



Combs School

Est. 1876

Florissant, Missouri

**Dedicated to those who
know and love Combs School.**



Ferguson-Florissant School District



Historic Combs

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Combs School holds the distinction of being the “sentimental center” of public education in Florissant, Missouri. It is the site of the oldest public school in what was originally the village of St. Ferdinand. This area was settled by the French in the late 1700s.

The site of Combs School is bounded by Rue St. Jean, Rue St. Jacques, Harrison and Washington streets. This property was reserved for the benefit of public schools under an Act of Congress in 1812 which held that all uncultivated, unclaimed or unreserved lands prior to December 20, 1803, were to be used for public schools. It was on this date in 1803 that the United States took formal possession of the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase; Florissant was part of this land agreement.

William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition became the territorial governor of Missouri in 1813 and remained in that position until 1821 when Missouri achieved statehood.

The earliest documented public school on this site was in 1876 when the St. Ferdinand Public School was built. The earliest schools in the village of St. Ferdinand, however, were the private schools established around 1820 under the direction of Philippine Duchesne of the Order of the Sacred Heart and Peter DeSmet of the Jesuit Order.

The first legal provision for a school tax was passed in 1825, but it was not until 1853 that a workable system for public schools was established and the first tax money was appropriated.

An academy was established in 1845 by an act of the General Assembly of Missouri for children of the village of St. Ferdinand. It was a free school for both male and female students and offered instruction in our modern equivalent of first grade through high school. No preference or discrimination was to be made. The children were to be educated in English, French and German.

The academy was named St. Ferdinand Academy and it is thought that the building was constructed of brick and housed two apartments. The school was supported by two-thirds of the yearly revenue of the leases of the Commons of St. Ferdinand.

The present Combs site was held in the name of St. Ferdinand Academy in the early plats of the village. However, the records of the academy are meager and lack any definitive site location.

The teachers in the public academy were the Sisters of Loretto. There are no explanations as to why the Catholic nuns taught in the public school. We may speculate that they were perhaps the only available educated teachers in the area at the time. Also, St. Ferdinand Catholic Church did not have a parish school, so the children of the parish attended the public school if they went to school at all.

Thus the public school in early Florissant was operated in a quasi-parochial manner for many years until 1887 when the first parish school was established in St. Ferdinand Parish. Available records do not indicate how long the academy operated.

By 1871, the state of Missouri had formed the Florissant School District and six years later, in 1876, the St. Ferdinand Public School was built on the site now occupied by Combs School. It was a two-story brick building with a bell tower and a clock. The upper floor contained an auditorium and one classroom and the ground floor was divided into two classrooms. Construction of the school cost approximately \$10,000. It had a capacity of 270 students and an average enrollment of 235 students.

The Sisters of Loretto continued teaching in the public school until 1887 when their teaching licenses were not renewed by the Florissant School Board.

St. Ferdinand Catholic Church established a parish

school at this time and named it St. Ferdinand Catholic School. The Sisters of Loretto continued teaching in the parish school. In 1866, the German Catholics had formed their own church and opened Sacred Heart School.

In 1897, the clock from the St. Ferdinand Public School was sold by the City of Florissant to Sacred Heart Church for \$1. The city was willing to sell the clock in order to place it in a highly visible spot. In its location at St. Ferdinand, the clock could not be seen by the townspeople; and, in addition, there was no one to wind the clock on weekends and during the summer. The city stipulated that the clock must be visible and running at all times.

The school population grew very slowly, as did the town, which retained its exclusiveness from neighboring communities in architecture, customs and language. As late as 1920, German and French were still spoken by the descendants of the early settlers.

By 1946, there were only 139 students and three teachers attending St. Ferdinand Public School. All of the eighth graders from the three schools in Florissant—St. Ferdinand Public School, St. Ferdinand Catholic School and Sacred Heart School—attended Ferguson Junior High School since there were no junior or senior high schools in the area. At this time, there was a one-room school on Halls Ferry called Cross Keys, which was an extension of St. Ferdinand School.

The post World War II building boom that started in the late 1940s changed Florissant forever. The first subdivision was built in 1948 and the population increased rapidly for the next two decades.

Volunteers built a portable three-room building next to St. Ferdinand Public School to house the increased enrollment. A special milk program provided students with milk for only two cents and on Fridays, the moth-

ers of students sold cupcakes as a special treat.

