

State Inventory Number: 77-09978  New  Supplemental  
9-Digit SHPO Review and Compliance (R&C) Number: \_\_\_\_\_  Non-Extant Year: \_\_\_\_\_

**IOWA SITE INVENTORY FORM**

Read the **Iowa Site Inventory Form Instructions carefully**, to ensure accuracy and completeness before completing this form. The instructions are available at <http://www.iowahistory.org/historic-preservation/statewide-inventory-and-collections/iowa-site-inventory-form.html>.

**Basic Information**

Historic Building Name: West Des Moines Elementary School/Phenix Elementary School  
Other Names: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street Address: 415 7th Street  
City: West Des Moines  Vicinity County: Polk State: Iowa ZIP: 50265

**LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
Township Name: _____	Subdivision: <u>1st Addition to Valley Junction</u>
Township No.: _____	Block(s): <u>23</u>
Range No.: _____	Lot(s): <u>Lots 11-20</u>
Section: _____	
Quarter: _____ of _____	

**Classification**

**A. PROPERTY CATEGORY:**

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

**B. NUMBER OF RESOURCES (WITHIN PROPERTY):**

If eligible property, enter number of:

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>1</u> Buildings	_____ Buildings
_____ Sites	_____ Sites
_____ Structures	<u>2</u> Structures
_____ Objects	_____ Objects
<u>1</u> Total	<u>2</u> Total

If non-eligible property, enter number of:

_____ Buildings
_____ Sites
_____ Structures
_____ Objects
_____ Total

**C. STATUS OF PROPERTIES LISTED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  Listed  De-listed  NHL  NPS DOE

**D. FOR PROPERTIES WITHIN A HISTORIC DISTRICT**

- Property contributes to a National Register or local certified historic district.
- Property contributes to a **potential** historic district, based on professional historic/architectural survey and evaluation.
- Property does not contribute to the historic district in which it is located.

Historic District Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Historic District Site Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**E. NAME OF RELATED PROJECT REPORT OR MULTIPLE PROPERTY STUDY (if applicable)**

MPD Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Historical Architectural Database No. \_\_\_\_\_

Address: 415 7th Street

City: West Des Moines

County: Polk

Site Number: 77-09978

District Number: \_\_\_\_\_

### Function or Use

Enter categories (codes **and** terms) from the Iowa Site Inventory Form Instructions

#### A. HISTORIC FUNCTIONS

05-Education/05A05-Elementary School

#### B. CURRENT FUNCTIONS

70-vacant

### Description

#### A. ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION

Modern Movement-Moderne

#### B. MATERIALS

Foundation (visible exterior): Concrete

Walls (visible exterior): Concrete

Roof: Gravel-compound asphalt

Other: Subwalls-concrete block

#### C. NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION See continuation sheets which must be completed.

### Statement of Significance

#### A. APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CRITERIA (mark your opinion of eligibility after applying relevant National Register criteria)

Criterion A: Property is associated with significant events.

Yes  No  More research recommended

Criterion B: Property is associated with the lives of significant persons.

Yes  No  More research recommended

Criterion C: Property has distinctive architectural characteristics.

Yes  No  More research recommended

Criterion D: Property yields significant information in archaeology/history.

Yes  No  More research recommended

#### B. SPECIAL CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS (mark any special considerations; leave blank if none)

A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure.

B. Removed from its original location.

F. A commemorative property.

C. A birthplace or grave.

G. Property less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

D. A cemetery

#### C. AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (enter categories from instructions)

Education

Architecture

#### D. PERIOD(S) OF SIGNIFICANCE

1939-1965

#### E. SIGNIFICANT DATES

Construction Date: 1939

Other Dates (including renovations): \_\_\_\_\_

#### F. SIGNIFICANT PERSON (complete if Criterion B is marked above)

#### G. CULTURAL AFFILIATION (complete if Criterion D is marked above)

#### H. ARCHITECT/BUILDER

Architect: Proudfoot, Rawson, Brooks and Borg

Builder/Contractor: The Weitz Company

#### I. NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE See continuation sheets which must be completed.

Address: 415 7th Street  
City: West Des Moines County: Polk  
Site Number: 77-09978 District Number: \_\_\_\_\_

### Bibliography

See continuation sheets for the list research sources used in preparing this form.

### Geographic Data

#### OPTIONAL UTM REFERENCES

See continuation sheet for additional UTM or comments

	Zone	Easting	Northing	NAD
1.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____	_____

### Form Preparation

Name and Title: James E. Jacobsen Date: March 3, 2015  
Organization/Firm: 4411 Ingersoll Avenue  
Street Address: 4411 Ingersoll Avenue  
City: Des Moines State: Iowa ZIP: 50312  
Email: hp@raccoon.com Telephone: 515-274-3625

### Additional Documentation

#### A. FOR ALL PROPERTIES, ATTACH THE FOLLOWING, AS SPECIFIED IN THE IOWA SITE INVENTORY FORM INSTRUCTIONS

1. Map of property's location within the community.
2. Glossy color 4x6 photos labeled on back with property/building name, address, date taken, view shown, and unique photo number.
3. Photo key showing each photo number on a map and/or floor plan, using arrows next to each photo number to indicate the location and directional view of each photograph.
4. Site plan of buildings/structures on site, identifying boundaries, public roads, and building/structure footprints.

#### B. FOR ALL STATE HISTORIC TAX CREDIT PART 1 APPLICATIONS, HISTORIC DISTRICTS AND FARMSTEADS, AND BARNES

See lists of special requirements and attachments in the Iowa Site Inventory Form Instructions.

#### State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) Use Only

The SHPO has reviewed the Site Inventory and concurs with above survey opinion on National Register eligibility:

- Yes  No  More research recommended  
 This is a locally designated property or part of a locally designated district.

Comments:

SHPO Authorized Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

IOWA SITE INVENTORY

600 East Locust Street | Des Moines, IA 50319

(515) 281-8742 | Fax: (515) 282-0502

[www.iowahistory.org/historicpreservation](http://www.iowahistory.org/historicpreservation)

July 2014

## IOWA SITE INVENTORY FORM – CONTINUATION SHEET

Name of Property: \_\_\_\_\_

Site Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Related District Number: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

West Des Moines Elementary School/Phenix Elementary School, Continuation Sheets:

### 7. Narrative Description:

The City of West Des Moines, as the name implies, is the largest suburban community that borders on the City of Des Moines, proper. The latter city is Iowa's capitol city, and is situated just south of center in the state. West Des Moines was buffered from Des Moines by the presence of the flood-prone Walnut Creek bottoms and for that and other reasons failed to be annexed by the larger city. West Des Moines enjoyed the proximity of fairly flat topography to the west and north and this factor enabled it to expand, particularly after World War II.

This school building is centered in what was initially the town of Valley Junction. Numbered streets orient north and south and named streets east/west. Blocks are elongated rectangles oriented to the numbered streets. The Valley Junction downtown is just a few blocks to the southeast of the school location. The school is centered on the west half of the block. The block was subdivided into 20 residential lots but the school is now the only building on the block.

This is the second school building on this site (see Section 8), with the precursor high school/elementary school being located off center north on the west half of the block. The construction of this school placed the second school building in the middle of the west half of the block. Figure 1 locates the original sidewalk approaches to the new building. These primarily were west-focused toward 7<sup>th</sup> Street, although alleyway access was a clear option. The demolished footprint of Lincoln School extends north of the new building, showing its southward relocation vis-à-vis the block.

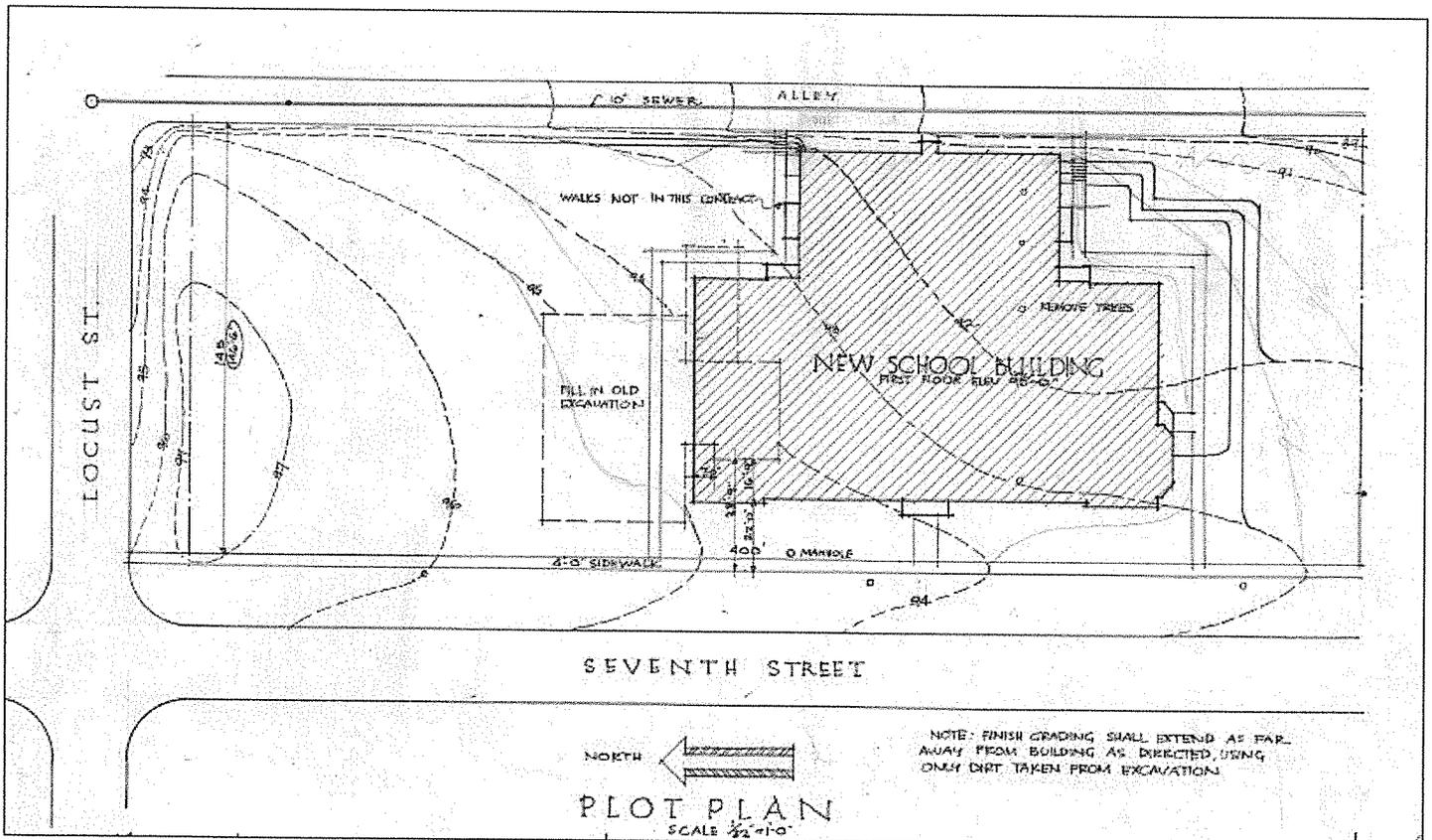


Figure 1: Plot plan, 1938 (Proudfoot, Bird and Rawson)

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

The original school was and remains two stories in height. The plan consisted of two components, the elementary school and the general use auditorium/gymnasium. The former wrapped around the latter on its north, west and south sides and the massing of the former projected well east of the flanking school side wings. There was a two-part partial basement and a perimeter system of ventilation and service tunnels underneath the building. The furnace room is centered beneath the north end of the gymnasium and the substantial chimney is centered on the east wall of the gymnasium wing. A swivel beam used to remove clinker from the furnace room remains in place on that same rear wall. The original school plan, with six classrooms, the office and teacher's room (these flanking the west entry) on the lower floor and seven classrooms upstairs, included those rooms and the U-shaped hallway. Interior stairs were in the two rear wings. These are non-extant save for a basement egress stair in the north hall that leads to a basement level storage room. This stair and floor opening was the lowest run of the north stair system.

The 1992 remodeling added stacked classrooms at the northeast and southeast corners and added new entrances on either side of those square-based new rooms. The additions not only replicated the historic wall treatment but its horizontal patterning as well. The additions were particularly sensitive to the original school inasmuch as they "float" outside of its original perimeter and the stair/hall voids on their inside faces separate the original and enlarged parts of the building.

The school style is Moderne or Modern style. This style is reflected in its perimeter walls, concrete (the walls being load-bearing which in and of itself is unusual) and its massing and ornamentation. The massing is streamlined, with horizontal recessed lines patterning almost every frontage. It is also nearly square, in terms of the facades (north, west and south) save for a minimalist projecting of the end bay (or two bays) on the principal (west) façade. These are not fenestrated and have a flush-set plain section. At the upper levels of each of these wall sections are inscribed (north) the year of the town founding, 1893, and (south) the year the school was placed into service, 1939. The horizontal coursing varies vertically. The wall base is not so marked up to the ground floor sill level. The first floor line series is standardized up to the lintel level where a narrower band caps the first floor. Above that point across the upper floor level, the horizontal lines are more broadly spaced, save for the window midpoint, where three lines create two very narrow courses. The parapet is largely unadorned save for a plain surfacing with no horizontal lines. Faux roof drain openings pierce the center points of each of the end sections. The name of the original school is inscribed across the front parapet face. The centered entry features a rounded flat projecting concrete canopy and stacked columns that frame the entry. A plaque notes the new school name (1955).

The respective side secondary facades have the same concrete surface and ornamentation. The south façade has a three-sided single-story bay with an east end side entry that denotes the historic kindergarten room location.

Fenestration is uniform across the school portion of the original building. Based on original plans the full-sized windows were fixed frames having a central mullion. Plans show that each half window was vertically divided into four rectangular lights and that the bottom and upper lights were narrower than the two middle lights. The base lights and the upper center lights had a hopper function. The same sized window opening is uniform save for narrower four-light openings that are paired on each sidewall on each floor level. The latter locate the original bathrooms. The east second floor gymnasium walls have twin oversized rectangular windows that provided additional light. These are currently glass block infilled and are now interior walls due to the extension of the side halls. The gymnasium east wall is fenestrated at each original end bay where dressing rooms were located. The back of the stage area is also fenestrated with four lights that flank the projecting chimney. These windows are all smaller than the classroom windows and are currently divided into three even-sized rectangular lights. The stage windows are slightly longer than the dressing room openings.

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

The roof is flat and of equal elevation, being sectioned off by projecting party walls into three main subsections. The mechanicals penthouse is centered atop what was the west end of the gymnasium (see alterations) and dates to 1992. Two unusual monitor skylights flank the penthouse and extend across the north and south ends of the original gymnasium. Their vertical fronts are infilled with glass block and this provided natural light to the gymnasium.

The twin square-footprint 1992 additions as noted copied the historic building exterior. They like the main façade are unfenestrated on their eastern frontages and have the identical plain center wall sections. A simple recessed set of three vertical lines is centered at the upper part of each of these central sections and faux roof drains again match those found on the west historic façade. The new south, north and east entrances are recessed with flat metal entry canopies. Entry parapet fronts and spandrels are cased in metal. The grade behind the school being lower, the east entrances is supplemented with short metal stairs. There is a concrete mechanicals shed with flat roof and three sides. It is adjacent to the south end of the gymnasium east wall.

An asphalt playground is to the north of the school. Paved parking is centered to the east of the building. The parkings and the ground to the south are grassed.

The perimeter walls as noted are load bearing. While of uniform thickness on each floor level (ground level walls are a foot thick while the upper level walls are stepped back to 8 inches in depth) the walls do contain functioning piers that are not visible but are more strongly bolstered with reinforcement rod. Reinforcement rods 3/8 inch in thickness on either side of the wall, every 8 inches vertically on the lower level and 6 inches horizontally on the same level. Due to the lighter upper walls these spacings are increased to 8 inches and 12 inches respectively on the second floor. Figure 2 illustrates how the walls were formed. The horizontal line pattern in the exterior walls was created by the insertion of molding strips inside the forms and pours were terminated at these resulting baselines. The indented belt course helped blend the pour lines. Vertical indentations keyed each successive cast wall segment together. How the boltholes were infilled and hidden is not determined. The same figure appear to show the lack of any vertical expansion joints, which is a point of some importance given Iowa's climate. The forms could be adjusted vertically as the wall progressed upwards. The exterior walls stood just over 24 feet high from ground to the parapet cap.

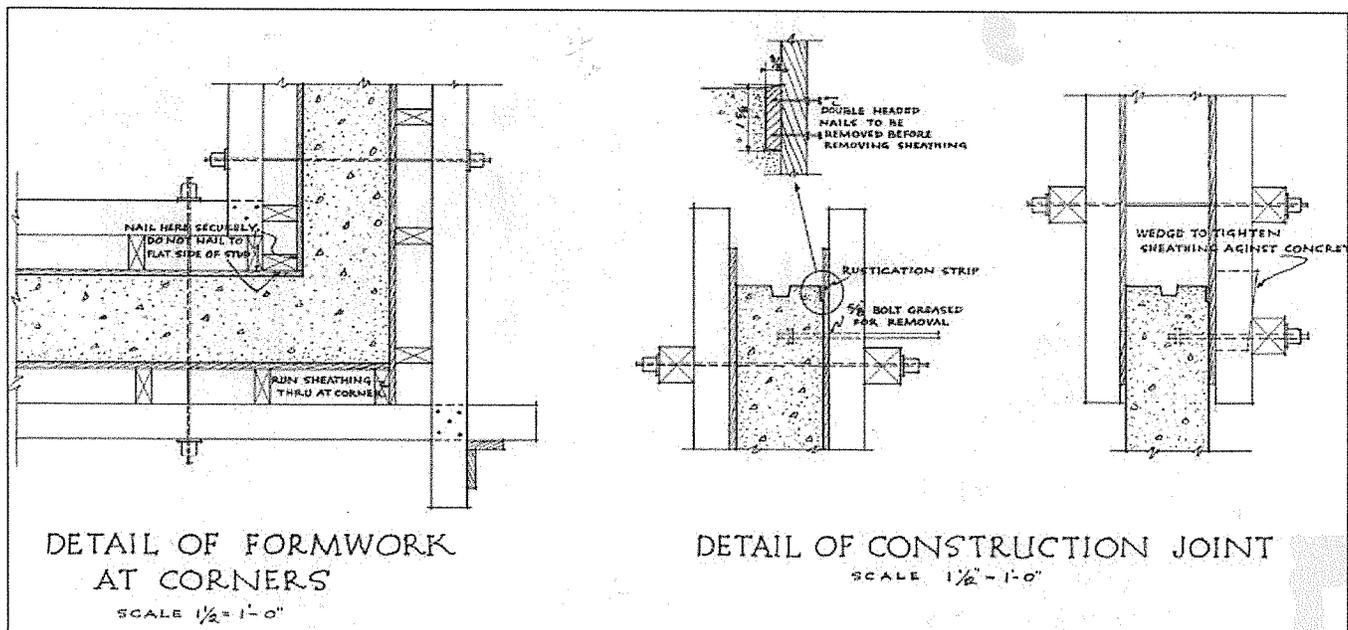


Figure 2: Wall forming and construction details (Original 1938 plans)

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

The ground floor and first floor structural ceiling is composed of concrete beams and slabs, while the second story roof consists of concrete atop steel trusses. The concrete beams were variously thickened according to stress and load and consequently all ceilings in the new school were suspended ceiling systems. One particular design challenge was the long span that capped the south bay on the ground floor. With three windows cut into the wall plane, angled supplemental reinforcement rods had to be incorporated to carry the span.

