

WYANDOTTE HIGH SCHOOL, 1934-37

2501 Minnesota Avenue

Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved (Chicago), Architects

Joseph W. Radotinsky, Associate Architect

Hare and Hare, Landscape Architects

Emil Zettler (Chicago), Sculptor

Kansas City, Kansas Historic Landmark: March 28, 1985

Register of Historic Kansas Places: November 23, 1985

National Register of Historic Places: April 30, 1986

Wyandotte High School is the most notable public building in Kansas City, Kansas. As an example of school planning and design it would seem to have few if any equals in either the Kansas City metropolitan area or the State of Kansas. It was the latest in a series of landmark school designs by the firm known at the time as Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved, and a superb example of the "middle road" in architecture between academic eclecticism and International Style modernism, as exemplified in the work of the noted Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen. As fine in detail as in overall concept, the designs of the noted sculptor Emil Zettler were executed by highly skilled craftsmen. The building and its campus became the immediate focus of civic pride in the midst of the Great Depression, and it remains so to this day.

The public school system in Kansas was established by the state legislature in 1867. The first public school in Wyandotte City, the Central School in the town square called Huron Place, was completed the following year. No high school was established, however, until 1886, the year Wyandotte consolidated with two smaller cities to form the present Kansas City, Kansas. According to school records, the Kansas City, Kansas High School was organized in "several unused rooms at the Riverview Elementary School, 7th and Pacific Avenue, and several of the smaller classes convened at the home of the principal nearby." The first graduating class, in 1887, consisted of eleven girls.

It was not long before the high school got its second location and its first real school building. The school was relocated to the former Palmer Academy building on the southwest corner of North 7th Street and Ann Avenue. President Grover Cleveland had signed the Consolidation Act, which was intended to make education available to everyone through free schools. The Palmer Academy had been a private secondary school which closed due to lack of enrollment - ironically due to the Consolidation Act; people would no longer pay for that which was being provided for free.

The Palmer Academy building soon proved to be inadequate to the district's needs, leading to a proposal by the Board of Education to demolish Central School and erect a new high school building in the center of Huron Place. The City immediately went into court and asked for an injunction restraining the Board from erecting the proposed building. The City alleged that the ground known as Huron Place had been dedicated by the town company for park purposes only, and that the Board of Education had no rights there. The case ended up in the Kansas Supreme Court, which held that the Board of Education was entitled to a tract marked "Seminary Place" on the original plat of 1857 and that the ownership of Huron Place was therefore divided between the Board and the City. The Carnegie Library was eventually built on this tract, but in the meanwhile another location had been chosen for the high school.

In 1897 a bond issue was passed which funded the erection of a new building for the Kansas City, Kansas High School on the west side of North 9th Street, from Minnesota Avenue to State Avenue. The building was designed in the Richardsonian Romanesque style by W. W. Rose, and included a great peak-roofed tower that dominated the downtown skyline for many years. The building was completed in 1899, with substantial additions in 1905 and 1910. In addition to high school classes, the school also provided space for a junior college beginning in 1923.

The next expansion came in that same year, when a gymnasium and laboratory building was erected across the street on the southeast corner of 9th and State. A tunnel underneath 9th Street connected the two buildings. This new addition was only vaguely Romanesque in style, being designed by Rose and Peterson in a manner quite similar to the elementary schools they were doing at the same time. The building still stands, and is presently owned by the boilermaker's union.

The 1920s saw a general expansion in the school district's facilities, including the construction of major additions to the Argentine and Rosedale high schools. As the former cities of Argentine and Rosedale were now part of Kansas City, Kansas, it was decided that it would be appropriate to change the name of Kansas City, Kansas High School to Wyandotte High School. This was finally approved by the Board of Education on January 3, 1928.

Because of downtown development, it was not possible for the high school's athletic field to be located near the school. The Board therefore acquired property at 16th and Armstrong, where the Carnival Park amusement park had previously been. This separation of facilities, together with the other limitations of the downtown site, eventually prompted the Board to start planning for a completely new high school. Accordingly, on February 16, 1928, the Board acquired some 28 acres of land on the south side of Minnesota Avenue between North 22nd Street and North Washington Boulevard from Jesse A. Hoel, who had previously operated a golf club there for residents in his Westheight Manor development. In addition to a purchase price of \$125,000, the old athletic field was traded to Hoel, who subsequently sold it to Ward High School following the failure of a residential development scheme.

