

5. COA-060187-2019

PUBLIC HEARING DATE

November 26th, 2019

PROPERTY ADDRESS

813 N. 28th Street

DISTRICT

Church Hill North

Commission of
Architectural Review

STAFF REPORT



APPLICANT

City of Richmond Public Schools

STAFF CONTACT

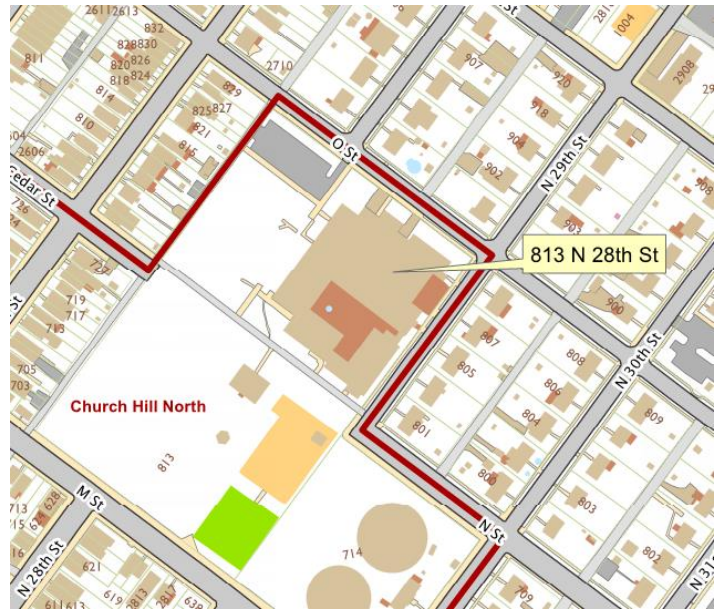
C. Jones

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Demolish an existing school building.

PROJECT DETAILS

- The applicant requests permission to demolish the ca. 1922-1979 George Mason Elementary School.
- The applicant proposes to install tennis and basketball courts, athletic fields, and play areas on the cleared site.



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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

DEFER

PREVIOUS REVIEWS

The Commission reviewed the application for the demolition of the George Mason Elementary School at the September 24, 2019, meeting. At this meeting the Commission voted to defer the application for demolition to allow the applicant the opportunity to consider all feasible alternatives to the demolition of the 1922 section, including an appropriate new use and rehabilitation, relocation of the structure to a compatible site, or re-sale of the property to an individual committed to suitable rehabilitation or relocation; and consider preservation of important architectural elements of the building.

STAFF COMMENTS

The applicant has responded to the request to consider feasible alternatives to demolition in a letter dated October 11, 2019. In the letter the applicant responded to the requirements to consider feasible alternatives; however, the applicant did not respond to the additional requirements the Commission must consider when reviewing an application for demolition.

In the October 11, 2019 letter the applicant proposes to salvage some of the brick from the 1922 section to create fence columns for the new school. Staff acknowledges that there is an additional project cost associated with this proposal and that this will be a manageable cost given the salvage value of the bricks. Staff believes

that there are other important architectural elements that should be preserved to memorialize the significant history of the building and its association with public education in the City of Richmond. Staff has requested that the applicant work with staff and members of the Commission to develop feasible alternatives to the demolition and to discuss additional ways to commemorate and memorialize the history of this school and important alumnae.

In the letter dated October 11, 2019, the applicant states their belief that: *any continued deferral of action may jeopardize the City and RPS' ability to provide the necessary green space when the school opens in August 2020.* Staff acknowledges that project delays have the potential to incur additional costs. However, staff also notes that the Commission raised concerns about the preservation and potential demolition of the school building during the conceptual review of the new school at the November 27, 2018 meeting. The Commission raised the same concerns at the January 22, 2019 meeting when it approved construction of the new school.