The interior walls are constructed with a lightweight Haydite ceramic block or “expanded shale, clay and slate” (ESCS). These blocks are rough surfaced and weigh a third as much as concrete block but have a double the insulation value ([www.digeronimoaggregates.com/about\\_us/](http://www.digeronimoaggregates.com/about_us/)). The use of these blocks resulted in a distinct interior wall finish inasmuch as the lower (locker-level) portion of the walls was finished with a thin plaster or comparable coat, the upper walls remain rough save for multiple layers of paint. The original wall appearance is best appreciated by viewing the walls of the furnace room stairwell walls. No original lockers remain in place and the existing locker banks consist of full-sized lockers on the ground floor and a shorter version upstairs, the latter having angled tops. The full sized lockers are recessed into the walls. Interior surfaces cover or replace the originals on walls, floors and dropped ceilings. An interesting feature of the classroom interiors is the use of an angled bulwark below the original (the school had suspended ceilings from the start) ceiling levels that contain vents, etc. These allow for full-sized window openings and explain why this school got its downsized windows replaced to full size when the present windows were installed (Building Specifications).

Character-defining interior elements consist of the hallways, the now-interior former east entrances at the end of each side hall, vertically fluted concrete pilasters that mark the intersection points of the hallways, one original cabinet set found on the second floor, north side, and a broad range of gym and stage components. These include the original gymnasium floor, recently (2003) completely removed, resurfaced and replaced, the original stage area and wooden floor, the wooden steps leading to same at each end, the glazed brown tile walls (lower walls only), the upper side windows (glass block as noted) and the ceiling trusses. There is the ever-present peg climbing board that has been repositioned on the west wall of the stage proscenium as well.

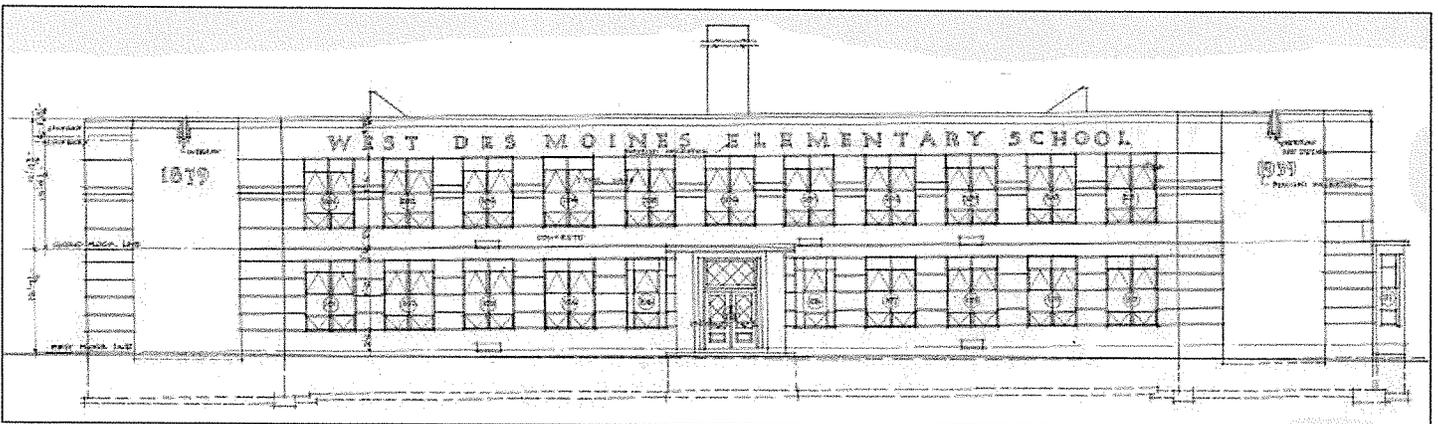


Figure 3: Main or west façade (original plans, 1938)

The classroom wall pattern survives best on the side wings of the original school area. The original principal's office largely survives north of the main entry but the teacher's room is lost. The corner rooms have been slightly enlarged at the expense of the west central classrooms. This part of the plan on the second floor has been completely opened up and served, as the library-it is open into the hall. The major change to the interior came (see alterations) when the gymnasium was reduced in size by the addition of a full height load-bearing wall that supports the rooftop penthouse along its east frontage. The removal of movable (first floor)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

and fixed bleachers (second floor) created a range of new rooms and a north side elevator (an usual feature for a school).

The Original Building Plan, Exterior Details:

Figure 3 shows the main façade components along with the overall building profile. The windows shown here have shorter upper and lower lights.

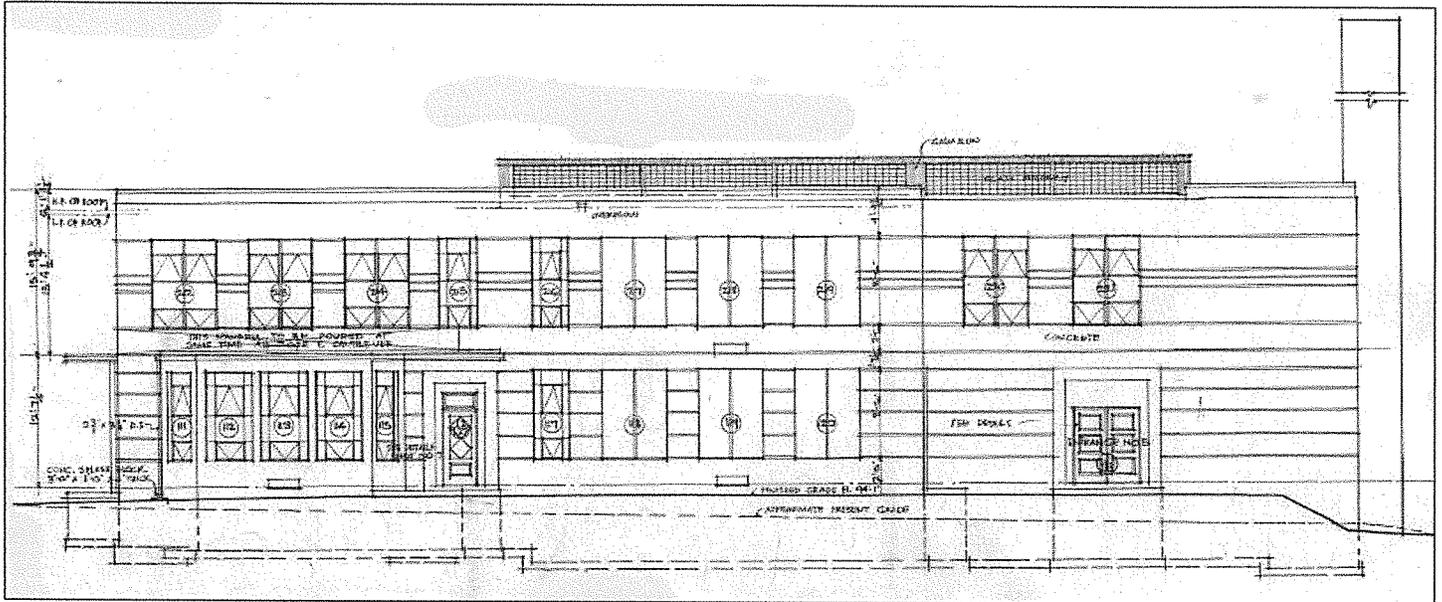


Figure 4: South elevation (original plans, 1938)

Note that there were side entrances to the gymnasium/auditorium that were exterior to the elementary school portion of the building. The school had its own direct entries as well but these exterior doors allowed for non-intrusive use of both spaces if school was in session. Figure 14 (roof plan) and this one show that the rooftop gymnasium monitor light wells had their glass block fronts in line with the sidewalls of the exposed gymnasium walls. The 1992 additions brought those walls out so this profile effect is no longer present.

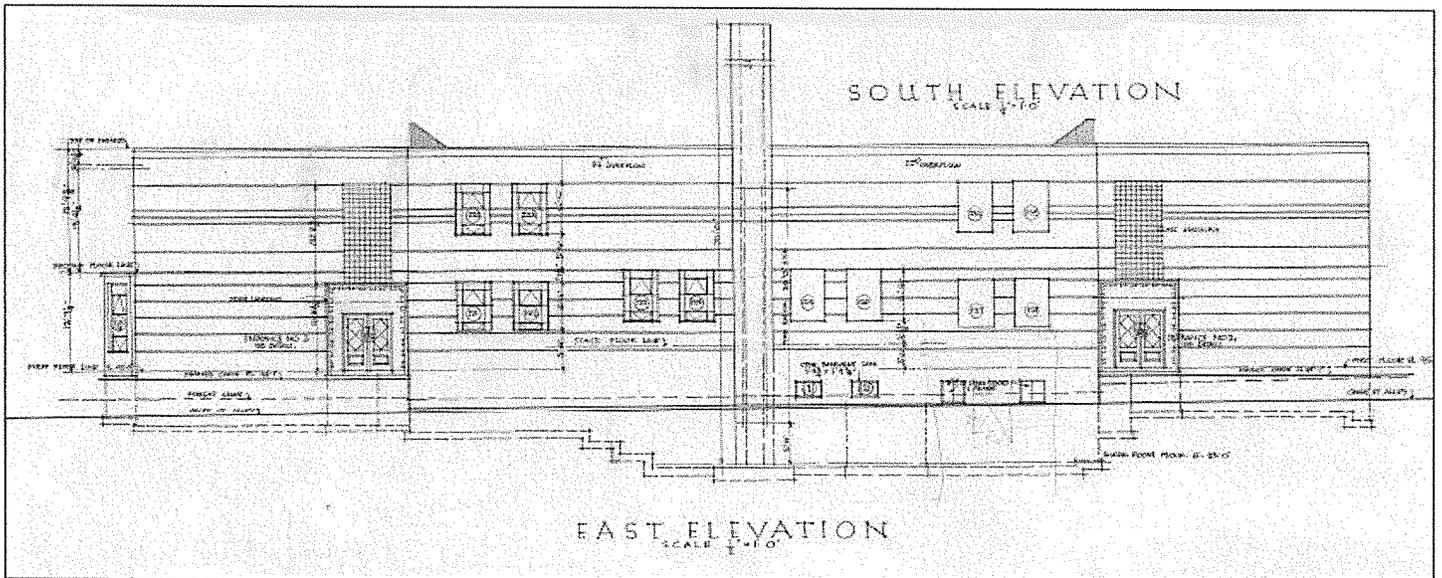


Figure 5: East or rear elevation (original plans, 1938)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

Figure 5 shows the overall profile but also corroborates the use of glass block in the upper level windows for the east entrances.

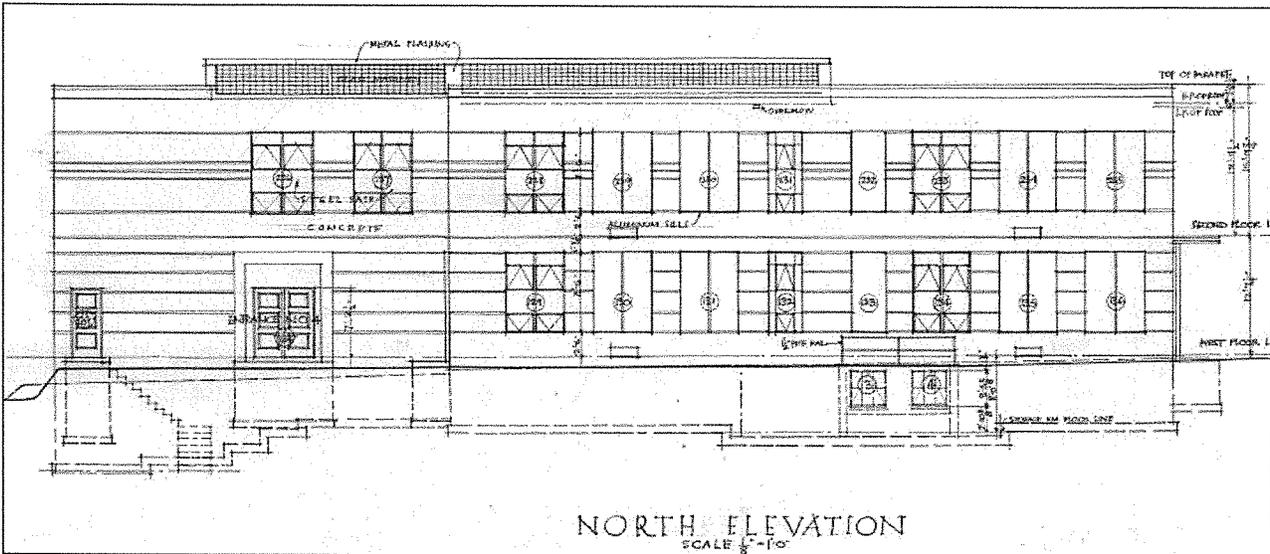
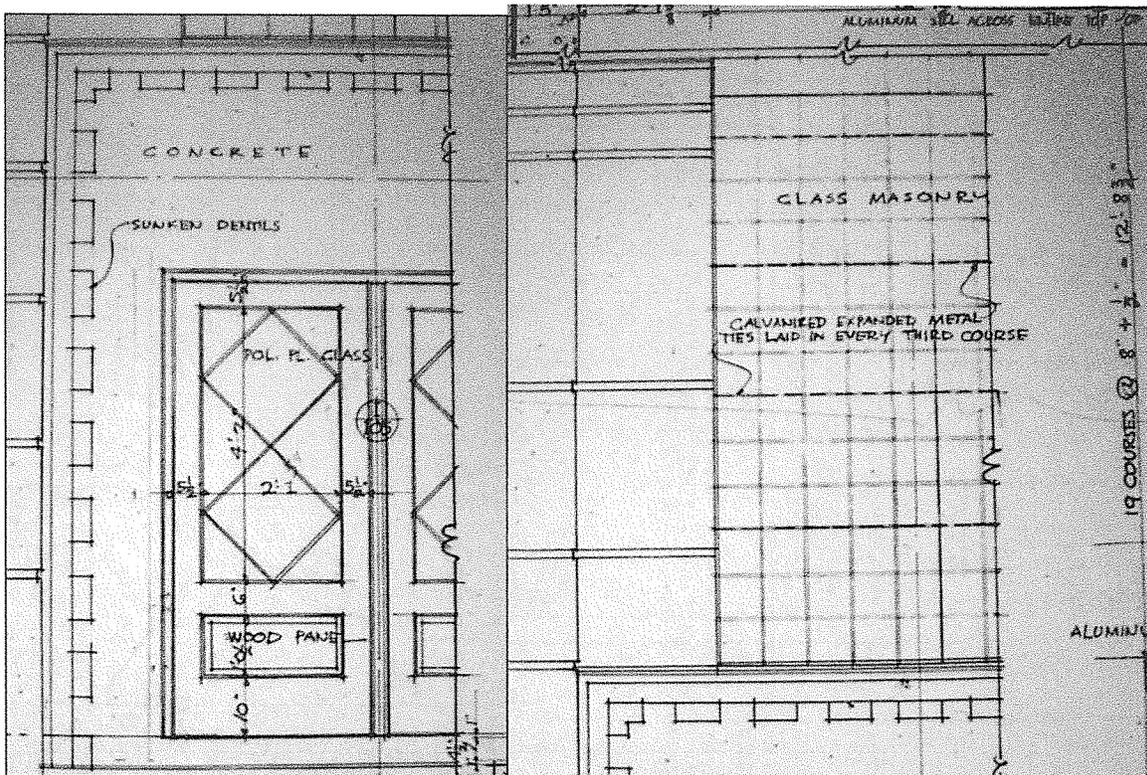


Figure 6: North elevation (original plans, 1938)



Figures 7-8: Door and entry surround details, east entrances (original plans, 1938)

Figure 7 shows the recessed “quoin”-like patterning of the entry surround. These patterns survive and were replicated on the 1992 addition work where necessary. Figure 8 describes the large “glass masonry” window set atop the original east entrances. These necessarily were removed in 1992 when the side halls were extended eastward.