The nationally known landscape architecture firm of Hare and Hare was retained to develop the overall plan for the new site. The grounds as they subsequently developed followed the master plan very closely, including the placement of the high school building at an angle across the northwest corner of the site, its front oriented toward the intersection of North Washington Boulevard and Minnesota Avenue. The one deviation was in the southwest quadrant, where the master plan called for a junior college building that was never built. The first elements of the plan to be completed were a new stadium and athletic field designed by H. T. Caywood, engineer, and built at a cost of \$62,500. These facilities were dedicated in October, 1929. The stock market crash that month brought an abrupt halt to any further construction, and under the circumstances it was decided that the old high school building was adequate for the district's needs.

This situation suddenly changed on March 3, 1934. A fire, thought to have originated in burning trash in a janitorial storage room, swept through the timber-framed, brick-walled school building. The first alarm came at about 6:30 p.m., but efforts to halt the blaze were futile. The fire was the most spectacular in city history; people can still recall seeing the blaze from many miles away, the flames shooting through the roof of the three story building and the brick walls glowing like a blast furnace. No one was seriously injured, but the estimated loss was \$750,000 when the building was insured for only \$336,000.

The Board of Education was faced with no alternative but to proceed with the new high school building in the depths of the Great Depression. Students were divided among three schools for the remainder of the term. The junior college students held classes in the gymnasium and laboratory building, which was unharmed by the fire. (This would remain the home of the junior college for many years, until the construction of the Kansas City, Kansas Community College in 1972.) Freshmen and sophomores attended classes at Central Junior High School, while juniors and seniors attended Northwest Junior High School.

It was felt to be critical that construction commence within a year, and the Board acted with great rapidity. By March 6, a demolition contract had been awarded, on March 12 the Board agreed to try to obtain P.W.A. funding, and on March 22 a Special Committee was appointed to assist in the selection of an architect. In the short time available to them, the Special Committee

interviewed a number of prominent architectural firms, and visited several schools around the country. One of these schools was the Evanston Township High School of 1923-24 in suburban Chicago, designed by the noted Chicago firm of Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved. The principal of the school expressed great satisfaction with his building, and the committee was very favorably impressed when they subsequently interviewed John L. Hamilton.

The committee, which included Superintendent F. L. Schlagle and Board President Frank Rushton, reported back to the Board on March 30 with a unanimous recommendation of Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved. On April 2 the Board voted 4 to 2 to pick Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved over Joseph W. Radotinsky. Radotinsky, a local architect, had not been interviewed by the Special Committee. He had just resigned his position as State Architect (an office he had held since 1928) and returned home in hopes of securing the Wyandotte contract, and his inclusion at the last minute smacks of local politics. He was subsequently named associate architect on the project, but his contract was with the Chicago firm rather than directly with the Board. The contracts were signed on April 5, just 33 days after the fire. Ground was broken fifteen months later, on July 19, 1935.

Radotinsky is sometimes credited by local citizens with the design (a belief he did nothing to discourage), and it does seem to reflect some of his predilections, but it is more probable that he functioned as local coordinator and job supervisor, with the design remaining the responsibility of the Chicago firm. The Board minutes, the surviving architectural drawings, the design's antecedents in the Evanston school, and even the plaque installed at the school's entrance all make clear that the Chicago firm was the principal architect on the project, with Radotinsky in a secondary position. This view is further reinforced by the hiring of the noted Chicago sculptor Emil Zettler to supervise the decoration. Zettler's most notable previous work in Kansas was the sculpture for George Grant Elmslie's Capital Federal Building in Topeka of 1922 (now sadly demolished). Like Zettler, the firm Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved had ties to the Chicago School and the Prairie School, being the successor firm to Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton, the architects for a number of landmark school designs in the Chicago area.