STAFF ANALYSIS

According to Sec. 30-930.7(d) of the Historic Preservation Ordinance: The commission of architectural review shall not issue a certificate of appropriateness for demolition of any building or structure within an old and historic district unless the applicant can show that there are no feasible alternatives to demolition. The demolition of historic buildings and elements in old and historic districts is strongly discouraged. The demolition of any building deemed by the commission to not be a part of the historic character of an old and historic district shall be permitted. The demolition of any building that has deteriorated beyond the point of being feasibly rehabilitated is permissible, where the applicant can satisfy the commission as to the infeasibility of rehabilitation. The commission may adopt additional demolition standards for the review of certificates of appropriateness applications to supplement these standards.

Under the provisions of Sec. 32-930.7., the Commission shall approve requests for demolition when:

1) *There are no feasible alternatives to the proposed demolition. "Feasible alternatives" include an appropriate new use and rehabilitation, relocation of the structure to a compatible site or re-sale of the property to an individual committed to suitable rehabilitation or relocation.*

- *an appropriate new use and rehabilitation*

The applicant has responded that neither RPS nor the City have a use or funding for the rehabilitation of the 1922 section of the building. In the October 11, 2019 letter the applicant explains that the renovation and rehabilitation of the building would be costly due to the need to abate asbestos; replace the plumbing, electrical and mechanical systems; and address current building code requirements. The applicant has not provided a detailed description of the work required and the costs associated with converting the building to a new use and/or rehabilitating it using other funding sources such as the historic rehabilitation tax credit, the City of Richmond Tax Abatement program, or grants.

- *relocation of the structure to a compatible site*

In the October 11, 2019 letter the applicant states that there would be considerable cost associated with relocating the building and that they do not have a site to allow for relocation. The applicant states that moving the 1922 section of the building is "technically unfeasible" but does not provide any data or analysis to support this statement or as to whether they have considered other nearby City-owned sites.

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- *re-sale of the property to an individual committed to suitable rehabilitation or relocation*

In the October 11, 2019 letter the applicant reiterates that RPS does not have a need for the building and explains that RPS needs the land in order to provide recreation and play areas for the school and community. On account of the need for play spaces and recreational areas, the applicant does not believe that allowing for the rehabilitation of the building by a separate party is feasible. However, the applicant has not indicated that they have considered other nearby City-owned locations for the community recreational areas.

2) A building or structure is deemed not to be a contributing part of the historic character of an Old and Historic District.

The building is located within the Church Hill North City Old and Historic District. When the boundaries of the Church Hill North City Old and Historic District were determined, they specifically included this school in acknowledgement of its significance to the neighborhood. Staff finds the building contributes to the historic character of the Old and Historic District as it was constructed during the period of significance, reflects the areas of significance for the District, and is in keeping with the general architectural styles of the historic buildings in the District.

3) The Commission deems that a building or structure has deteriorated beyond the point of feasible rehabilitation. A determination that a building or structure no longer presents an opportunity for feasible rehabilitation is arrived at only after an on-site visit by Commission members and a thorough structural analysis has been undertaken by a licensed structural engineer experienced in historic preservation work.

The applicant has indicated that in order to rehabilitate the school building, including the 1922 section, substantial exterior and interior work would be required. However, the applicant has not provided additional information regarding the nature, extent, and cost of the rehabilitation or a structural analysis by a licensed structural engineer.

In addition to the above criteria, the Commission has the authority to consider four other factors in arriving at decisions involving proposed demolitions:

1) The historic and architectural value of a building.

Historic Richmond provided the following research and analysis to staff. The full version of this information can be found here:

<https://www.historicrichmond.com/property/george-mason-school/>. The oldest section of the existing school dates to 1922, when a 12-classroom building was built to alleviate overcrowding in the original 1881 frame building and 1887 brick building on the site. The 1922 building is a reconstruction of an 1873 building which originally housed Richmond High School, later John Smith School, at 805 East Marshall Street. Construction drawings for the 1922 building indicate that the materials, such as the bricks and windows, from the John Smith School were used for the construction of the 1922 George Mason School. The drawings also indicate that Charles M. Robinson, architect to Richmond Public Schools from 1909-1930,

oversaw the new school construction. Staff finds that the 1922 section is potentially significant for its association with early twentieth-century educational trends in the City of Richmond and with Charles Robinson, a noted architect of education buildings in Richmond. Staff also finds it is potentially significant as a representative example of late-nineteenth century educational architecture.