In 1951, the residents of Florissant and Ferguson voted to merge school districts. At that time, Ferguson was the larger of the two districts with a school population of 2,672; Florissant had about 300 students.

A new one-story brick building with six classrooms and a multipurpose room was erected in 1951 adjacent to the old St. Ferdinand School and both continued in use until the original school was razed in 1956.

Joe M. Combs became the principal of St. Ferdinand School in 1951. Before that time, Mrs. Dorothy Shields served as acting principal as well as one of three teachers in the building.

After 1951, the Florissant area saw rapid change. The farms which had been laden with corn, tomatoes, oats, wheat and many other vegetables, disappeared and in their place subdivisions grew.

The school population was also growing rapidly. Kindergarten classes were held in churches and in a building on St. Jacques Street adjacent to the school playground.

Then in 1953, DeSmet School was built. It was the first of many schools to be added to the Ferguson-Florissant School District in the next decade. DeSmet relieved the population growth at St. Ferdinand by absorbing many of the students, and for several years the two schools operated a joint mothers' club.

When the old St. Ferdinand School was demolished in the late 1950s, a new wing was added to the existing school. The reorganized school district had a population of 9,554 children of school age by this time.

At about the same time, the name of the school was changed to Florissant School—a logical occurrence since Florissant was the legal name of the town by then.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Florissant School was the center of many community activities. Regular

Friday night dances were held for teenagers and several square dance clubs met in the cafeteria one night a week—a custom that continues to the present. For a dime, children could attend Saturday morning movies. Even though the town was growing rapidly, all of the growth was occurring in the outlying farm areas around Florissant; the Old Town area around the school saw little change.

The school district acquired three-tenths of an acre of land on Harrison Street for additional playground space east of the school. The playground was divided by St. Jacques Street, which was barricaded to halt traffic during school hours. The closing of St. Jacques was the topic of many PTA and city council meetings. Several years later, St. Jacques Street was closed permanently between Harrison and Washington streets, the entire playground area was fenced, and additional space became available with the razing of two houses on the eastern side of the playground.

One section of the playground on the southeastern corner had playground equipment and several fruit trees for shade. The foundation of one of the houses remained and a merry-go-round was situated on the concrete slab, which was later removed as a safety hazard.

Joe Combs was the principal for 10 years until 1961 when he accepted a position at one of the junior high schools in the district. With his departure, the school was renamed Combs School in his honor.

Herbert White, principal of Vogt School in Ferguson, became the principal of Combs School where he remained for the next eight years.

During the decade of the 60s, the school grew until it housed over 500 children and 17 teachers for a period of eight to ten years. Every available room in the building was used as a classroom, including the two small

rooms adjacent to the gym. Special purpose rooms for music and art were nonexistent and special education classes were not yet included in the school system.

In 1969, Kennard Ward became the next principal of Combs School. Education was becoming less structured and more innovative as the decade of the 70s began—open classrooms, team teaching, learning centers, ungraded primary and more! Combs was no exception. Walls were removed between some of the rooms on the lower level and two large rooms became available for team teaching. They were used as first-second, second-third, fourth and fourth-fifth team rooms.

The library finally had become established and was moved from the “basement” room next to the gym to the first classroom east of the office.

The PTO embarked on a two-year project to upgrade the equipment on the playground. The district matched the funds that were raised, and the existing playground equipment was acquired.

In 1972, Combs became the first school in the district to offer extended day kindergarten with home visits and parent volunteers in the classroom. In the previous decade, the enrollment grew so large that kindergarten had been offered for only one semester for each child. In the 1964-65 school year, the district did not offer kindergarten at all, and in response, Sacred Heart School established its kindergarten that year.

Phyllis Stoechlein became the principal in 1973 and Combs experienced “a woman’s touch.” The school was redecorated with bright colors, and the Mothers’ Club equipped the school with draperies. Parent participation grew in all areas. Mary Winkelmann, a parent volunteer, painted a map of the United States on the playground making Combs easily identifiable from the air.

As enrollment began to decline, classrooms became available for special purposes. On the upper wing, a

first, second and kindergarten class shared an activity room of learning centers staffed by parents.