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

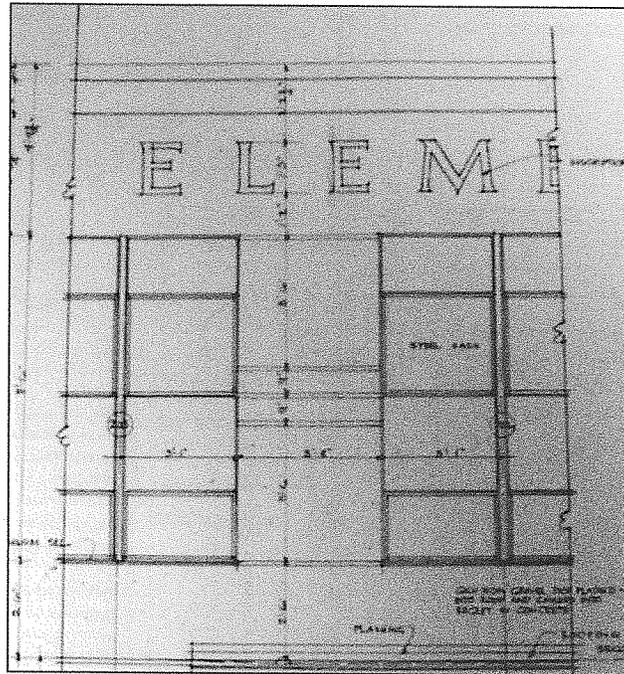


Figure 9: Window details, main façade

Figure 9 shows the sizes of the lights in the exterior walls and implies a hopper function at the third light level. It seems only logical that the lowermost openings were also functional for ventilation. The plans simply note, “steel sash.”

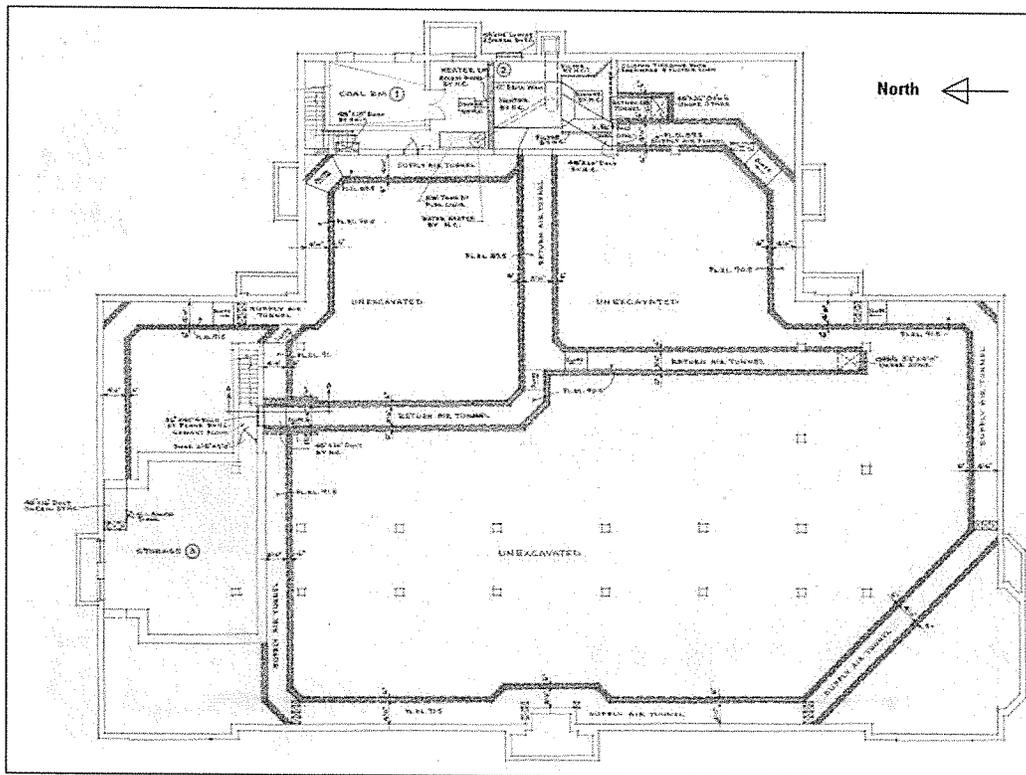


Figure 10: Tunnel plan (original plans, 1938)

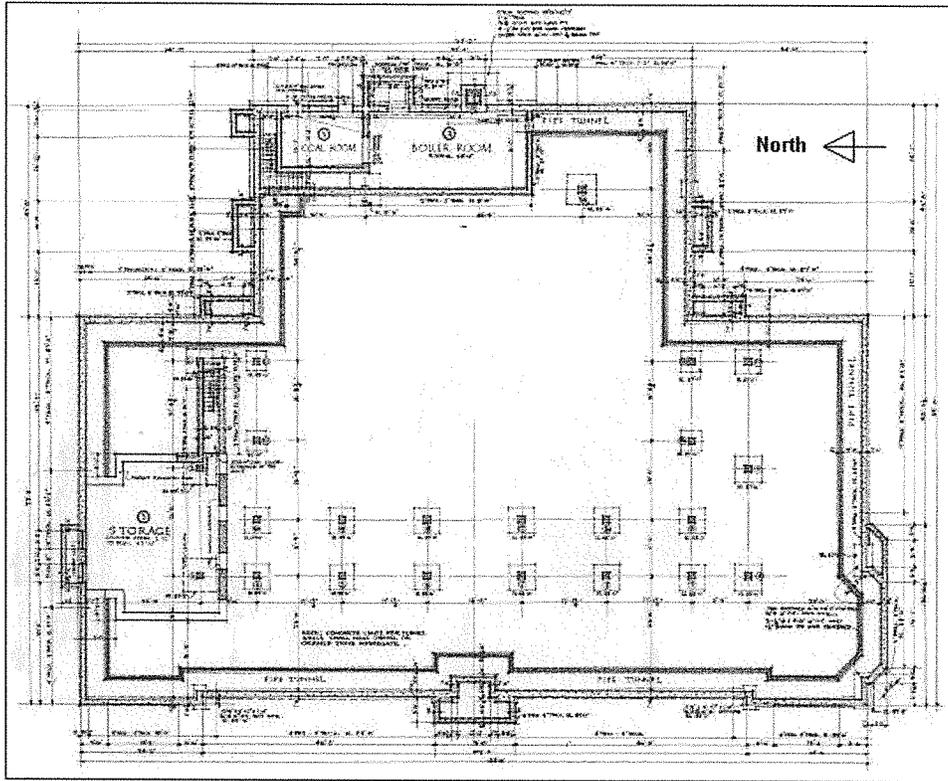


Figure 11: Foundation/footings plan (original plans, 1938)

The perimeter walls are as noted load bearing. The footing pattern in Figure 9 denotes the sidewalls of the hall that encircles the gym.

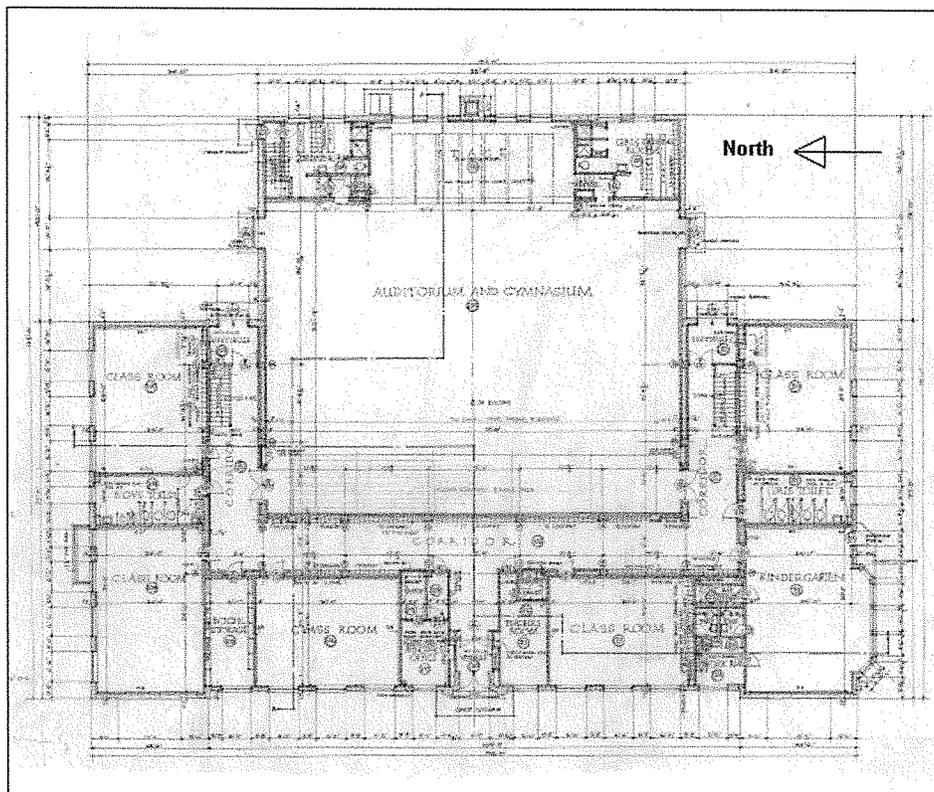


Figure 12: First floor plan (original plans, 1938)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

Figure 12 lays out the “wrap-around” elementary school plan with its perimeter band of classrooms and offices. The main office and teachers’ lounge flank the west entrance. The kindergarten is located in the sunniest corner of the plan where a bay window projects to the south. Interior stairways are at the east ends of each side wing hall. These occupy half of each hallway area. Lockers are massed along both sides of the main west hall. The east wall of that hall is unfenestrated and solid. Gymnasium interior elementary school entries are alongside the expandable bleachers in the northwest and southwest corners of that space. Note that the gym footprint is nearly square, a reflection of its dual usage as an auditorium. The separate side gymnasium doors have projecting canopies and separate stairs to the east of the rear school entrances. Locker rooms flank the stage. Toilets are centered on each side wing.

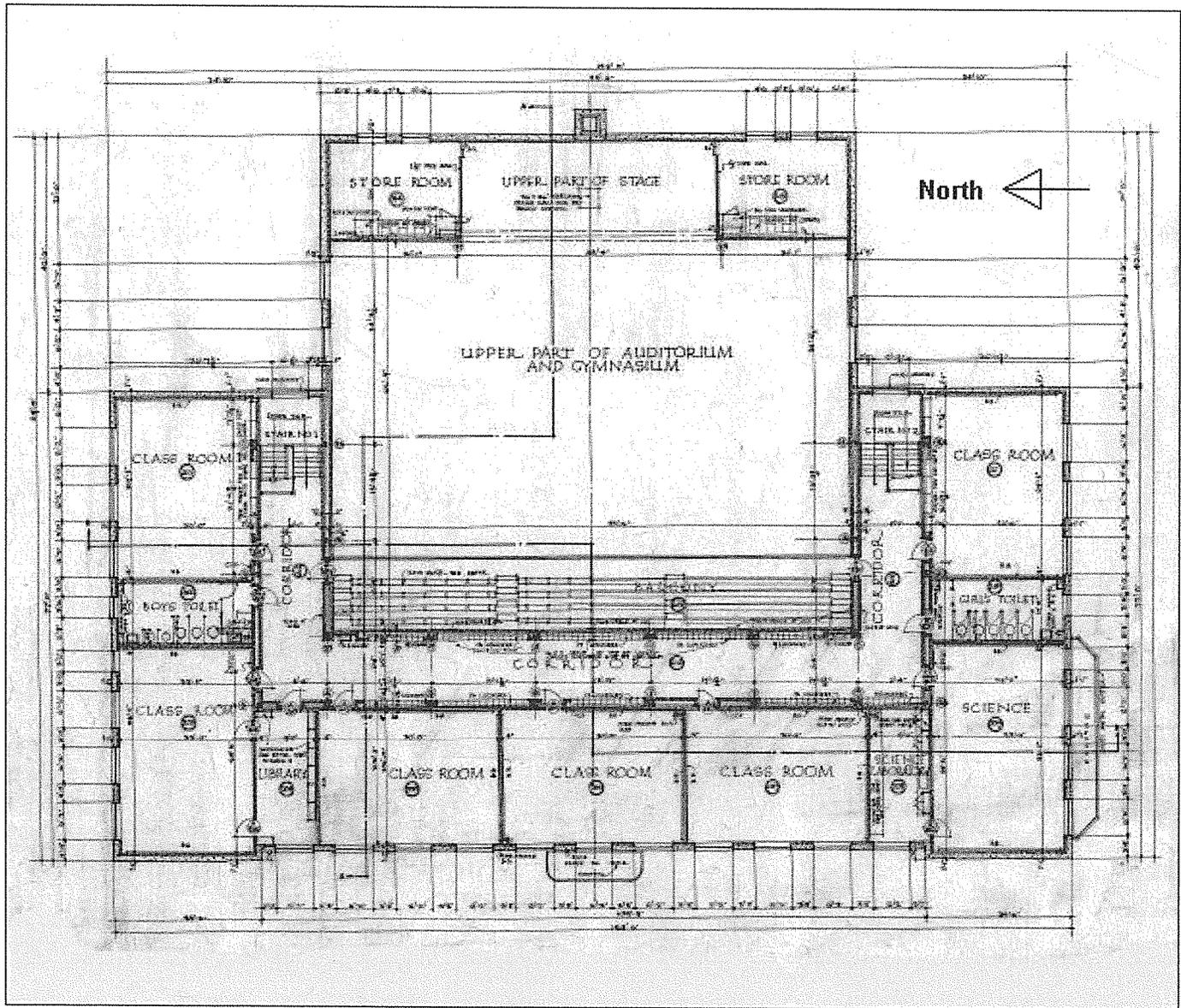


Figure 13: Second floor plan (original plans, 1938)

Figure 13 depicts the upper floor layout where there are seven classrooms. Bathrooms, lockers and stairs are in the same location. The stairs reach a landing and a half-flight of stairs continues to this level. The gymnasium entries at the balcony level where there were fixed bleachers, were reached by means of single door side doors. The library is tucked into the northwest corner, as is a science lab in the southwest corner, adjacent

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

to the science classroom. Note the twin upper level gymnasium windows on each of the sidewalls. Storerooms are above the ground level locker rooms. The roof on the building consisted of concrete over steel trusses. Nine huge welded trusses supported the gymnasium/auditorium roof. Nine huge welded trusses supported the gymnasium/auditorium roof.

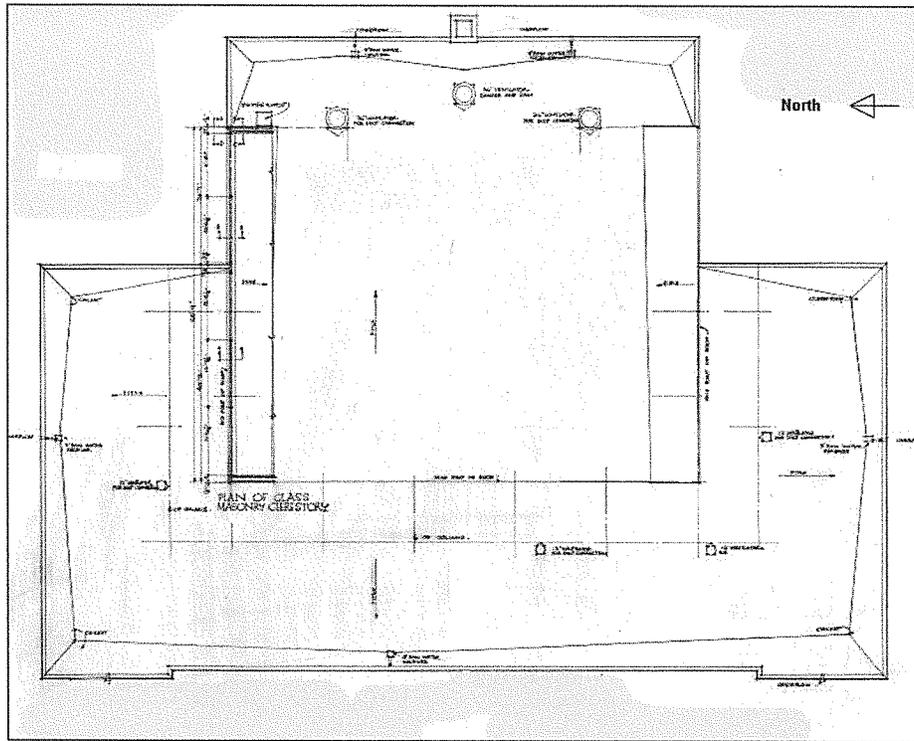


Figure 14: Roof plan (original plans, 1938)

The skylights (21.5 feet by 65 feet 9 inches) vertical glass block walls are set flush with the gymnasium sidewalls, behind the side school entrances as previously noted. There are no rooftop projecting parapet walls so these must have been added for fire safety at a later date. This is an internal drainage plan. All apparent ventilation is located on the east end of the gymnasium roof at this time.

The original heating system was a hot air one.

