

Black History Month – Education in St. Joseph Week 4– Feb. 22-26, 2021

In the early decades of the 1900's, a second elementary school, Douglass, was built to serve the children in the south side of St. Joseph. As with Lincoln School, a prior Douglass School existed, but had become obsolete and perhaps unsafe.

In addition, enrollment at the old Douglass was low. Teachers at this school included Mr. B. T. Perkins, principal, who also taught grades four through eight, and Miss Myrtle Stone, who taught first through third grades.

In 1923, the school board authored a report suggesting that Douglass School be expanded, and that the basement classrooms should no longer be used because they were unsafe. Eventually, they decided to build a new school instead. They selected a hillside site at Russell and Barber Streets.

Sometime around 1928, the "modern" building was erected. The high school students from this part of town still attended Bartlett School.

Douglass School was similar to Lincoln in design and may well have been built by the same firm. A simple, geometric building with a flat roof and parapet. It featured less extensive brick work than Lincoln.

The western side featured large windows flanking an entrance that extended from the facade. Douglass was used until desegregation, in 1956, when it was purchased by an African American social club for use as a meeting hall. The name of the club was the 'Tes Trams' club. This was a men's club and the name reflected another African American women's club of that time, the 'Smart Set', Tes Trams spelled in reverse.

The owners apparently removed the front windows and built an extensive addition at the rear of the building. Major interior changes have also been made.

Douglass school was vital to African Americans residing in the southern part of St. Joseph.

Architecturally it is interesting for its kinship with Lincoln, and for its distinctive geometric form, which was prevalent in 1920s schools.

On May 18, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States rendered a decision in a case from Topeka, Kansas that would affect the entire nation. The case was called "Brown vs. Board of Education" and its result would be racial integration in schools. The School District of St. Joseph saw it coming and the very next day, met in a special session and ordered immediate integration of all St. Joseph Public Schools to begin with summer school. Many districts across the nation did the same and integration was ordered to begin with the fall term.

Because of the May 19th meeting being held and the District beginning with summer school, the School District of St. Joseph hold the distinct honor of being the first district in the nation to integrate its students (Board, 1954, May 19 and 1954, May 26). Bartlett school was closed (Board 1954, July 12) and plans were made to continue it as neighborhood grade school (Board, 1954, August 9). The Board felt that the name should be changed and renamed the school as Horace Mann (Board, 1955, March 21).

Horace Mann was a lawyer, American politician and education reformer best known for promoting universal public education. Mann thought that education should be non-sectarian, free and its aims should be social efficiency, civic virtue and character. Mann's methods angered groups across the social and political spectrum; clergymen objected to the diminished role of religion in the classroom, and politicians balked at the overreach of authority into local school systems. Ultimately, Mann's ideas prevailed, and he is recognized today for his efforts in transforming the country's public education system.

Upon the 1954 Supreme Court, Bartlett was razed, with the exception of the gymnasium, and a new, modern school was built on the site, eventually serving both black and white students. The gymnasium continued to serve this integrated school until the early 1980s, when the school was closed, and still serves the community as part of the Bartlett Center community service organization.

In recent years an additional room was added to the south side of the gymnasium. Otherwise, the building has been minimally altered, both inside and out.

Bartlett School gymnasium is significant as the last standing remnant of the infamous period of racial segregation in this area and served as the only accredited black high school in Buchanan and surrounding counties, serving for over seventy years.

Architecturally, the building is a gem, reflecting the architect's incorporation of classical elements into a distinctly modern form, and should be included in the National Register of Historic Places.

Source: Gary S. Wilkinson & A Chronological History of the St. Joseph School District and Biography.com