The influences on this design were fairly diverse, yet related in their moderately progressive approach. The massing seems to reflect the earlier school designs with which Hamilton and Fellows were associated such as the Carl Schurz High School of 1908-1910 in Chicago and more particularly the Evanston Township High School that the Special Committee had visited, while the overall layout, the flat-topped towers, and much of the decorative treatment seem patterned after the work of the noted Finnish-American architect Eliel Saarinen. (Radotinsky's work would show the influence of Saarinen as late as the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library of 1965.) Much of the decorative effect, as in Saarinen's work, is ultimately derived from the Romanesque, with its round-headed arches and short columns. (The architects referred to the style as Lombardian Romanesque.) A closer examination of the details shows that the sculptor Zettler employed sources quite unrelated to the Romanesque, however, with stylized floral patterns and pre-Columbian Indian motifs such as those found at the main entry doors. Even the Gothic is present in the pointed arched openings in the upper level of the towers, while Greek classicism is reflected in the relief sculptures of the auditorium and gymnasium lobbies, and Georgian Revival in the library interior. This diversity of sources might be compared to the contemporary Art Deco or Modernistic style, although Wyandotte High School does not seem to fit within that classification. Despite what may read like a hodge-podge, the building is an aesthetic whole. For all its size the building does not overwhelm its residential surroundings, and continues the harmony with the land that has always marked the best in Midwestern architecture.

In plan the building might be described as a regularized, angled figure eight, or two straight-sided pentagons joined at their bases. The structure is laid at a forty-five degree angle across the northwest corner of the site, as planned by Hare and Hare, with the crossbar of the plan on axis with the point of the intersection of Minnesota Avenue and Washington Boulevard. The two interior courtyards formed by the plan were left open and landscaped. The west-facing angle at one end projects forward toward North Washington Boulevard and contains the entrance

to the gymnasium, while the corresponding north-facing angle at the other end projects toward Minnesota Avenue and contains the entrance to the auditorium. A leg projecting south from the southwest corner of the figure eight houses the swimming pool and power plant with its tall smoke stack, while a similar leg projects east from the southeast corner and contains the shop areas. Functions that might be potentially noisy or disruptive are thus held away from the academic areas in the main body of the complex.

With the exceptions of the auditorium and the gymnasium, the building is three stories in height, together with a basement. Because the ground slopes from the northwest to the southeast, the twin basement cafeterias, separated by a lobby located where the crossbar intersects the long southeast facade, are at ground level with views across the landscaped grounds toward the athletic field. The opposite, northwest end of the crossbar pulls forward of the main facade and is flanked by the two aforementioned towers. The principal entries to the building are two pairs of doors in the base of each tower. The first floor of the projection between the entries contains the administrative offices. This in turn forms the base for one of the school's many notable features, the two-story high main reading room of the school library. This room is illuminated by seven great windows extending the full height of the space, the windows separated by alternating piers and engaged columns in an aa-b-a-b-b-a-b-aa rhythm. The great room is flanked by smaller, one-story reading rooms occupying the second floor of each tower.

The remaining portions of the building are occupied by classrooms on doubleloaded corridors, each lit by large, three-over-three double hung windows thanks to the two courtyards. The rhythm of alternating piers on the facade divides the length of the academic legs into four-window bays, each generally corresponding to a classroom on the interior. Laboratory facilities are located in the crossbar. On the first floor in front of the administrative office, where the traffic flow from the main entries and three corridors comes together, is a large commons area with a beamed ceiling and two fireplaces. Because of the figure eight layout and the placement of such high intensity areas as the commons, library and cafeteria at critical junctures, the traffic flow is extremely versatile for a complex of this size. An additional feature of this is the way in which the balcony levels of the auditorium and gymnasium have direct access from the second and first floor corridors respectively.

The building is of fire-proof construction, an obvious requirement in view of the circumstances under which it was built. The exterior is clad in a lightly mottled red brick with limestone trim and decorative areas of tile and brickwork, most notably in the three figured panels above the entry to the gymnasium. At certain areas such as the upper portions of the two towers, brick and stone alternate in broad bands in a manner reminiscent of some of the designs of Sir Edwin Lutyens, and ultimately based on Roman architecture stripped of its marble veneer. Brick and tile are also used extensively on the interior.