The Original Building Plan, Interior Details:

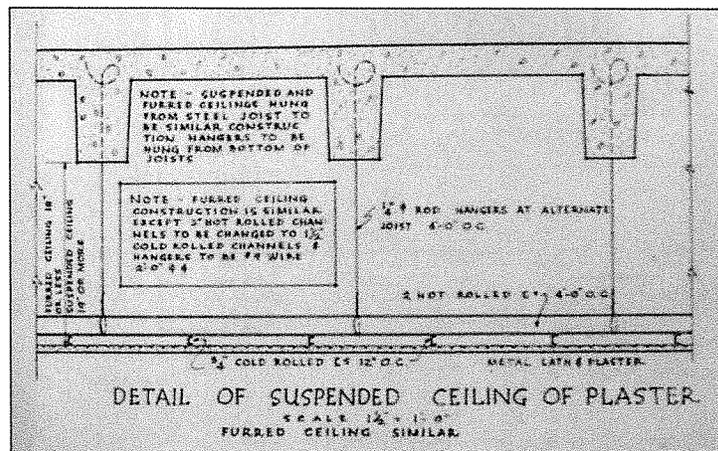


Figure 15: Suspended ceiling profile (original plans, 1938)

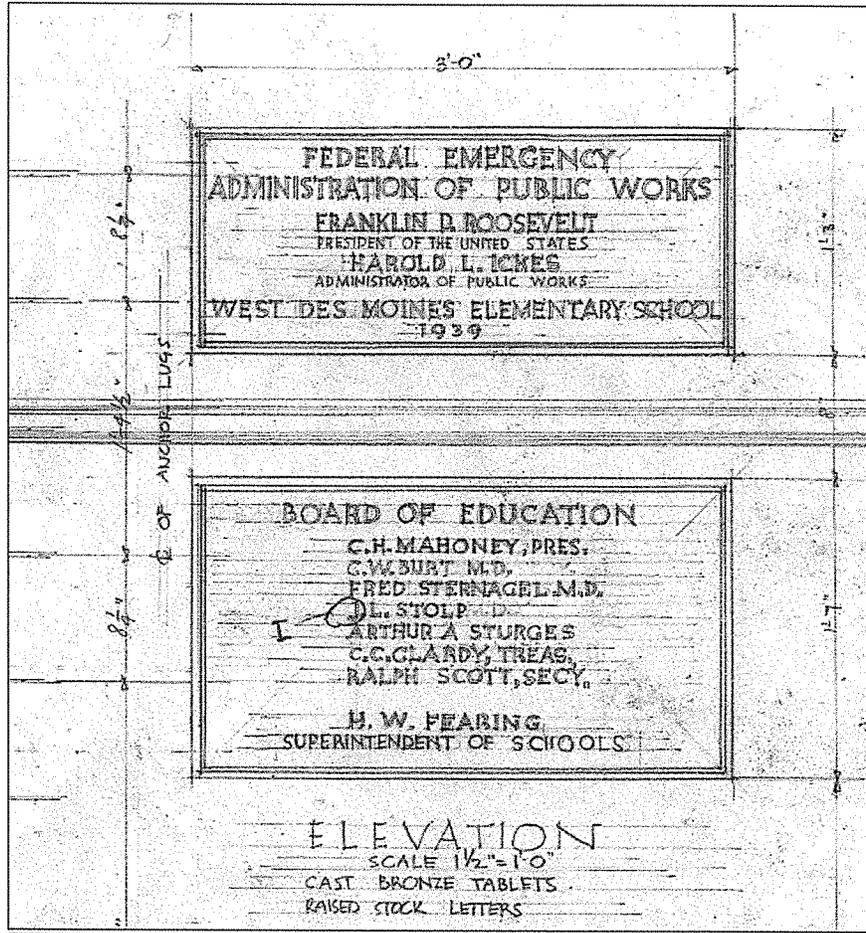


Figure 16: Commemorative plaque drawings (Original Plans, dated May 23, 1939)

An alternative plaque arrangement consisted of only the federal plaque, in enlarged square form and made out of Indiana Limestone, being recessed fully into the wall. The specifications reference a corner stone but none was finally put in place. Figure 16 represents the as-built plaque design and placement.

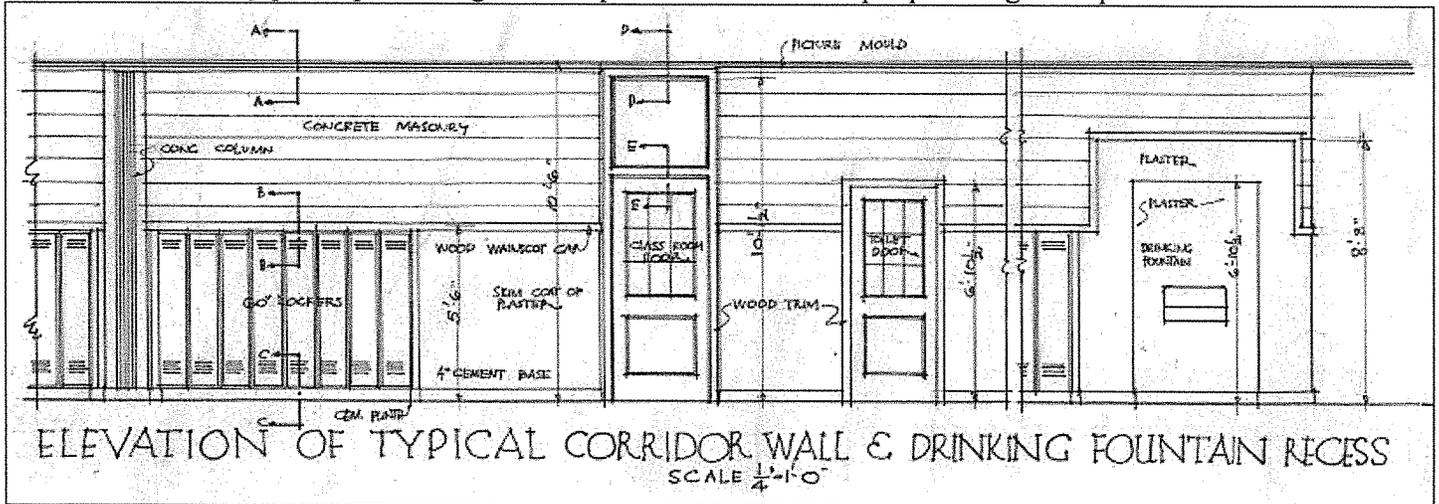


Figure 17: Interior wall profile showing transoms, doors and lockers, also trim work.

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

Figure 17 notes a wainscot cap that ran atop the recessed lockers. Note that picture mold was placed beneath the suspended ceiling. The concrete column detail at the left is descriptive of surviving column interior faces. Finally note the raised plaster surrounds that framed the drinking fountain locations.

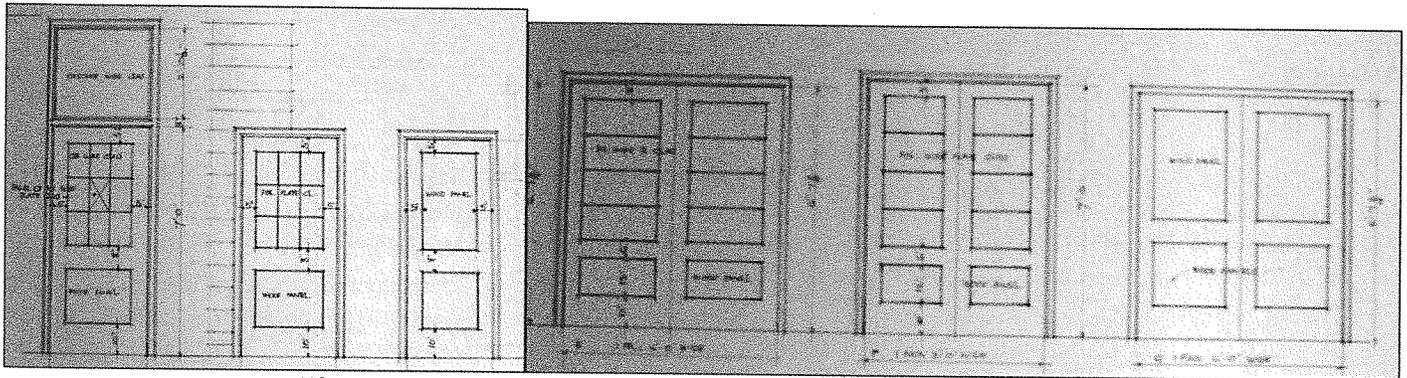


Figure 18: A range of original door types (original plans, 1938)

Alterations:

It would appear that the original building survived in largely original form until the 1992 renovations. They appear to account for most of the substantial changes to the original plans. Typical of schools of its era, the original interior featured extensive wood trim, wood door frames, doors with overhead square transoms, cabinetry and the usual range of finishes. Given its use until 2013, the school interior evolved into what is expected of a modern school interior, which is to say clean lines, few built-ins, modern finishes and cleanable surfaces. One unusual alteration was the return to full-sized exterior windows, a rarity in this type of building. As noted angled bulwarks in each classroom conceal HVAC equipment and the frontages of these build-outs are angled up to the original ceiling level, allowing for fully utilized windows. Another notable change, post-dating the 1980s was the removal of houses from the block, which placed the entire block under school district use. By the 1990s a few houses still remained and a school parking lot occupied the southeast corner of the block. Figure 19, however appears to indicate that all of the houses were finally removed. It does show the southeast corner parking lot. Based on this evidence, it would appear that the school remodeling coincided with the removal of any remaining houses on the block by 1992.

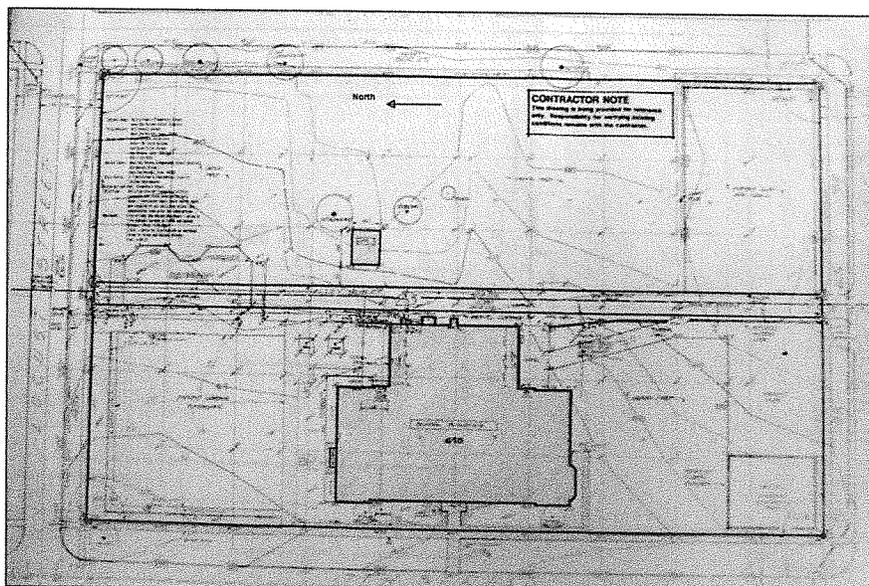


Figure 19: 1992 plat plan (1992 remodeling plans)

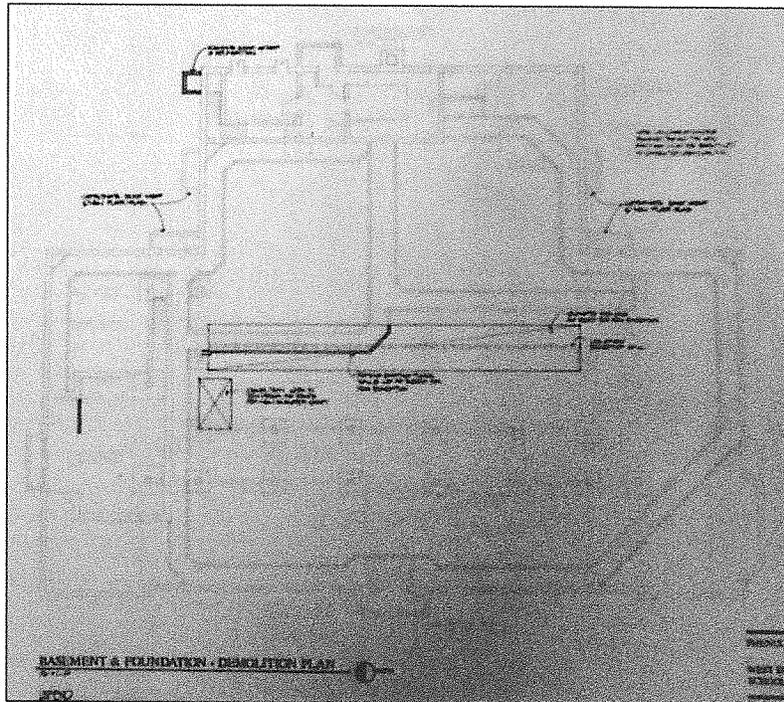


Figure 20: foundation demo plan (1992 remodeling plans)

The major change below grade was the construction of footings for an internal load-bearing wall that intruded into the west part of the gymnasium volume. This concrete block wall contrasts with the tile and painted block walls of the remainder of the gym void.

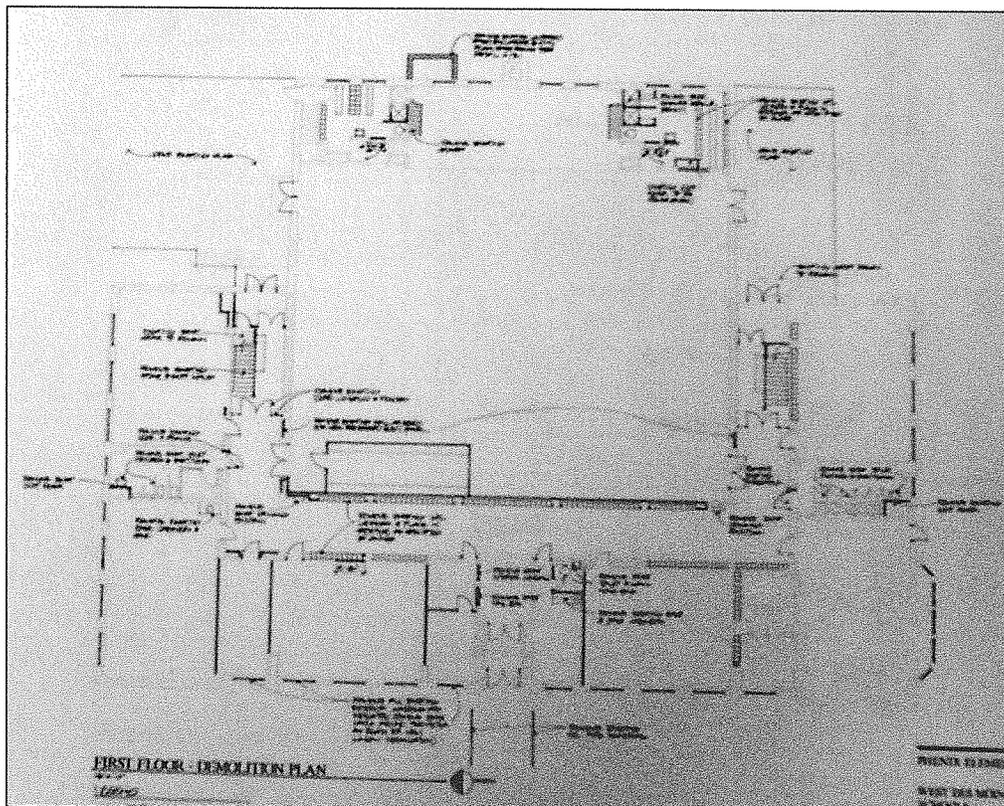


Figure 21: First floor demolition plan, 1992 (1992 remodeling plans)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

First floor demolition (Figure 21) removed the original stairs, the teachers' room south wall and a range of fire doors that had been added in the school hallways. The south locker room was repurposed as a small kitchen. This plan implies that the moveable lower level gym bleachers were gone and that there was a small rectangular storage room that was removed.

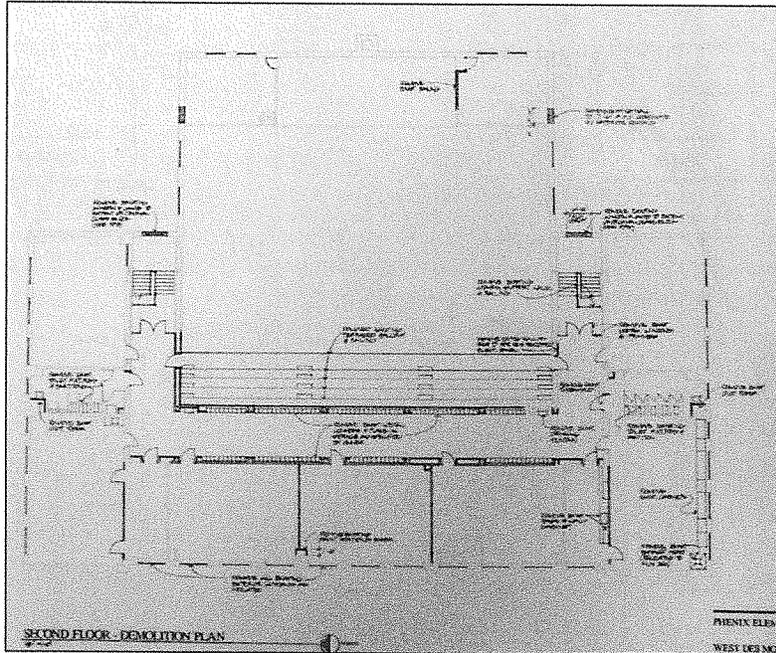


Figure 22: Second floor demolition plan, 1992 (1992 remodeling plans)

The upper story demolition (Figure 22) opened the plan for library use as previously noted, eliminated the lockers in the west hall and removed the upper level fixed gymnasium bleachers. The upper stairs were removed and the toilets were modernized.

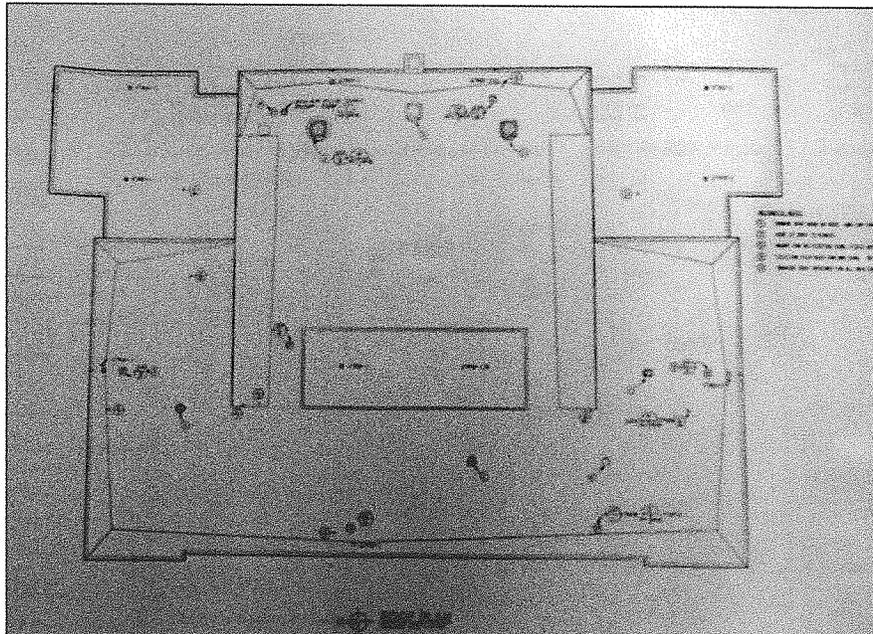


Figure 23: Revised roof plan, 1992 (1992 remodeling plans)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

The roof demolition plan (Figure 23) also fails to show the projecting interior walls so it must be assumed that they were present from the start. The new penthouse is shown (while the large HVAC unit, now centered on its east side is not shown). The three rooftop ventilators were removed.

