley School  
3720 McKinley Avenue (1908)
- Fern Hill School  
8442 South Park Avenue (1911)
- Central School  
601 South 8th Street (1912)
- Oakland School  
3319 South Adams Street (1912)
- Grant School Addition  
1080 North Prospect Street  
(1919, severely remodeled)
- Lincoln High School  
701 South 34th Street (1913)
- Fawcett Elementary School  
126 East 60th Street  
(1949, by the firm of Heath, Gove & Bell)

## Schools demolished:

- Jefferson School (1908)
- Park Avenue School (1912)
- Sheridan School (1909)
- Point Defiance School (1912)
- Barlow Annex (1910)
- Hawthorne School (1913)
- Franklin School (1910)
- Northeast Tacoma School (1919)

Other notable works in the Tacoma area include: St. Patrick's Catholic Church (1906), First Church of Christ, Scientist (1911); The Swiss (1913); Trinity Methodist Church (1913); First Methodist Church (1916, demolished); Paradise Inn at Mt. Rainier (1916); Bethany Presbyterian (1924); Tobey Jones Home (1924); First Baptist Church (1923); and 6th Avenue Baptist Church (1924).

> Tacoma Public Library, original construction blueprints for Central School, 1912.





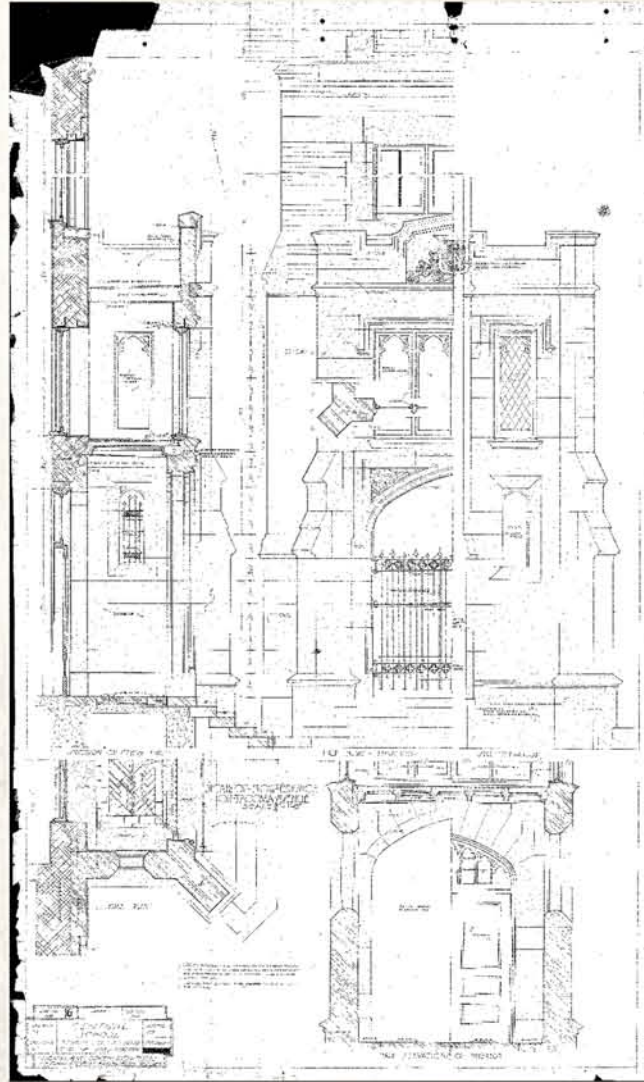
# Building Style: Collegiate Gothic

Gothic Revival is one of a number of historical revival styles that became popular in the 19th century, both abroad and in the United States. It was a common style for church and public school construction in Tacoma until the end of the 1920s. Central School showcases this style through its rectangular massing, engaged buttresses, lancet arches, tracery, and crenellations.

The original Gothic style was developed in the late 1100s in the region surrounding Paris, France. The style, while used for a number of building types, became associated with ecclesiastical architecture, in part due to the numerous new cathedrals built during this time, and soon spread to other countries. The style emphasized vertical massing, masonry construction, heavily sculpted façades, and prominent use of stained glass (in ecclesiastical forms).

Interest in Gothic forms revived during the late 18th century and continued through the early 20th century. American Collegiate Gothic is predominately an early 20th century style. The primary difference between general Gothic Revival and the more specialized Collegiate Gothic Revival is one of massing. Collegiate Gothic buildings are typically rectangular in plan, and frequently have flat rooflines. The multiple spired towers, heavily sculpted façades and irregular massing more common with religious versions of the Gothic style are often missing. Architects and clients specifically selected the Collegiate Gothic for its direct connotations with the two most renowned academic institutions in the world, Oxford and Cambridge. The style was commonly used by school districts during the early 20th century. The Tacoma press made several observations that Central's style was English Gothic, the same used on the campuses of Cambridge and Oxford.

The majority of other primary schools in the district showcased simpler ornamentation, regardless of style. The prominent location of the downtown project, the size of the building, and its use as administrative headquarters likely all contributed to the elaborate detailing on Central School.



^ Tacoma Public Library, original construction blueprints for Central School, 1912.

# Changes: An Addition and a New Use

In 1965, the district selected Tacoma architect Robert A. Parker to design a large addition on the southwest side of the administrative tower. This provided space for business offices, computers and instructional resource storage. The addition also included remodeling two floors of the original tower. Construction was finished in 1967. As administrative needs for the district increased, and the number of school-aged children living downtown decreased, Central School increasingly became an administrative center. By 1968 the school serviced 165 students who primarily occupied the third floor of the building. The rest of the building was used for administration. The decision to move the remaining students to the reorganized McCarver School (originally constructed as an Intermediate school) started with the 1968-69 academic year.

Little is known about Parker. He briefly attended Pacific Lutheran University before working as a draftsman for Heath, Gove, & Bell in 1940. Parker then served in the U.S. Army from 1941-1945. He was a draftsman for the firm of Lea, Pearson, & Richards from 1945-1956, and in 1956 he established his own firm. *The American Architects Directory* of 1962 lists him as designing residences, apartments, nursing homes and churches. Parker served as treasurer of the Southwest Chapter of the AIA from 1954-1956.



^ Detail of the 1967 addition. Kingstree Studios, 2009.





# TACOMA

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

EVERY STUDENT. EVERY DAY.

Front Cover: Tacoma Public Library, Marvin D. Boland Collection, BU-11306, circa 1920.

Back Cover: Central School as seen from the rear, before the 1967 addition was constructed. Tacoma Public Library, BU-11308, date unknown.