In addition to the library and the commons, the auditorium had the most elaborately decorated interior. Of particular note was the curtain, unfortunately destroyed in a fire in 1983. The frames of the classroom windows are of wood painted a yellowish cream color, while the windows of the gymnasium, auditorium, towers and library are of metal divided into small lights and painted dark green. The vertical muntins of the windows echo the dividing piers, and this very multiplicity of verticals combined with the strong horizontals of the high, plain cornice and the long lines of the spandrels give the overall structure a feeling of textured horizontality.

The building was placed in a beautiful, campus-like setting, carefully planned and landscaped by Hare and Hare. Broad walks, steps, stone and brick retaining walls and balustrades, and well-designed lighting fixtures help mediate between the angled geometry of the building and the gentle curves of the land on which it is placed. The careful attention to detail so evident in the building was applied to these landscape elements as well, creating a unified composition. This extends even to the carving on the base of the flagpole, which is carefully positioned on the main cross axis near the corner of Minnesota and Washington Boulevard. The only seeming awkwardnesses in the site planning are to the south and east of the building, where

the transition to the previously built athletic field is not as well handled as it perhaps might have been. Similar problems exist with the parking lots north of the field, but this may reflect later changes made in the layout by persons not overly concerned with aesthetics.

In appearance Wyandotte remains much the same as when it was first built, with only the maturing of the plantings and the softening provided by age to show that any time has passed. The only exterior change has been the addition of letters spelling out "Wyandotte High School" to the upper portion of the main facade sometime in 1964. Apparently it was originally felt that any such labeling would be superfluous. In view of the achievement in planning and aesthetics that Wyandotte represents, and the meaning that the school has for the community, that was probably correct.

Given the elaborate and costly nature of such a project, the construction of Wyandotte High School in the middle of the Great Depression could only have been done with federal assistance. The building was a Federal Emergency Administration public works project costing more than \$2,500,000. Sources of the financing were \$1,200,000 from a bond election, \$557,000 from a P.W.A. grant, \$700,000 from the Board of Education, \$450,000 from other school funds, and \$250,000 from the fire insurance payment for the old school building. The costs included over \$143,000 for site work and landscaping, and \$92,500 in architects' fees. The labor force employed on the building included brick layers, tile setters, and masons drawn from the great pool of skilled craftsmen left out of work by the Depression. Many of the workmen involved in the project were employed by the federal Works Progress Administration, the great Depression-era program that provided public service jobs for thousands of unemployed Americans. Without this W.P.A. assistance the costs of the project would probably have been much higher.

Much of the day-to-day supervision of the enormous project was in the hands of Cecil E. Cooper, a young architect employed by Radotinsky, and George Widder, long-time Secretary to the Board of Education. (Widder's job was made somewhat easier by the fact that he lived just across the street from the construction site, at 808 North Washington Boulevard.) The building was completed on March 4, 1937. Work on equipping the building and finishing the grounds continued through the summer. Wyandotte High School opened for classes in September, 1937, and immediately became the focus of much civic pride. It was described in contemporary newspaper accounts as "the largest building enterprise ever undertaken in Kansas City, Kansas," and as "the best equipped school in the U.S." Those feelings continued largely unabated for over fifty years.

NOTE: Wyandotte High School was entered on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986, just fifty years following its completion, at the earliest point at which a building is considered to be eligible for listing.

PERKINS AND HAMILTON/
PERKINS, FELLOWS AND HAMILTON/
HAMILTON, FELLOWS AND NEDVED
ARCHITECTS

Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved, the Chicago architects responsible for the design of Wyandotte High School, were the successors to the firm previously known as Perkins and Hamilton, and as Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton. The firm had a well established reputation as the designers of educational facilities, and Wyandotte was but one of a series of outstanding school designs that they produced.

The firm was founded by Dwight Heald Perkins. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1867, with two years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology behind him (1885-87), he went to Chicago and entered the office of Burnham and Root in 1888. He must have exhibited unusual maturity and ability almost immediately, for they placed him in charge of the office during their activities with the World's Columbian Exposition in 1891 to 1893. Perkins established his own office in the year of the World's Fair and within two years received a fairly large commission for the design of Steinway Hall, built between 1895 and 1896 at 64 East Van Buren Street. The building housed Frank Lloyd Wright's downtown office for several years around the turn of the century and for a time became the focus for a group of young architects committed to the idea of a new architecture. The Steinway is a typical tall, narrow office block in the manner of Holabird and Roche, with projecting bays and Chicago windows.