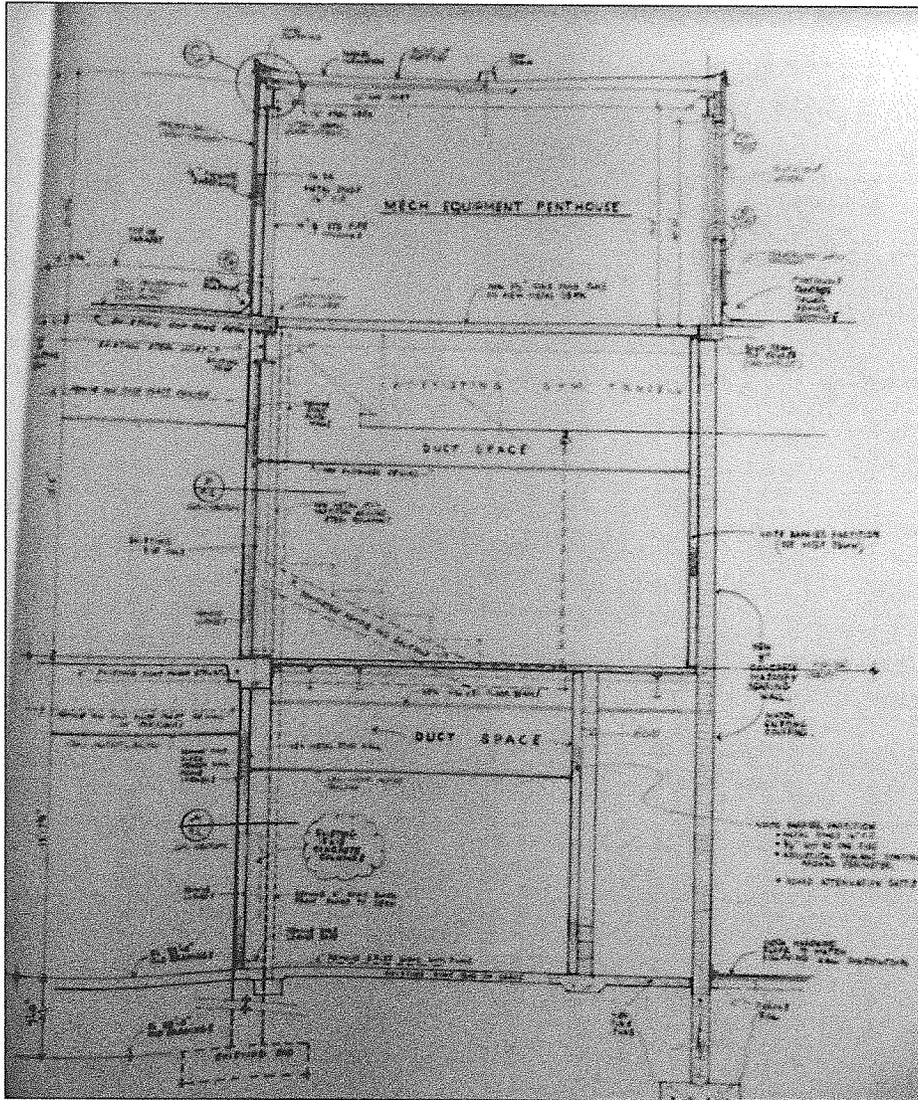
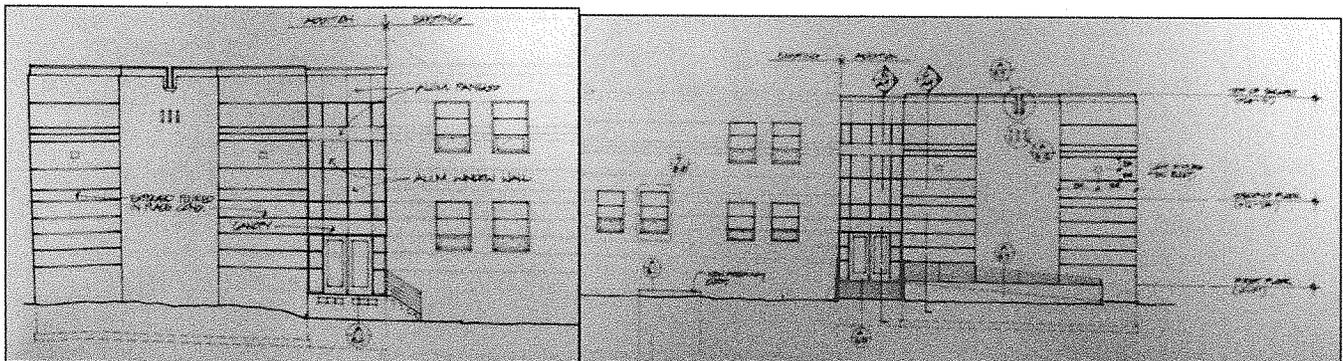
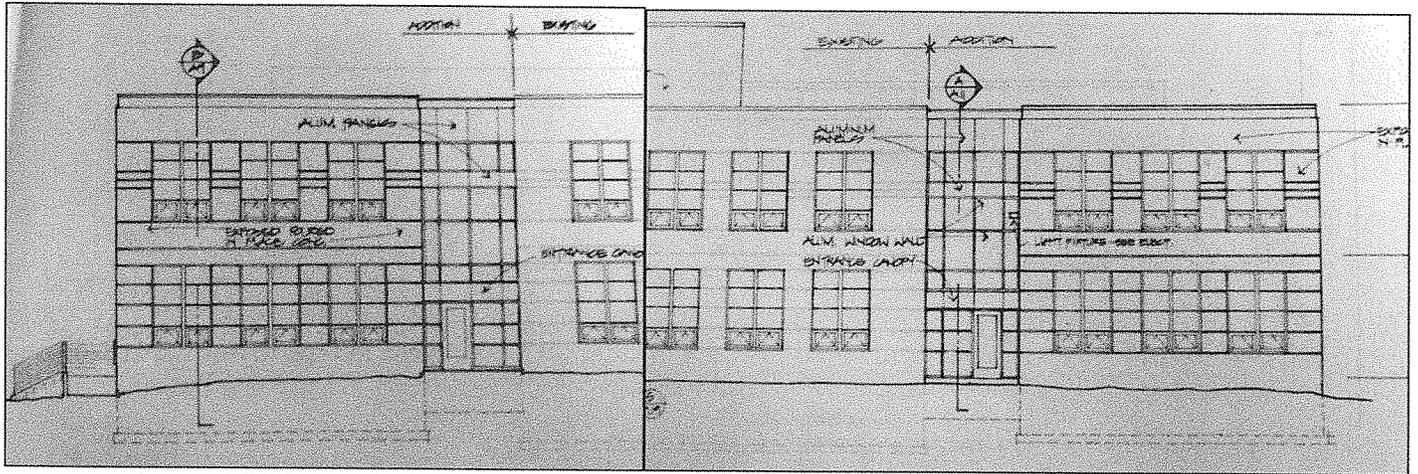


Figure 24: Added support wall for penthouse, profile of removed gym seating along west wall (1992 remodeling plans)



Figures 25-26: East new addition elevations, south end (left) and north end (right) (1992 remodeling plans)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:



Figures 27-28: North (left) and south (right) new addition elevation (1992 remodeling plans)

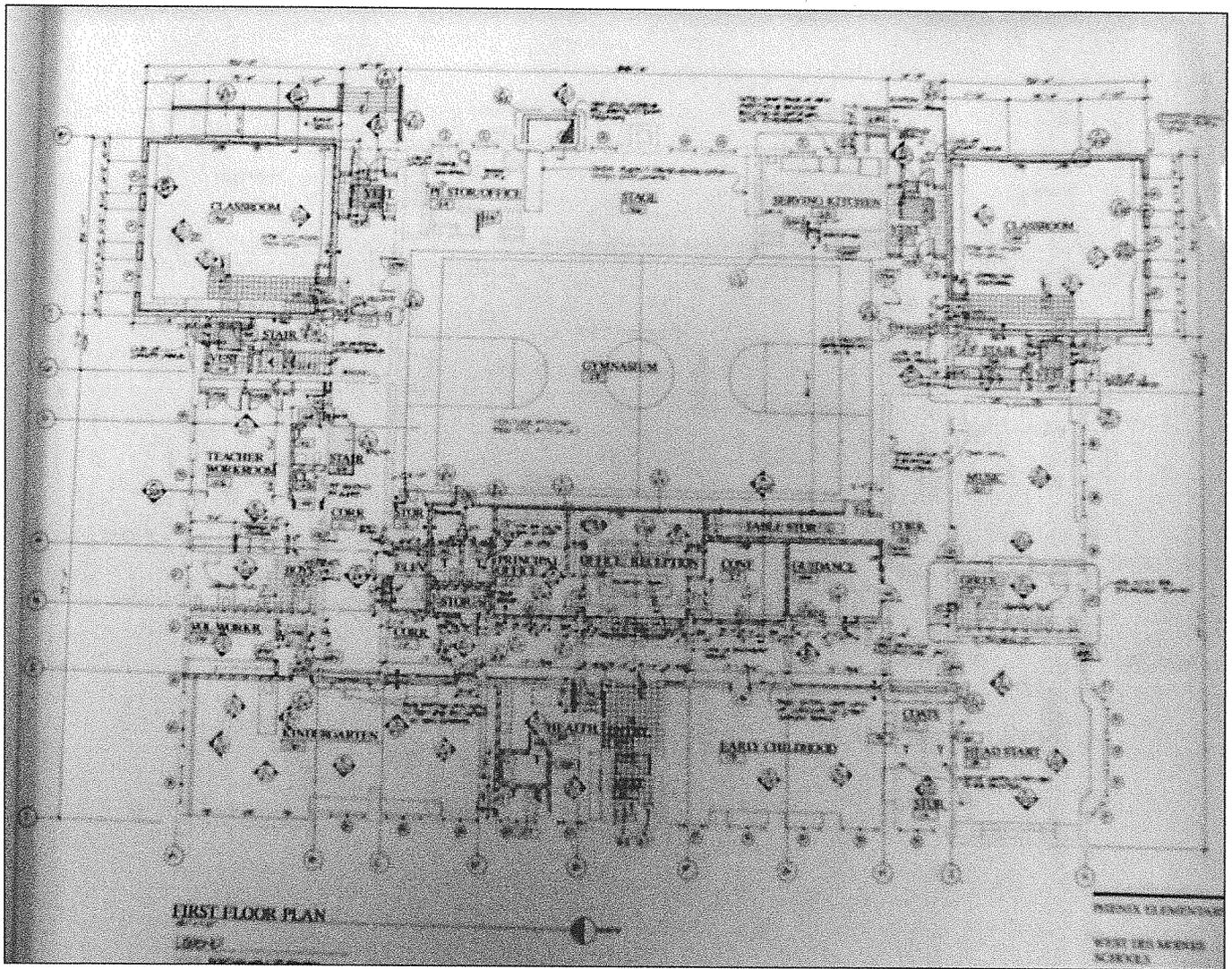


Figure 29: Revised first floor plan (1992 remodeling plans)

The focal point of the remodeling, apart from the new classrooms, entryways and halls, was the construction of a range of rooms to fill the area removed from the gymnasium space.

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

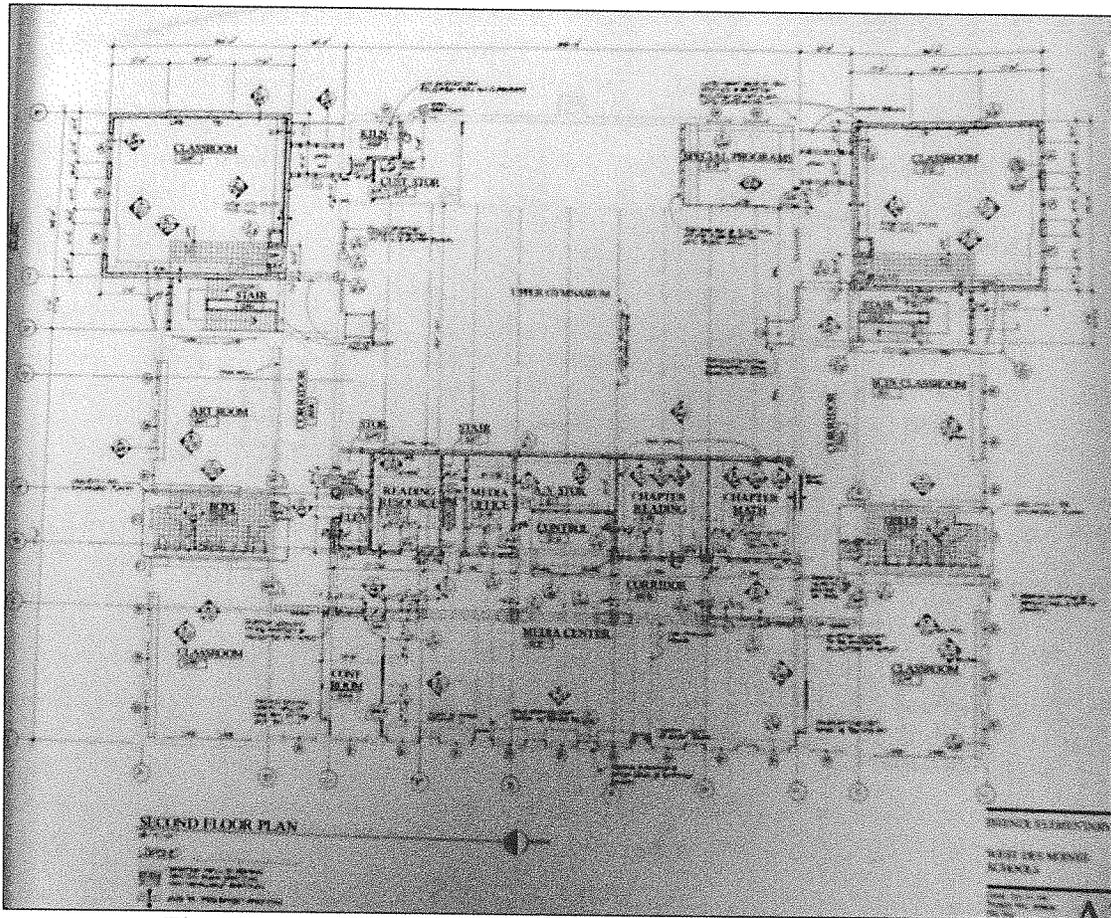


Figure 30: Revised second floor plan (1992 remodeling plans)

Due to the independent governmental authority of the school district, just two building permits were obtained (at least in surviving local building inspection and permitting records). The 1992 work was valued at \$1,526,663. The general contractor was Betts and Beer Construction Company of Adair, Iowa. The plumbing and heating contractor was Ed Sweeney Mechanical of Grainger, Iowa. The electrical contractor was Edgewell Electric Company of Des Moines. Architects were RDG Planning and Design of Des Moines.

The second building permit added cabinetry and a small bathroom to the classroom just west of the south stairway. The work was valued at \$25,700 and the contractor was Bergstrom Construction Company. The room was converted as a Drake University Head Start program site.

Integrity Evaluation:

This building has a good level of historical integrity. School buildings as noted in the alterations section routinely lose their interior detailing and demising walls are often altered. Windows are normally shortened in response to the addition of lower dropped ceilings and original windows simply don't survive. Buildings commonly gain additions as well. The subject school has undergone a range of these changes. Salient positive points relative to integrity are the survival of its original massing, exterior cladding, profile, window dimensions, hall profiles, interior walls and cladding, chimney, structural system and the majority of the gym/auditorium interior. The additions were constructed with unusual sensitivity, being structurally separate from the original building footprint, and executed in matching materials, design and massing. Full-height metal and glass entries are recessed between the original building and each new section and nicely separate the old and new as transition points. Negative aspects of integrity are the loss of upper level classroom spaces due to

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

the opening of the plan, the addition of offices on both levels of the area removed from the gymnasium/auditorium void, the loss of interior trim work, original cabinetry and doors, the loss of original locker rows and their distinctive visual cadences, and the reduction of ceiling height due to bulwarked ceilings. The rooftop mechanicals penthouse (1992) is not visible from the ground level. The loss of setting is an arguable point and it represents a change that is already largely lost to memory. The historical integrity of the school setting however was the presence of houses to the south and east of the school, a reality that remained intact as late as the 1980s.

### Historic Character Defining Elements:

Primary: Original building footprint, massing (including roof monitors and chimney), materials (concrete and concrete block, steel trusses), stylistic components (main entry, horizontal patterning, side bay and entry), hall dimensions and layout, surviving classroom and other demising walls, interior wall surfaces, gym interior void and surviving side and east walls with appurtenances, stage including proscenium, wood floor and access stairs, under-stage chair storage carts, gym floor, interior concrete ornament in doorways and transition points and exterior window dimensions.

Secondary: East wall hoist for cinder removal, north basement stair, sole surviving wood cabinets and trim work.

The building retains integrity of location by virtue of its not having been moved.

Integrity of design is strongly retained in terms of its exterior massing, style and ornament. The additions as noted while designed to blend with the original school, were designed and built so as to be visually distinct.

Integrity of setting is retained to the degree that the school remains surrounded by open ground and the historical north playground area remains in place. As noted, homes surrounded the school to the south and east on the same block until relatively recently. Its historical setting was originally more directly integrated into its immediate residential neighborhood given the presence of these houses and the building's view sheds would have been different. For example the building would likely have been centered on the block had the entire block been available as a building site in 1938.

Integrity of materials is strong with respect to the cladding materials, which are one and the same as the structural materials. The structural system, hall layouts and a large proportion of the original classrooms remain so as meet this measure. The restored wood gym floor and wood stage are also central to this measure of integrity given the expected modernization of the school interior. The Haylite light-weight concrete block used in the interior walls is also key to this measure.

Integrity of workmanship is retained by virtue of the exterior shell and its ornamentation, interior partition walls (particularly their mix of plaster and painted exposed block), interior concrete ornamentation (vertical fluting, entry door surround ornamentation, the gym and stage areas all reflect the original workmanship of the building.