The first expansion of the school occurred in 1936 when a 14-room wing was added. In 1951, a 12-room wing was constructed. The original 1881 frame building was demolished in 1974 and the 1887 brick building was demolished in 1979 for the construction of the Marsh Wing. Staff finds that the 1936-1979 additions do not possess historic or architectural significance.

2) *The effect that demolition will have on the surrounding neighborhood.*

The demolition of the entire school complex will remove a physical reminder of the historical development of the area and the public school system.

3) *The type and quality of the project that will replace the demolished building.*

The proposed new use of the site is basketball and tennis courts, play areas, and an athletic field for use by the students of the new school and members of the surrounding community.

4) *The historic preservation goals outlined in the Master Plan and Downtown Plan.*

The 2000 Master Plan does not address schools in the East Planning District but does recognize the contribution of historic and architectural resources to the character of the community.

FIGURES



Figure 1. George Mason Elementary School, ca. 1922 section.



Figure 2. George Mason Elementary School, ca. 1936 section.



Figure 3. George Mason Elementary School, ca. 1956 addition.



Figure 4. George Mason Elementary School, ca. 1956 addition.



Figure 5. George Mason Elementary School, ca. 1979 addition.



Figure 6. George Mason Elementary, ca. 1922 and 1979 sections.

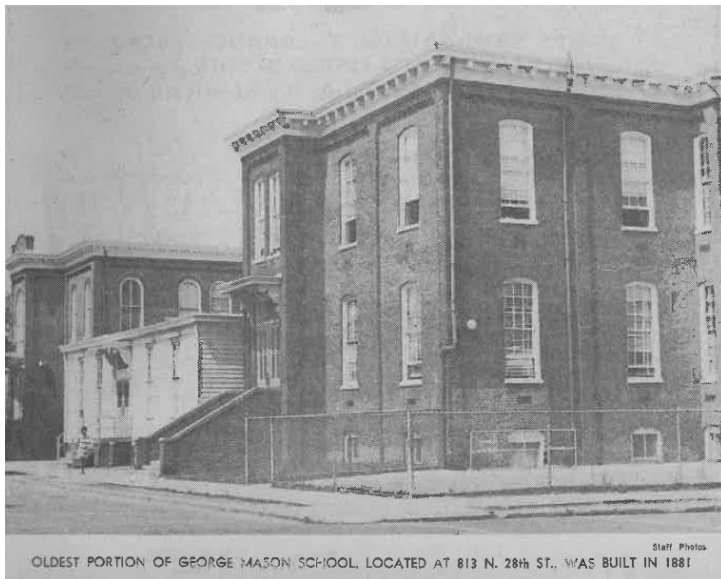


Figure 7. Original George Mason Elementary School at right in foreground, the 1881 frame section in the middle, and the current (1922) section in background. Courtesy: Historic Richmond.

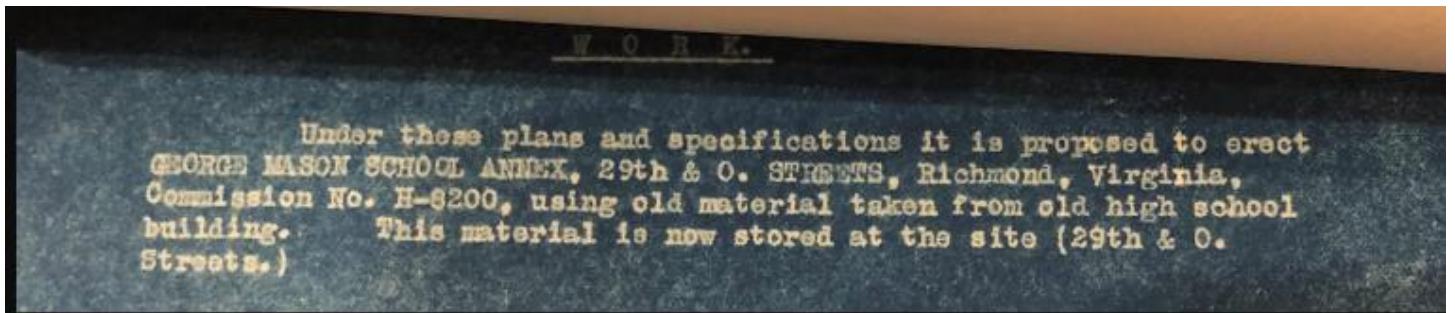


Figure 8. Specifications for the George Mason School, 1922. Courtesy: Historic Richmond.