In 1901 Wright was commissioned by his uncle Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a Unitarian minister, to design the Abraham Lincoln Center, a settlement house founded by Jones and affiliated with his church. Perkins was associated with Wright on this project, but disagreements with his uncle eventually caused Wright to withdraw. Perkins was thus largely responsible for the present appearance of the building, which was constructed between 1901 and 1903 at 700 East Oakwood Boulevard. The main elevation is a rectangular composition in which the vertical pattern secured through continuous piers is bound within strong horizontal bands at the base and the parapet. The whole block is a simple rectangular prism of excessive severity, a rather heavy design although arresting in its smooth planes of warm red brick. Like Wright before him, Perkins ended up resigning before the building was actually completed.

Neither the Steinway nor the Abraham Lincoln building gave an indication of the imaginative designs that Dwight Perkins was to develop for public schools. The Chicago Board of Education appointed him as its chief architect in 1905 and thus pioneered in the adoption of a modern American architecture for school buildings. Dwight Perkins was associated with the Board for only five years, but in that time he designed about forty new schools and additions to existing schools.

Perkins' designs for several buildings for the University of Chicago gave him some claim as a school specialist. His appointment was therefore not undeserved, and soon proved more than justified. His earliest public schools were not outstanding, but those constructed between 1907 and 1910 have long been recognized for their planning innovations as well as for their design. The Jesse Spalding (Crippled Children) School of 1907 was a rather uninspired Queen Anne design that continued a trend established by Perkins in several commissions during the late 1890s. However, in 1906 and 1907 the *Inland Architect and News Record* published several projects signed by Perkins for schools of a markedly different character. These projects were not subsequently built, although two of the named schools were constructed according to different designs. The project for the Lyman Trumbull School was a heavy, almost fortress-like structure of brick laid in polychromatic bands, emphasizing the megalithic quality of the design. The other published project was for the James H. Bowen High School which, as built in 1910, was similar in concept to the Carl Schurz High School of 1908.

The project for the Carl Schurz Public High School at Addison Street and Milwaukee Avenue, the firm's most famous design, was displayed at the Chicago Architectural Club annual exhibition in March and April 1908, and the final working drawings were signed by Perkins on 21 October 1908. The school was opened in 1910. This strong, almost expressionistic design, executed in a rich, warm-toned brick with stone and terra cotta trim, owes something not only to Louis Sullivan in its closely spaced piers and recessed spandrels, but possibly to German Secessionist architecture as well. Pure forms exactly repeated, sharp-edged intersections, uninterrupted planes, the close vertical pattern under a dominating horizontal line - all are characteristic features of the time, but they appear in the school in a unique and personal way. The major emphasis of the wall treatment is the verticalism secured by Sullivan's technique of introducing false piers between the true piers, which are impossible to discover except at the entrances. Elsewhere this accent is uniform throughout the length of all the elevations. The vertical movement is abruptly terminated one story below the roof line by the stone course at the top of the heavy pylon-like projections at the corners, along the wings, and flanking the entranceways. It is a formal element characteristic of several of Wright's designs at the time, especially the Larkin Company building in Buffalo. Part of the effectiveness of Carl Schurz High School lies in its color: the brick envelope of the wall is burnt red, the roof a softer red with green copper trim, the stone trim light buff. While the interior of the building differs little from the traditional planning of big urban schools, the exterior is a brilliant exhibition of virtuosity that marks the high point of non-commercial architecture in the Chicago tradition.

Another remarkable design prepared under Perkins' stewardship was for the Grover Cleveland Public School at 3850 North Albany Avenue (the 1909 Joseph Gray School, 30th and Lawndale Avenue, is similar). The approved drawings are dated 25 May 1909; construction was largely completed in 1910. The plan is a truncated T shape, four stories high, and the principal materials are brick with stone trim. The vigorous plasticity of earlier designs is not characteristic here. Wall plane predominates but is vitalized in two ways - first by the rich tapestry brickwork establishing a broad, continuous border along the sides and across the top (the cornice hardly projects at all); and, second, by the superimposed grill of piers which rests on a plinth that, in turn, caps the projecting posts and lintels of the ground floor. There is dignity and repose in the design; it is monumental without being formidable.