Integrity of feeling is particularly strong based upon the Moderne style and the use of cast-in-place concrete perimeter walls. The streamlined bay and canopy components and the horizontal patterning of the otherwise plainly wrought exterior frontages reflect their point of origin, that being a redefinition of the city's school program in the later years of the Great Depression. Feeling is also imparted by the implied local-federal partnership (PWA) and a design that was influenced by that national building program.

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

Feeling of association is based on a school that was used successfully (and without substantial change for most of that history) until 2013. Despite its interior modernization, the surviving building attests to the evolution of a very successful school design that respected much of the original design, took pains to replicate same and to even reverse the downsizing of windows, when the building was finally expanded and updated in 1992.

### Rehabilitation Plan:

The City of West Des Moines has purchased the former school with the intention of using the gymnasium/auditorium for community purposes. Community Housing Initiative will purchase the remainder the building and will rehabilitate it for use as residential housing.

### **8. Areas of Significance:**

The West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School is individually National Register of Historic Places eligible on the local level on the basis of its architectural merit (Criterion C) and its historical role in the maturation of West Des Moines' public school system and the role that the Federal Works Progress Administration played in that process, 1938-39. Architecturally the school is an excellent and well preserved example of the Moderne style, and an example that merits particular interest given its use of a concrete exterior wall system (and a Haylite lightweight ceramic block for its interior walls in lieu of regular concrete blocks) and an unusual combination plan that combined a separate gymnasium/auditorium with an elementary school. Historically this school is associated with the context of Education. Its completion allowed the school district to more efficiently consolidate two much older elementary schools with a modern, fireproof and well ventilated and heated facility (and one with a larger playground). The school then served as the city's sole grade school from 1939 until 1951. This makes it the oldest extant grade school building in West Des Moines. The original name, "West Des Moines Elementary School" was an important symbol of a newly-rechristened former railroad town that struggled in the face of the Great Depression to repurpose itself economically. As a part of this struggle for survival, and driven by the push by the local school-based Mothers' Clubs, the city turned to the federal government to accomplish what it could not, by itself. The Federal Works Progress Administration matched funding made its construction possible and the construction of this school closely followed the re-naming of the city (1938) from Valley Junction to West Des Moines, and the city's embarking on what was to become a period of population and territorial expansion that continues to the present day. The period of significance is 1939-1965. Significant dates are 1939, the year the school was completed and went into service, 1955, the year that the building was renamed to honor Nellie Amanda Phenix (1890-1972), a former student-teacher and principal,

The school was designed by the notable Des Moines architectural firm of Proudfoot, Rawson, Brooks and Borg. It appears that this design commission was an important financial coup for the struggling firm. It is also possible that the school's design and its expression in concrete represent innovative talent on the part of active partners Elmer Borg and J. Wilson Brooks, as well as an important Iowa WPA school design based on its style, use of concrete and the mixed-use plan. These potential significant associations have yet to be explored and proven and lie beyond the necessary or reasonable purposes of this submission.

### Valley Junction Becomes West Des Moines:

Valley Junction as the name implies had its origin in 1893 as a railroad division point, the line being the Rock Island Railroad. The rail facilities abruptly abandoned the town in 1935 and the community was severely challenged in the depths of the Great Depression to transform itself. In the face of at least one bank failure this

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

was accomplished over the next three years and success was finally symbolized by a name change, made effective by plebiscite, January 1, 1938. The water tank on the hill north of the high school was famously reworded “West Des Moines.” The question of a name change was a hotly debated one; one fear being that the name change would somehow facilitate annexation by Des Moines, the immediate eastern neighbor. One reason to fear annexation and ironically one that the fledgling community would use to its advantage, was the fear that the school buildings and other public buildings represented attractive plums to be seized without any real cost (undated newspaper clipping titled “What Des Moines Would Acquire by Annexing Valley Junction,” Des Moines Public Library Clippings File, the photo set included all of the local schools).

One of the attractions of Valley Junction as of the mid-1930s was a combination of low or even no local taxes (save for school taxes). The Des Moines *Tribune* lauded two years with no municipal taxes “Operates Within Income For Second Year: No City Taxes) at the end of July 1938. The cited budgets covered 1938-1939, and 1939-1940. One revenue source was that of a plentiful water supply, presumably sold to other cities. This fact and the proximity of the city made it an attractive residential location, with its residents commuting to Des Moines for work (Des Moines *Tribune*, July 22, 1938).

These factors (bolstered by the availability of federal assistance) set the stage for the improvement of the school district and the city stabilized, and then following World War II, began what became a very successful westward and northern expansion using annexation. Among the prizes of these territorial conquests were various school buildings (The City of Clive alone escaped this fate by a consolidation of their school districts in 1962). A good summation of the success of the new-rechristened community appeared in the *Express* at the end of 1939:

### **You Bet We've Got A Good Town!**

This writer was talking with a Des Moines business man Tuesday, who happens to be connected with the automotive industry and he made the following comment.

“You know, when they moved the shops from West Des Moines I really thought that things would ‘fold up’ out there—you know, empty houses and all that sort of thing. Instead, it seems like you get more pep out there every day, new homes going up, business good and apparently you haven't got an empty house in town.”

He went on to speak glowingly of the conditions out here and the general fine opinion in which West Des Moines is held by outside residents.

Well, we agree with him. Without denying or disguising the fact that the removal of the shops was a staggering blow, we are proud to point out that the community took it “on the chin” and has bounced back to a point where not many communities in Iowa can boast of a finer or more progressive city.

The absence of city taxes, good schools, a good water supply and progressive business firms, are all factors which have contributed to the development of the city as a residential and small factory site.

This copy of the *Express*, going out to some 1,500 additional homes this week, is intended to convey from West Des Moines a message of cheer and optimism. We invite you to make this city your home or your trading point – or both. You will be welcome here. And you will find few cities with a finer or more likeable group of businessmen and civic organizations than you will find in West Des Moines—the ‘friendly city’ (West Des Moines *Express*, December 14, 1939).

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

Early School District History:

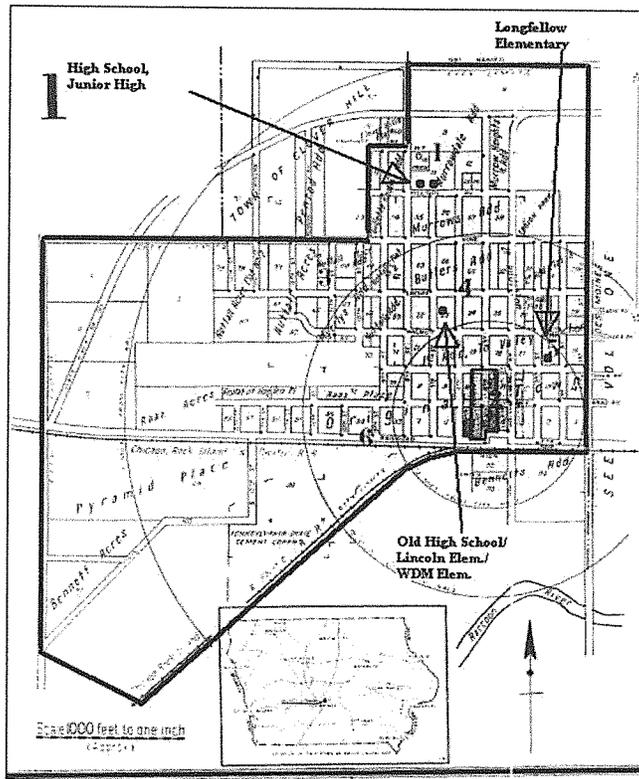


Figure 31: West Des Moines as of 1937 (1937 Sanborn Map)

Figure 31 locates the four buildings that were serving the local school district as of 1937, the point in time that just predated the planning and construction of the subject school building. The curiously shaped municipal boundary reflected the original inclusion of what had been the extensive railroad yards to the southwest of the town. The construction of the new school predated all of the many subsequent annexations that extended the renamed city to the west and north. The following general timeline offers a concise history of the West Des Moines School District. Key events relative to the subject school are bolded:

**Valley Junction/West Des Moines School District Historical Timeline:**

- **1893** – April the district was established as the Valley Junction Independent School District
- **1894** – March the bond issue approved for \$5,000 to build two schools – one in Walnut Hill (52nd and Grand) and one in Valley Junction
- **1895** – October the first high school opens in Valley Junction at current Phenix Elementary site
- **1900** – Space needs grew and Longfellow Grade School was built at Third and Elm
- **1907** – Walnut Hill school is switched to Des Moines School District
- **1916** – \$70,000 bond issue for a new high school was voted down, but a \$50,000 bond issue was approved two months later
- **1917** - September the new high school opens at 8th and Hillside
- **1923** – A junior high building was built just east of the current high school
- **1938** – The district changed its name to the West Des Moines Independent School District and added two new buildings – a **new elementary at the old high school site** and a stadium north of the high school

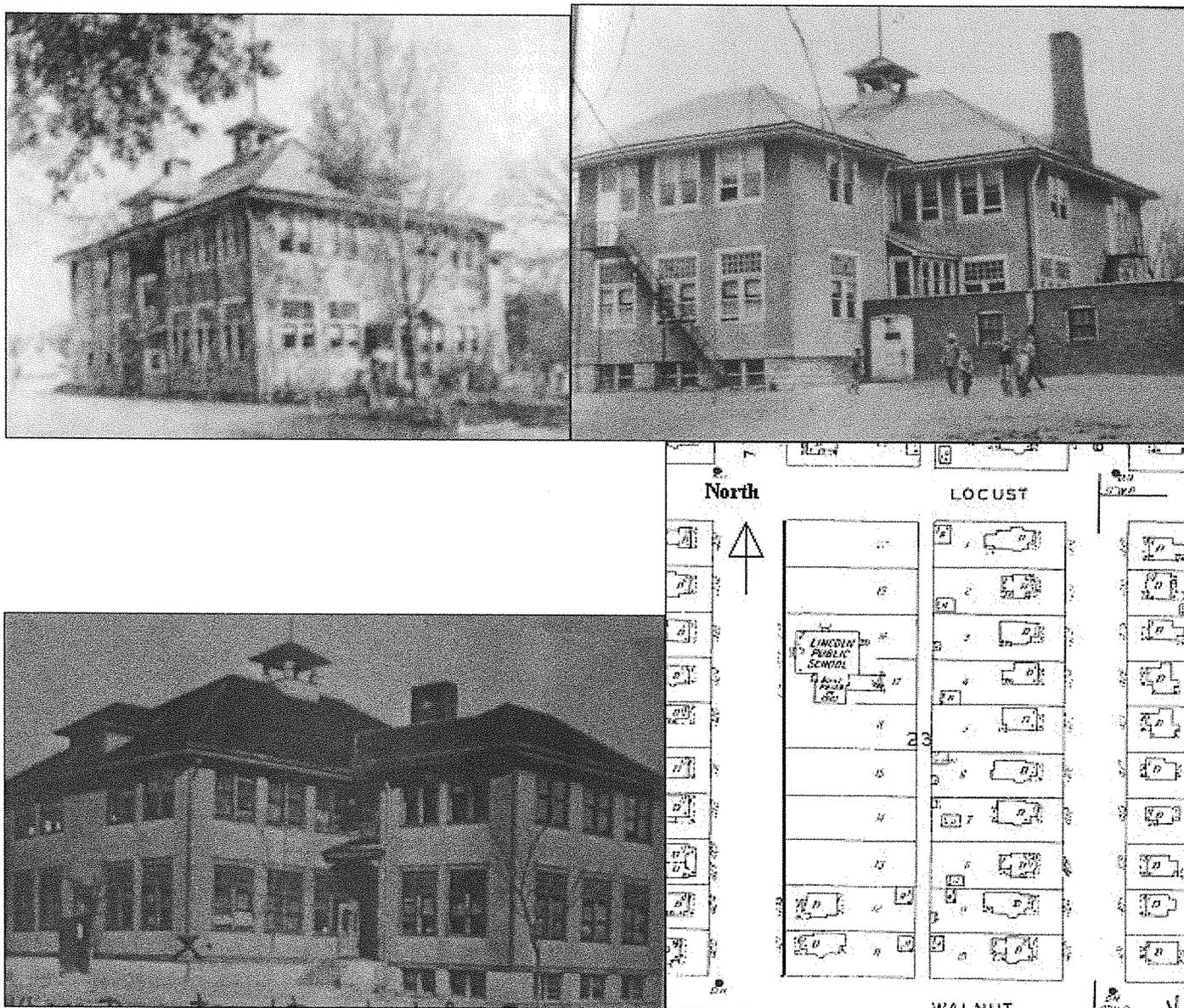
## Valley Junction/West Des Moines School District Historical Timeline:

- **1938** – In the fall the old high school is torn down to build the new elementary school named **West Des Moines Elementary**
- **1939** – May 24 the football stadium dedicated and in the fall Longfellow was vacated and sold in 1940. **Students were moved to Phenix Elementary.**
- **1951** – Clover Hills Elementary opens at 15th and Vine
- **1954-57** – The district incorporated several areas, including Walnut Township, Clegg Park, sections of Dallas County and the Pleasant Valley and Plainview districts.
- **1955** – **December the West Des Moines Elementary is renamed Nellie Phenix Elementary School to honor a former student, teacher and principal**
- **1956** – A bond issue for \$408,000 provided funds to build Fairmeadows and Clegg Park Elementaries
- **1958** – Clegg Park and Fairmeadows open
- **1958-59** – The district's budget passes \$1 million for the first time
- **1960** - A new junior high is built at 16th and Vine and named Stilwell Junior High in honor of former school board president Elbert H. Stilwell
- **1962** – 38 acres of farmland purchased at 35th and Ashworth for \$116,136 to become Valley High School. Construction was completed in four phases from 1963-70.
- **1962** The West Des Moines district merged with the Clive school district, adding Clive and Crestview Elementaries. Clive Elementary was the site of the first experimental hot lunch program in Iowa in 1932.
- **1965** – Valley opens, but houses only a ninth grade class and two sixth grade classes from Fairmeadows
- **1967** - Sophomores, juniors and seniors move into Valley High School and in October Western Hills Elementary opens
- **1970** – Clover Hills Elementary renamed Rex Mathes in honor of the school's first principal
- **1971** – Valley becomes a four-year high school. The old high school becomes a junior high and is renamed Hillside Junior High
- **1977** – November Crossroads Park Elementary opens and Indian Hills Junior High opens with students and parents helping move equipment and supplies from Hillside Junior High
- **1990** – Fall Westridge Elementary opens and same year residents passed a \$29.7 million bond issue, which was the largest ever in Iowa, to construct a new school and upgrade existing facilities
- **1992** – Jordan Creek Elementary opens, **Phenix Elementary School is substantially remodeled.**
- **1995** - The Learning Resource Center is opened and Walnut Creek Campus, the district's alternative high school, opens in the previous district office on 5th Street. Walnut Creek is eventually is moved to a renovated church next to the stadium on 8th Street
- **1997** - In the fall Valley Southwoods Freshman High School opens to ease crowding at Valley High school. The idea of turning the WDMCS into a two high school district was not favored by the community.
- **2000-11** – Clegg Park Elementary is used as a swing school. Several elementary schools in the district took turns moving staff and students into the building for a year while renovations were made at their building.
- **2001** – Hillside Junior High had been torn down before the stadium was demolished in 2001. Studies showed it would be more cost effective to reinvest in the area and rebuild as a new elementary to accommodate students from Rex Mathes and Clegg Park, which also needed costly improvements.
- **2002** – Fall Valley Stadium opens
- **2004** – August Hillside Elementary opens at the site of the old stadium
- **2012** – Clegg Park Elementary is renovated and opened as the new Walnut Creek Campus.
- **2013** – **Phenix Elementary School is closed.**

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

(<http://www.wdmcs.org/district/our-history>; Historic information from 1893 to 1992 taken from “West Des Moines: From Railroads to Crossroads”)

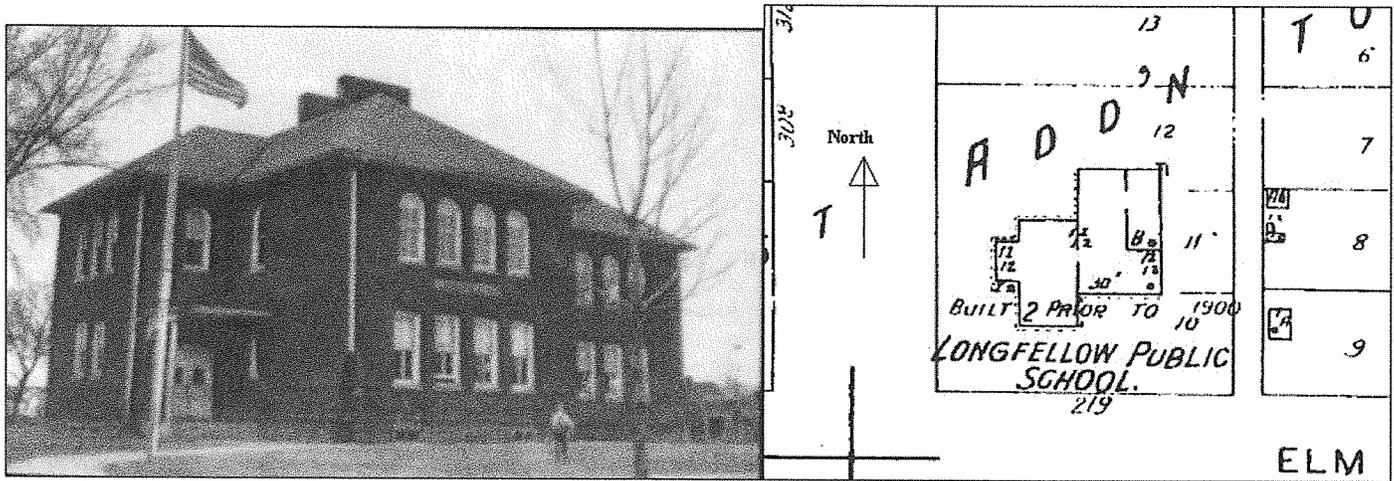
Pending the location of pre-1939 West Des Moines Express copies and West Des Moines School District board minutes, the origins of the subject school remain undocumented. What is known is that by mid-1938 the school board was in a position to apply for federal assistance to build a replacement elementary school and that this school, unusual for its time, represented the consolidation of two existing grade schools to a single location. Thus the new building became the city’s sole grade school and served in that capacity until 1951-52. Thus it is the earliest surviving city grade school and the first modern grade school as well (refer to the Public Works Administration, below).