In 1975, the Ferguson-Florissant School District was involved in a court ordered desegregation plan with the neighboring districts of Berkeley and Kinloch. When its first black students and teachers arrived at Combs, the entire school population devoted every effort to make the transition successful.

By the end of the 70s, Combs once again had a new principal, Dr. James Sallade, who had been a Berkeley School District principal.

Dr. Sallade provided the unifying force that Combs needed in a time of discussions about school closings and “back to basics” issues. Combs had been on the rumor list of school closings for several years and was saved from being closed in the early 80s by a tie vote of the school board.

Dr. Sallade instilled school pride and spirit and gave the school a logo and a motto—Combs School-A Special Place. Interest in the history of the school was revived. The bell from the old St. Ferdinand School was retrieved from McCluer High School and placed in the entry hall at Combs on a special stand built by the PROBE students in the school.

About the same time, Miss Marie Goldbeck, a Florissant resident, informed the school that the stone name block of the St. Ferdinand School had been saved when the old school was razed, but it had never been claimed by the school district. The stone had been placed behind St. Ferdinand Shrine, and, when apprised of its location, school officials initiated discussions to reclaim it.

In the meantime, Mr. Gene Schultze became the principal in 1981. For Mr. Schultze, it was a homecoming. He started his teaching career in 1953 in the old St. Ferdinand School with Mr. Combs.

By the fall of 1983, plans for the stone block had been completed and a special ceremony was held on Pride Day at Combs School to install the block that bore the words “St. Ferdinand School 1876,” on the lawn in front of the school. An accompanying historical marker identified the site on which the school was built.

School enrollment continued to decline for several years and in the spring of 1985, the neighboring schools on either side of Combs—Graham and DeSmet—were closed. The following September, Combs received part of the Graham students, and once again Combs was filled to capacity.

Jo Ann Jasin became the principal of Combs School in 1984. Under her leadership the school blossomed, both academically and visually. The building was redecorated with interesting graphics, plants, entry hall furniture, display boards for children’s artwork, and hall carpeting among other things. New tables were purchased for the cafeteria and PTO money provided ceiling fans for the cafeteria and classrooms.

The Combs School logo was changed from a crayon to a representative picture of the bell that once rang from the tower of St. Ferdinand School.

The fall of 1988 brought new changes for Combs. Susan Lark became the principal. She had begun her teaching career at Combs some 20 years previously.

A new addition to the school was opened at the end of the lower wing on St. Jacques Street. It contained one classroom, a computer room and a new library.

The Combs School logo was once again changed—to a representative picture of the old St. Ferdinand School with children on either side.

Beginning with the 1990-91 school year, Sam McCauley became the new principal. The school colors changed from blue and gold to black and white. “Expect The Best” became the school motto. Combs became a

“Fight Free” school, with flags of peace flying at every classroom door. All-day kindergarten was started in the fall of 1996, and the Limited English Proficiency Room opened in 1997, bringing children from around the world to our building. What a wonderful experience for the staff and students of Combs School!

In 1991, the school library was dedicated and named the Charlotte Glenn Library. Also, Charlotte’s unfinished project of refurbishing the cornerstone of the original school was completed and put in place on the front lawn by her son-in-law, Jim Klopstein, in that same year. Sadly, Mrs. Glenn died in 1996. It was a great loss to our community.

The PTO was very active during these years, contributing much time, computers, televisions, VCRs, as well as the beautiful outdoor sign to advertise our agendas.

After Sam McCauley’s retirement, Alice Aldridge became principal. With Ms. Aldridge’s enthusiasm and visionary leadership, along with the multifaceted, talented and committed staff came a variety of positive changes.

Under Ms. Aldridge’s leadership, Combs students and staff have been acknowledged both locally and state-wide for their academic success for the 1999-2000 school year and the 2000-2001 school year on the annual state-wide assessment, known as the Missouri Assessment Performance, (MAP).

This school-wide movement to support and encourage

the student body to develop into self-sufficient and productive citizens, was made possible through the adoption of the Effective Positive Behavior program. With this program came the Pioneer Plan, which offered a host of tools for staff to teach, model and reinforce appropriate behavior choices.

The school’s motto was expanded to “Expect the Best . . .and Then Some.” The school’s mascot became the Pioneers. The combined sailboat and spaceship logo represents sailing from the past into the future. The school colors changed from black and white to blue and white.