Variations on similar themes produce a markedly different effect in the final design for the Lyman Trumbull Elementary School, at the northwest corner of Ashland Boulevard and Foster Avenue. The dense array of continuous brick mullions on the long elevations and the tower-like projections provide a strong vertical pattern, which, however, is sharply contrasted with the horizontality of the entablature over the main entrance and the alternate bands of light- and dark-colored brick. The opposing movements are partially unified through the use of two ornamental devices: one is the complete enframing of the window groups between the broad piers, and the other is the extension of the light and dark bands continuously over mullions, piers, and projecting masses.

The year of his appointment to the Board of Education (1905), Dwight Perkins entered into partnership with John L. Hamilton; in 1911 the firm was expanded to include William K. Fellows who, prior to 1910, had been with George C. Nimmons. Hamilton served primarily as engineer and Fellows as designer. When writing of Perkins in 1915, Thomas Tallmadge said, "we think of him as a citizen and a patriot almost before we think of him as an architect." And for Perkins public service was always a matter of priority. His particular concern for more and better parks and playgrounds led him to service on numerous commissions. Along with Jens Jensen and others he was instrumental in establishing the famed Cook County Forest Preserves, one of which, in tribute, bears his name. His efforts to improve school facilities led to a conflict with the Board of Education, which, in effect, accused him of malpractice. At public hearings conducted in 1910 he cleared his name, but subsequently declined the proffered reappointment.

Perkins' reputation as an architect of the avant-garde is based upon his schools of 1907-10, and one naturally assumes that he created other designs of a similar nature. Such, however,

is not the case; there are few highly inventive designs among his works. It is possible, therefore, that these schools were produced by some anonymous designer temporarily assigned to his office staff. One suggestion has been that the designs might have been influenced by Marian Mahony, Perkins' cousin who for over eleven years to 1910 had been a designer and delineator in Wright's Oak Park Studio.

Although Perkins was not of the avant-garde, he often lent support to the cause. He did so at Steinway Hall, at the Chicago Architectural Club, and also during his mandate as architect for the Chicago Board of Education. But as a designer he perhaps lacked the capacity, and probably the will, to stray very far from the conventional course. His choice of medieval revival - whether the modified Queen Anne of his early career or the Tudor Gothic later on - typified the majority of his schools.

Despite the break with the Chicago Board of Education, Perkins, Fellows and Hamilton enjoyed continuous prosperity until Perkins' failing health forced his retirement and the reorganization of the firm as Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved in 1927. Of the firm's later work, architectural historian Carl Condit considered the foremost design to be the original building of Evanston Township High School, erected in 1923-24 in the Chicago suburb from which the township takes its name. It was this school that would later provide the model for Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas.

The site was as generous as a wealthy and education-conscious community could afford: it extended 1,495' along Dodge Avenue and 1,620' in depth along Church and Lake streets, the area embracing both the building complex and the contiguous athletic fields. Perkins' initial design called for a two-winged plan in the shape of a T, but this was later expanded to an H-plan in which the gymnasium, auditorium, classrooms, and study halls are in the wing, and the lecture rooms, laboratories, and offices are in the central block. The curtain walls of light-red brick and cream terracotta trim stand recognizably in the Chicago tradition; the strong articulation of continuous projecting piers and broad open bays is overlaid by a fine vertical pattern of thin continuous mullions. The decorative details - window moldings, coping, finials at the corners of the low tower over the entrance - are a simplified Gothic in character, but are carefully subordinated to the primary wall rhythms and the main volumes of the building.

When the Kansas City, Kansas Board of Education was faced with the necessity of replacing Wyandotte High School following the disastrous fire of March 3, 1934, they appointed a Special Committee to assist in the selection of an architect. The committee's efforts resulted in the hiring of Hamilton, Fellows and Nedved as principal architects for the massive project, as detailed in the preceding narrative. The result was a worthy successor to the firm's earlier schools and a major addition to the architectural legacy of the city of Kansas City and the state of Kansas.

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