Figures 32-35: Combination grade and high school (1894-95), later called Lincoln Elementary School, views southeast, northwest and northeast respectively and 1937 Sanborn Map.

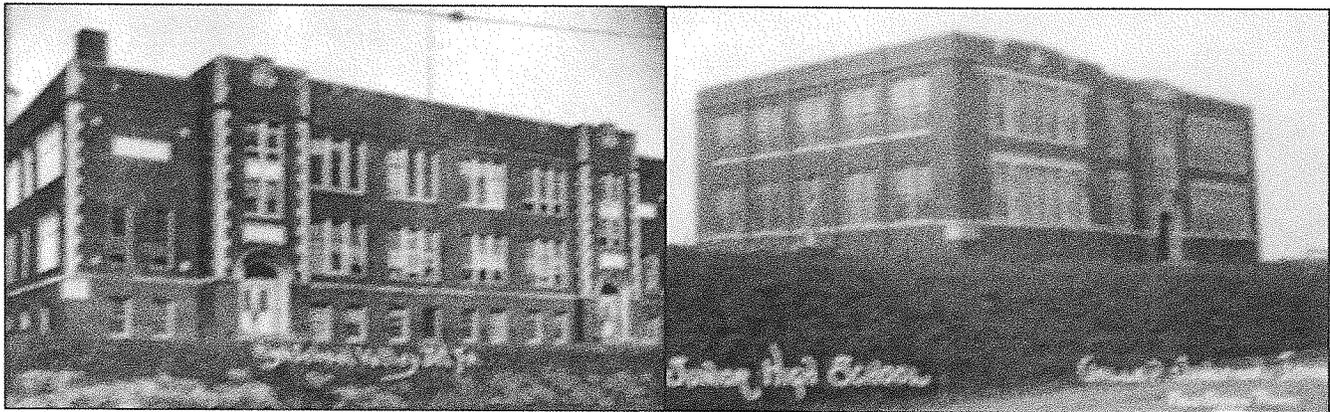
West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

This building was the original Valley Junction school building, with the addition of a high school program on the second floor beginning in 1895. Built in three phases, this building was removed to make room for the subject building in the fall of 1938.



Figures 36-37: Longfellow Elementary School (1900), view northeast, at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Elm streets (non-extant)

Longfellow was Valley Junction's second school building. It closed in 1939 when the subject school was opened. It then served as a casket factory (1949 Sanborn Map).



Figures 38-39: The high school (1917) and junior high (1923) fronted south onto Hillside Street in this order

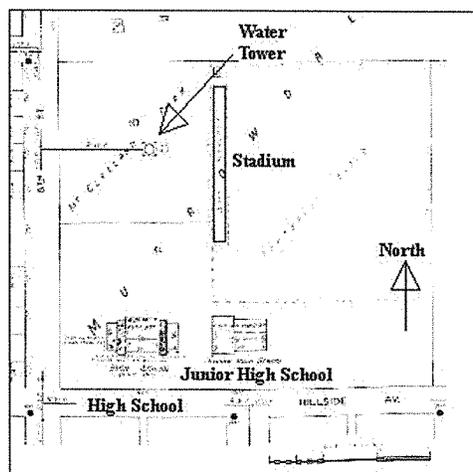


Figure 40: The high school, junior high school and stadium complex (1941 Sanborn Map)

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

The Public Works Administration Program (“PWA”):

The federal Public Works Administration was in its fifth year of operation by mid-1938 when it for the inaugurated another round of “non-federal” shared-cost local projects. States and municipalities would pay 55 percent of the total cost, with the remainder being borne by the federal government. This new round of applications prioritized schools, waterworks and sewer projects. The response was substantial. By late June Iowa newspapers inventoried the state’s applications and these included one for West Des Moines, for \$70,000, presumably a combination of two projects, a new elementary school and a new high school stadium. By early August the school component with a federal match of \$48,272, had been awarded (*Muscatine Journal & News Tribune*, June 23, 1938; *Emmetsburg Reporter*, August 4, 1938; *Des Moines Tribune*, July 27, 1938).

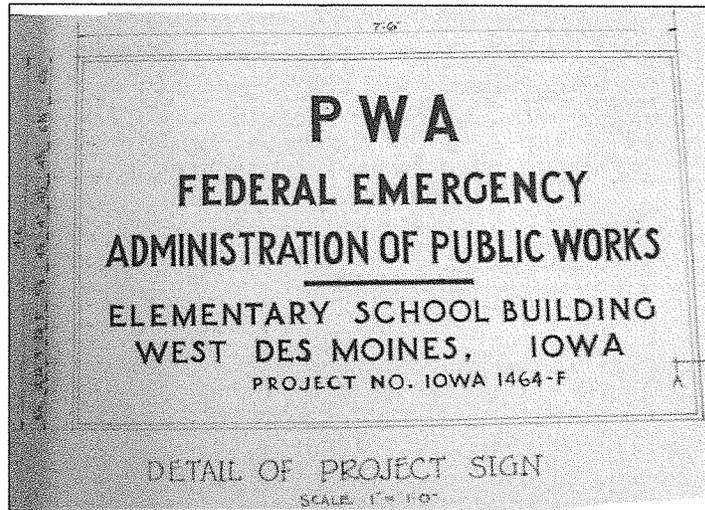


Figure 41: This yard sign made the public aware of the partial federal funding (original plans)

A New Elementary School Building:

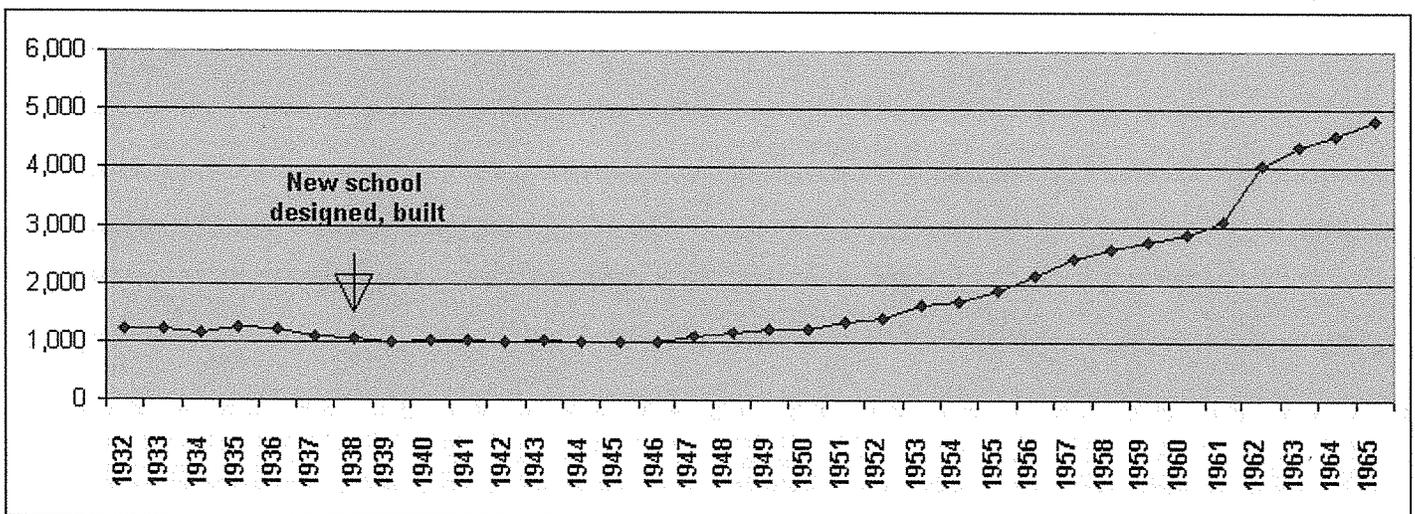


Chart 1: Valley Junction/West Des Moines School Registration, 1932-65 (Frederickson)

Chart 1 explains several fundamental points relative to the need for a new elementary school building. It wasn't driven by a growing school-age population, rather it made possible a consolidation of two existing

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

elementary schools (with room to spare) due to decline in the number of students. While these figures cover all ages, the grade school headcount accounted for 44 percent of the total (the new school opened with 438 students, had room for 100 more with a total district student head count of 1,005 as of 1939). School districts interpret these counts in terms of classroom equivalencies, so roughly 30 pupils require one classroom. So every increase or decline by that number crudely represents a change in the required classroom count. The impact of the removal of the railroad shops (1936) and the Great Depression generally reduced the student count from 1,237 in 1935 to just 1,005 when the new elementary school opened in the fall of 1939. That count declined by 65 pupils from the time the school construction began in late 1938 until it opened a year later. The other fact to be derived from the chart is an explanation of why the new elementary school could have continued as the district's sole grade school. There was minimal school population growth through 1943 and then there was another brief decline in the final two war years. It wasn't until 1951 that a second school was opened when nearby Clover Hill was annexed. The leap in student head-count in 1962 is more due to annexations than simple population increase (see timeline).

The Mothers' Clubs of the two grade schools were credited with initiating the idea for a new modern elementary school. The new school's generic title, "West Des Moines Elementary School" was certainly chosen as a compromise name, forsaking use of either of the doomed grade schools. C. H. Mahoney was the school district board chairman when the PWA grant application was sent to Washington, DC on June 1, 1938. If awarded construction work had to begin within 60 days of the award date. Initial plans called "for a two-story structure of either brick or cement." The school population in the unified elementary school was 700 pupils, 150 of whom would come from the to be closed Longfellow School. An early concept, apparently abandoned, was that of a phased construction/demolition of Lincoln School, the existing school in the building site. The idea was to finish the new school before taking down the old one. The total construction cost was placed at \$107,000. Municipal bonds were the normal source of the requisite local match of approximately \$50,000. Mrs. Marie Day, chairperson of the West Des Moines Mothers Club, started the petition drive to secure a special election to approve the bond funding. A quarter of voters, or 551 supporters, had to sign the petition. A subsequent newspaper report noted that the PWA grant had been approved in July and that the special election had quickly followed and won approval (*Des Moines Tribune*, June 22, 1938; *West Des Moines Express*, September 21, October 5, 1939).

Initially the school board was also mum as to the fate of Longfellow School, although it was clear that the two grade schools would be consolidated. By the latter part of October Lincoln School was taken down with a maximal effort being made to salvage anything usable from its materials. Dates in the architect's calculations specifications show that the design work was largely completed between September 5 and 31 [sic]. The sub-contract bids were due on October 20, 1938. The Weitz Construction Company was awarded the general construction contract with a bid of \$87,350. Longfellow School was now doing double time, with its students (mornings) sharing half-day turns with those from Lincoln (afternoons). The original 700 estimated pupil figure, was by this time reduced to just 500, and even that considerably lower figure exceeded actual enrollment by 35 (the actual figure turned out to be just 438 students, see below). It was noted "plans call for additional rooms if enrollment increases. The new feature in the developing plan was a combined gymnasium/auditorium having a seating capacity of 2,500 persons (*Des Moines Tribune*, October 26, 1938).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Pennsylvania Dixie Cement Corporation was located in West Des Moines. It would have provided a convenient source for the concrete needed for the new school but the supplier is not identified.

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

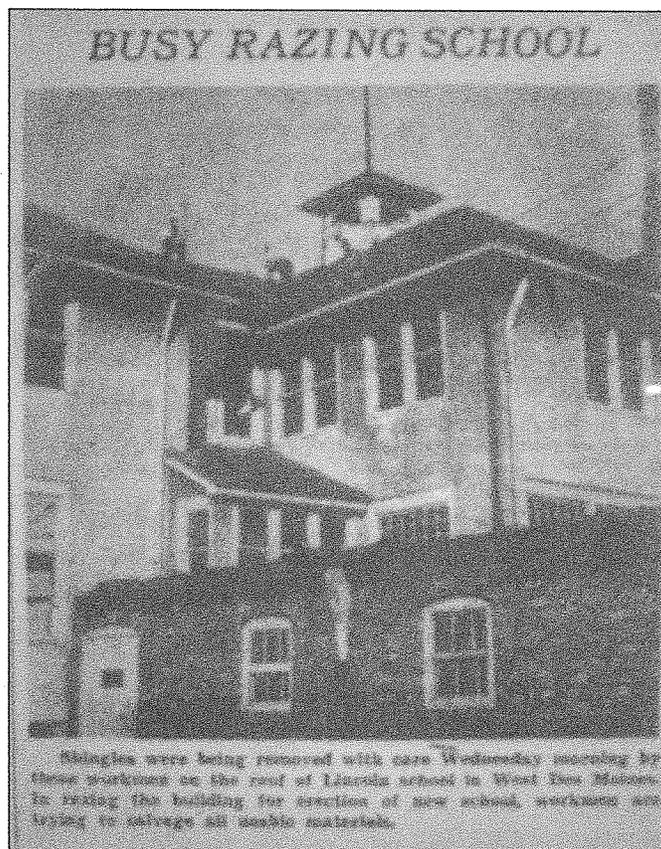


Figure 42: Demolition of Lincoln Elementary School, view northwest  
(Des Moines *Tribune*, October 26, 1938)

At this point construction progress reports are limited to a single late January 1939 reference to the fact that “every day the walls of West Des Moines’ new grade school building seem to rise a little higher.” A mild winter was credited with being “quite advantageous to the Weitz company of Des Moines...” The new school, “thoroughly modern in every respect” would be completed during the summer of 1939, being ready for fall classes (West Des Moines *Express*, January 26, 1939).

The school district had a long-term working relationship with Des Moines architects Proudfoot, Rawson-Brooks and Borg. The same firm in a previous iteration had designed the new high school in 1917 and designed the new high school stadium (see below) that was a second municipal WPA funded construction project, contemporaneous with the subject grade school.

Pending the locating of additional key sources, little can be said of the factors that led to the selection of a concrete perimeter shell and the use of the lightweight concrete block in the interior walls. There has been no study of the architects’ involvement with concrete perimeter walls. A review of period WPA local construction projects appears to show that concrete was more commonly used on stadiums, bridges, halls and other structures, but was not commonly used on school buildings. It appears logical to assume that the school board’s decision to depart from a brick school building reflected a combined determination to appear modern, forward looking and economical at the same time. Another unknown at this time speaks to the construction technology of cast-in-place concrete walls, particularly over the winter season. Available sources point to a mild winter as being helpful in this regard.

Similarly pending local progress reports, there are no other references to the completion of the new school. The \$45,000 concrete stadium was finished and was dedicated on May 24. A second PWA matched



West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

The new principal was introduced to the community in mid-September. The *Express* announcement included some useful information about the new school and its students and programs:

The present enrollment of the new school is 438 with ample room for 100 more. The children are divided into thirteen groups according to age and ability levels, each home room being under the supervision of one particular teacher. Kindergarten now a state requirement, is held for half a day.

Each home room teacher directs the physical education of her own group. After it becomes impossible for games and exercises to be held out of doors, such activities will be carried out in the new gym. For this purpose each student must have a pair of tennis shoes and proper gym clothes.

Music as in the former years holds an important place in the teaching schedule. The rhythm band with a personnel from the first and second grades will meet twice a week. An elementary school band made up of fourth, fifth and sixth grades will also rehearse two days a week.

There will be just the one Mothers' Club this year since all the children are in the same building.

Iowa U.S. Senator Clyde Herring was directly credited with securing the WPA grant for the new school and he was accordingly invited to the school dedication, but a special session of Congress prevented his attendance. It is important to bear in mind that worldwide attention including local newspapers was riveted on the approach of World War II (and the German-Russian joint invasion of Poland in mid-September 1939) and for that reason alone interest in the new school was back-burnered (West Des Moines *Express*, September 14, 1939).



Figure 45: The north façade of the new school (West Des Moines *Express*, August 24, 1939)

It is customary to photograph a new building paying attention to its architectural front. However for whatever reason the local photographer was satisfied to present the new building by illustrating its north wall. Perhaps the photographer couldn't get the entire west façade into the viewfinder so settled for a view that did fit. The mature tree visible at far right in Figure 40 indicates that pre-existing mature trees were preserved during the building construction and perhaps this was deemed to be an unobstructed view. Finally perhaps the point was to celebrate the gymnasium wing as much as the school portion of the building?

The *Express* provided its readers with a tour of the new building. The writer used a child's perspective which translated into fewer direct references to the interior appointments, but the account does speak directly to the modern transformation that this educational facility now offered to community children:

#### A TRIP THROUGH THE GRADE SCHOOL

A dream come true! There it stands –block upon block, rows of windows glistening in the sunlight, its spaciousness and compactness making it a thing of beauty in its complete simplicity – the long wished-for grade school.

Let's slip along the side of the little ones as they venture through the building for the first time. "Oh's" and "Ah's" are heard as the huge doors open and small feet touch the hard, shining floors.

Like a new bird in his nest, one small fellow stands by himself as his wondering eyes gaze about. Teachers tell him where to go but Bobby, so pleased with the beautiful new building, doesn't even hear. Running over to lockers, he opens one---

"Gee, this would be a swell place for a game of hide-and-seek."

As he drinks from the green water fountain, his curiosity is further aroused by a glimpse of a closed door. The letters s-c-i-e-n-c-e appear in black pain, but that means nothing to young Bob. Mastering courage, he enters cautiously. Sinks and lots of cupboards are there but no stove.

"What a funny kitchen! At least I hope it's a kitchen," he adds with a thought for his mid-morning lunch.

Back in the hall again, he opens another door. Shelves filled with books meet his eyes.

"Hmmm," says Bobby, "not even any Big Little books."

Soon he finds himself in the hall again. The stairs look very inviting so he ascends them. A glass wall on the landing proves very intriguing. He is just a bit disappointed in the upstairs – nothing but class rooms, though they are very colorful with their gaily painted woodwork.