Community and parent involvement supported numerous activities before, during and after school. The very dedicated Parent Teacher Organization, (PTO), works closely with the school staff to enable a cohesive working relationship between school and home.

With this dynamic partnership, many positive activities are sponsored throughout the school year. Such annual activities include Open House, Grandparents Day, National Education Week, Holiday concerts, Christmas Tours, Black History events, Read Across America, Multicultural Events, Field Day, Science Fun Day, Science Fair, Extended Learning Programs, tutorial programs, Celebrate Children, OASIS tutors, and many more.

Community involvement continued to increase, by promoting neighborhood harmony and well-being by working with the Florissant Old Town Partners, Inc., under the leadership of Rosemary Davison.

The interior and exterior of Combs School underwent improvements in recent years during this period. Such enhancements included a remodeled main office, mini blinds and new folding chairs for the gym, removal of carpet and replacement with new tile flooring in halls and most classroom, the purchase of new music equipment such as Yamaha keyboards and spotlights for school performances, new classroom furniture, the development of a math closet with over \$9000 worth of math manipulatives, and the expansion of the parking lot for staff and visitors.

A new playground was dedicated with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in September, 2002, by parents, students and staff. Combs' interior and exterior features further provide an inviting feel to all who entered this very special place.

In the year of 2002, the Combs School is honored to be celebrating 125 years of service to the Florissant community. On May 5, 2002, the Combs staff and students represented the school in the Valley of Flowers annual parade. On May 31, 2002, Combs School family and community

will culminate this historical period by inviting the community to a tea, an open house, and a family/school festival on the school playground.

The area surrounding Combs School, Old Town, is Florissant's historical treasure. Throughout the entire Old Town area, remnants of the city's colorful heritage can be found. The existence of these historical landmarks is a silent testimony to the people of Florissant who recognized the value of their heritage and fought to preserve it in the face of the new developments that were emerging in the surrounding area.

The Ferguson-Florissant School District is proud to share in that historical significance through Combs School. Many generations of Florissant families have attended Combs. Children presently enrolled are following traditions set by their grandparents.

Today, Combs boasts a proud heritage, a comprehensive educational offering and a strong unit of public education with well-defined goals and a strong historical identity.





Old Town: A Brief Sketch



Combs is located in Florissant's Old Town, an area that has gained prominence for its historical significance. Two blocks north of Combs School, at the corner of St. Francois and St. Jacques, stood the St. Ferdinand Milling Company which operated between 1897 and 1917. The mill's specialty was "bottled corn meal"—meal that had been separated and graded. The mill operated at the site of a spring which had various names—Fontaine des Biches (Elks Spring) or Fontaine Jaune (Yellow Spring). The spring was originally used by Indians and later became the source of the water supply for the village of St. Ferdinand. It was once surrounded by a stockade to protect the townspeople from Indians. Although covered by a parking lot, the spring is still there today.

At the turn of the century, a canning factory for tomatoes and pumpkins was built at St. Denis and St. Charles. One brand, The American, won first prize at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis.

Nearby on Rue St. Francois stood a trading post built by Pierre Chouteau in 1784. In 1911, the city council ordered the demolition of the building.

The block bounded by St. Francois, St. Ferdinand, St. Catherine and St. Pierre was the site of the depot which served as the western terminus for the narrow gauge

railroad. The railroad originated on Olive Street, west of Grand in St. Louis, and ran to Florissant.

The hexagon-shaped building called the Round House made the block a favorite place of entertainment for dances, weddings, dinners and picnics.

Two historical homes are located across the street from Combs. In the southwest corner of Rue St. Jean and Washington stands the Bellesime-Desitel House, a Missouri French-style house built in the early 1800s. The white brick Magill House, located on Harrison at the corner of Rue St. Jean, was built around 1830.

Nearby on St. Jacques Street north of the school is the Baptiste Aubuchon House, a brick federal-styled home built about 1832. Two other homes of the same period are located at the corner of Washington and Rue St. Pierre. The original door, window frames and some of the original glass in the windows still occupy one of the homes.

One of the oldest homes in the entire St. Louis area is Casa Alvarez at Rue St. Denis and Rue St. Pierre. It was built about 1794 for Eugenio Alvarez, the military storekeeper for the Spanish Lt. Governor of the area before the Louisiana Purchase made it part of the United States.





St. Ferdinand School

1876