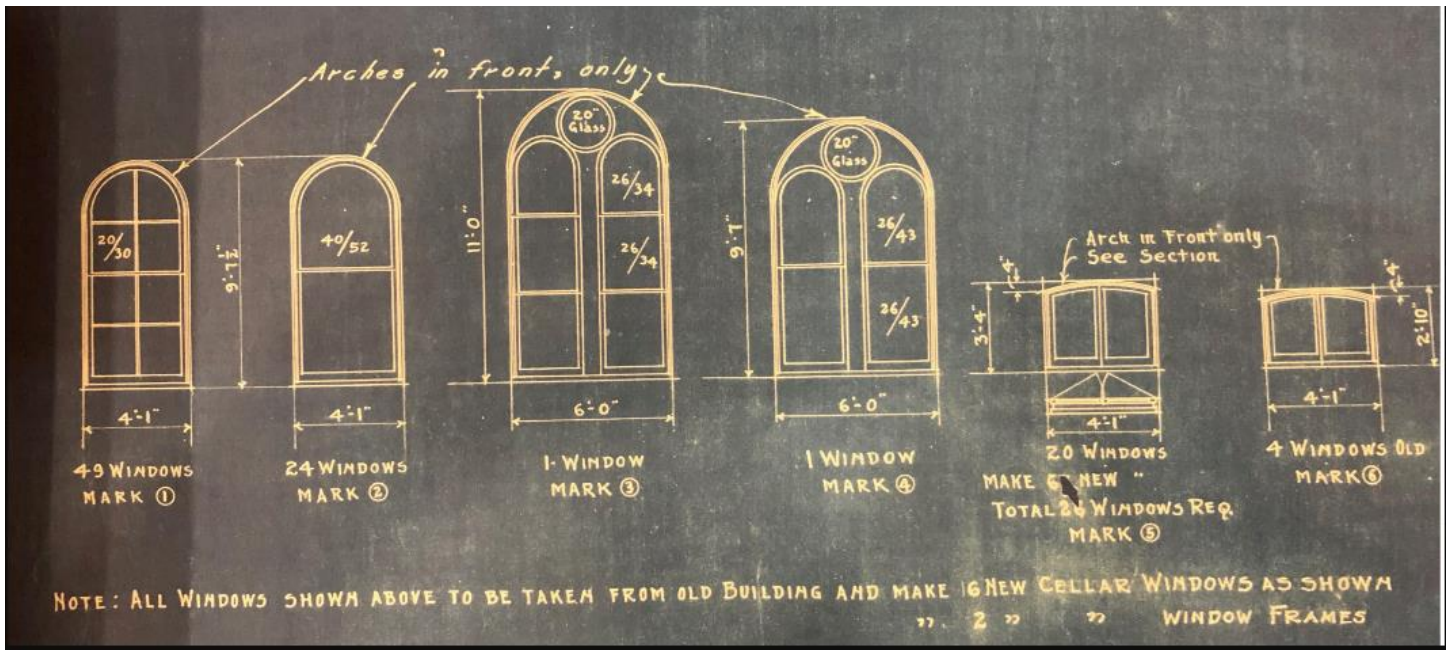


Figure 9. Window drawings for the George Mason Elementary School, 1922. Courtesy: Historic Richmond.



Figure 10. Cracking terrazzo floors, 1922 section.



Figure 11. Non-ADA compliant bathroom corridors and spaces, ca. 1922 section. .



Figure 12. Extensive water damage observed on the ceilings.



Figure 13. Damage to walls, ca. 1922 section.



Figure 14. Current heating system, ca. 1922 section.



Figure 15. Outdated mechanical systems, ca. 1922 section.