After roaming around a bit, he goes down another wide stairway into the cheeriest room on the ground floor on the south side. The room is full of windows and there is the cutest little cloak room with tiny stalls for the kindergartners' overshoes.

Exploring further he finds that the first and second grade rooms are just as nice, each with its lockers in the class room.

Thinking he has seen enough for the day, Robert starts for the door, "Wait just a minute – I don't remember opening that door," he mumbles. And there is the biggest and most beautiful room he has ever seen in his life.

Looking harder than ever, he patters across the shining gym floor for a better view of the huge stage.

"Those little rooms on each side of the stage are shower rooms. I know because I heard brother telling mother all about the new stage curtains and all kinds of lights too."

Just then the janitor pulls a huge drawer out from beneath the stage and puts chairs into it. One janitor asks the other when they were going to start on those accordion bleachers there under the balcony.

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“Golly, accordion seats! I wonder if they play music or something when you sit on them. I guess I had better get out of here before that man sees me. It’s so cool I’d like to take my nap here. Wonder if I can get out of this place?” Sure enough the door opens as easy as pie.

Outside once more Bobby decides to go back for a cool drink. But the door won’t open from that side.

“Oh well, guess I’ll go home and tell mother all about it. I’m going to like school this year.”  
(West Des Moines *Express*, September 21, 1939)

Absent Senator Herring, the school’s dedicatory speakers included City Mayor P. L. Riley, Commercial Club president Elbert Stillwell and school board president Mahoney. The featured speakers were Dr. D. W. Morehouse, president of Drake University and Miss Jessie M. Parker, the State Superintendent of Schools. The actual building tour was an afternoon event but the *Express* made it clear that many had already had access to see the school interior. An evening school band concert was the first use of the new gymnasium/auditorium. The extensive dignitary list of non-speakers included architect Elmer Borg. The State PWA program sent a representative and the leaders and membership of the several Mothers’ Clubs were also prominent at the dedication (West Des Moines *Express*, September 28, October 5, 1939).

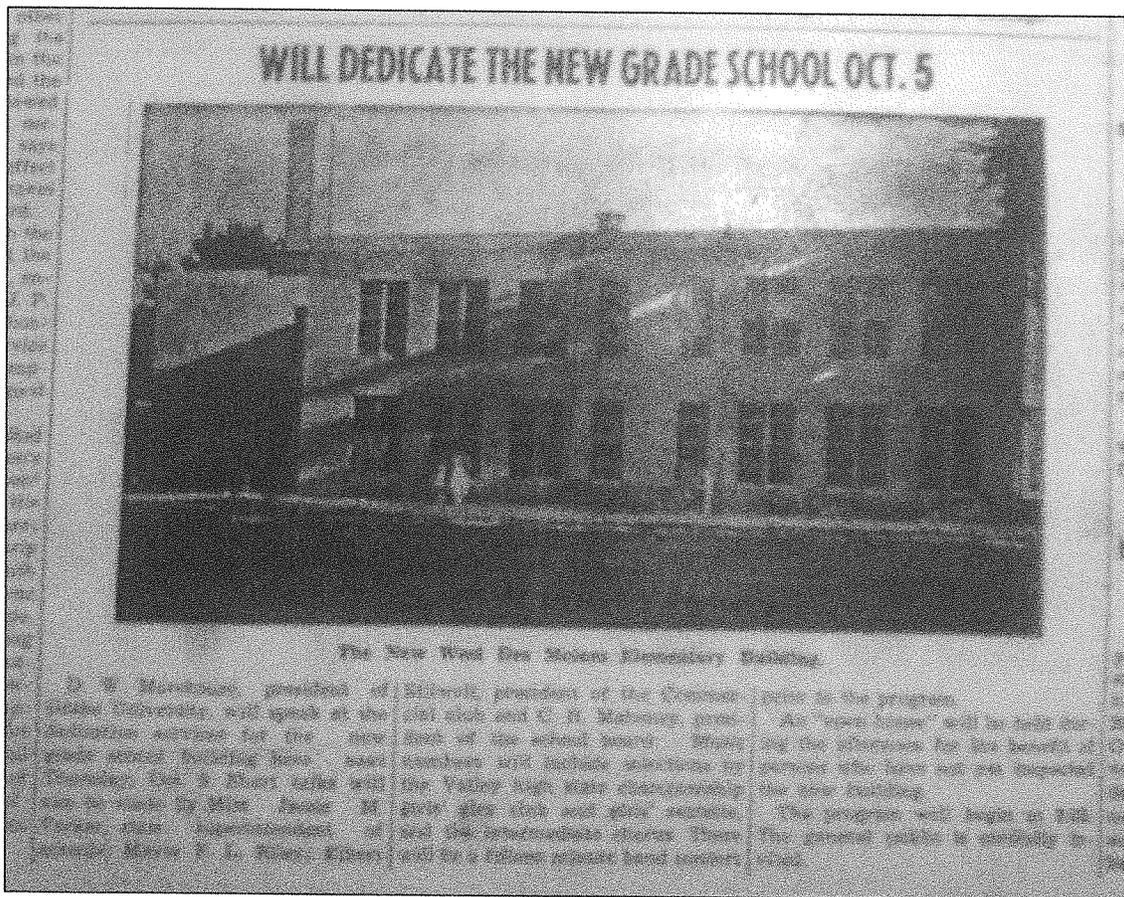


Figure 46: (West Des Moines *Express*, September 28, 1939)

What was described as a “capacity crowd” of 1,200 persons attended the formal dedication ceremony held in the gymnasium/auditorium. Dr. Morehouse, in his address, warned parents of an increase in “propaganda and advertising” from the press, magazines and radio sources. He challenged “It is a task to get young people to sift these things and learn what is trash and what makes for civilization. It is a problem for the teacher to distinguish between indoctrination and the scientific perspective.” The Superintendent of Schools

## West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

warned that the school years were too easy, and that graduates “find when they leave school that there isn’t a job that doesn’t require some hard work and drudgery” (Des Moines *Tribune*, October 6, 1939).

The new gymnasium/auditorium was immediately pressed into regular service and beginning the next January it was the location for baccalaureate exercises. It is no surprise that the city ranked the beginning of work on its new school as a key development. At year’s end the *Express*’ annual chronology for 1938 was titled “Events Last Year: New Grade School Was One of Major Improvements Secured During 1938” (West Des Moines *Express*, January 4, 5, 1939).

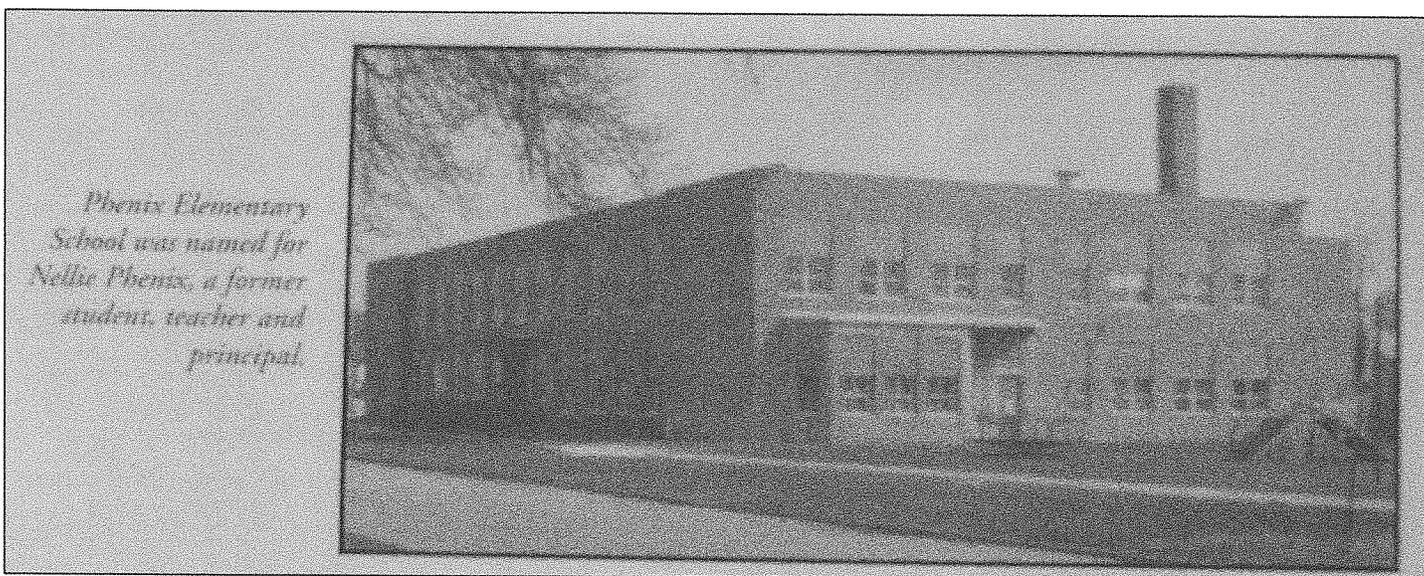


Figure 47: Phenix School, view northeast, ca.1968  
(A Detailed History of the Birth and Growth of West Des Moines)

Securing historical images of the subject school have proven to be surprisingly illusive. Figure 47 is the sole exception. Dating to ca.1968 it depicts downsized windows on all frontages, typical of a transformation in ceiling heights of most schools of this time period. Even a collection of PWA project completion photos located at the Iowa City office of the Iowa State Historical Society failed to include an image of this building.

No effort is made at this time to document the subsequent history of the subject school. As noted, it was renamed in December 1955 to honor its former principal from the World War II years, Nellie Amanda Phenix (1890-1972). Known simply as Phenix Elementary, the simpler and more specific name was likely more convenient by this time as there were other elementary schools in operation.

## The WPA High School Stadium:

This combination classroom/stadium structure was designed and constructed simultaneously with the new elementary school and had the same architects. It was also a WPA funded project although the federal fund was \$35,000 with just a \$10,000 city match. The stadium is contextually of interest (it is non-extant as of 2003) because it represented the same local school district initiative to modernize the school infrastructure, it had a related design source and utilized the same construction materials. Its construction recognized West Des Moines’ notable sports record in track (basketball as well but that relates to the subject gym) and was particularly important and symbolic to the growing re-named city. Four classrooms and shops in the stadium also addressed crowding in the nearby high school. The seating capacity was an impressive 3,500 and the new

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

stadium featured an electronic timing clock, which while an innovation, appears to have been typical of WPA stadium projects. It was dedicated on May 24, 1939 (Des Moines *Tribune*, May 16, 1939).

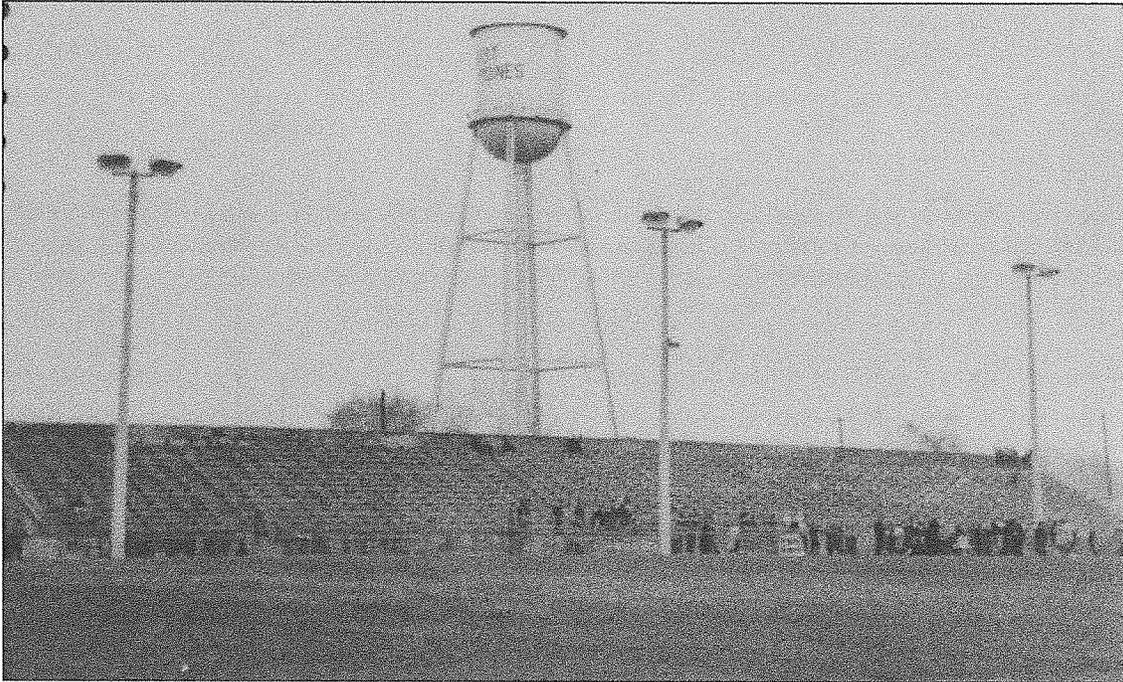


Figure 48: 1939 WPA funded high school stadium and the municipal water tower (non-extant)  
(State Historical Society of Iowa, WPA Project Photos)

#### The Architects:

The multiple property documentation form (MPDF) titled “The Architectural Legacy of Proudfoot and Bird in Iowa, 1882-1940” establishes the historical significance of this noted Des Moines-based architectural firm. At the same time, this 1988 study terminated at 1940, the then-50-year National Register cut off for determining historical significance. The late 1930s design and construction date for the subject building places it at the very end of the timeframe studied and author Barbara Beving Long shows that the firm was at its lowest ebb due to the Great Depression and changes in the partnership. None of the original or subsequent major partners were alive or still in practice as of 1938 (William Thomas Proudfoot, George Washington Bird, Harry Dustan Rawson, Clark Souers, Oren Thomas). The partnership that designed the subject building, while titled Proudfoot, Rawson, Brooks and Borg, dated back only to 1933. J. Woodson Brooks and Elmer H. Borg were the actual practicing partners, while their presence with the firm did date back to 1912-13 respectively. Both men gained little financially by being made partners and Borg even lost his house to creditors. Wesley Shank notes that with the arrival of World War II, non-governmental design and construction work ceased altogether (Long; Shank, p. 31).

West Des Moines/Phenix Elementary School:

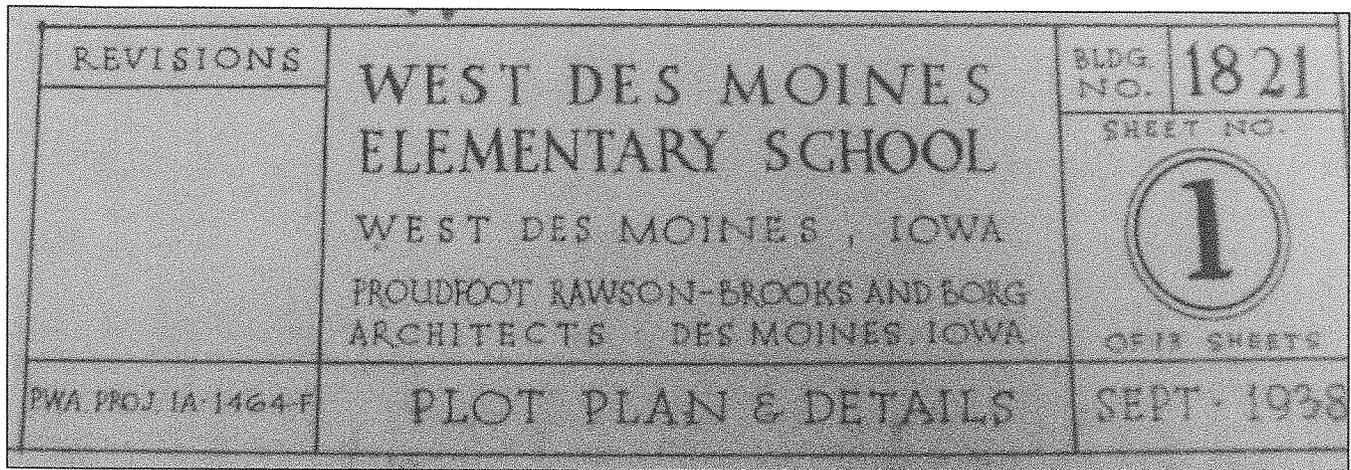


Figure 49: The building architects (original plans)

The point to be made is that the author of the MPDF was in a disadvantageous position to evaluate the firm's designs of the late 1930s. An update of that study would certainly treat this recovery period as one worthy of special study and buildings from that period would necessarily be evaluated in comparison with early post-war designs, assuming that many of the later forms and particularly building techniques were being tested prior to the war. The use of concrete exterior walls is perhaps the best example. There are no studies of this building technique relative to these designers. Cast concrete buildings had their heyday in the early 1920s and the general consensus was that they resulted in damp and substandard buildings. Key questions relative to the use of solid concrete walls focus on interior moisture barriers, the need for expansion joints and the manner in which reinforcement rod could be protected from deterioration and damage to the wall. Other questions focus on the potential reduced construction cost of concrete versus brick construction. By this time brick was relegated to a veneer status on some sort of sub-wall, usually of tile or block, so the question refocuses on the comparative cost of masonry versus concrete. Finally the possible association of the modern concrete finish with the Modern(e) style comes to the fore.

Long's treatment of the firm's schools (and again these were designs by previous partners but the then current partners had participated in this work) indicates that these were uniformly brick buildings that were ornamented with stone. Quoins at corners or around windows were favored and there is a faux recessed quoin treatment expressed in the subject school around the main entries. A preference for simple parapet treatments were also noted by Long and this feature could be extrapolated to the school design although the entire exterior is so treated. Long also hints at a familiarity on the part of the firm with the Art Deco style, citing several major Des Moines examples from the onset of the Great Depression, but she makes no reference to the Moderne style.

Bottom line, this building, in terms of its design significance should be contextualized as representing an early and important example of the work of the emerging new architectural partnership of Brooks and Borg. It can still legitimately be placed within the broader context of the larger design firm's history but as of now it dates to a design period that is devoid of contextual and comparative analysis. The second and perhaps more significant design context is its place within the state's examples of PWA designs. The PWA would have offered struggling architects a rare opportunity to both showcase their skills but also to show that they were well aware of modern design trends regionally and nationally.

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