

KANSAS

Kansas State Historical Society
Cultural Resources Division

KATHLEEN SEBELIUS, GOVERNOR

CERTIFICATION OF STATE REGISTER LISTING

The Register of Historic Kansas Places includes all Kansas properties nominated to the National Register as well as lower threshold properties which are listed on the state register only.

Property Name: Vernon School

Address: 2700 Sewell Avenue, Kansas City, KS 66101

Legal:

County: Wyandotte

Owner: Trustees, Episcopal District of AME Church

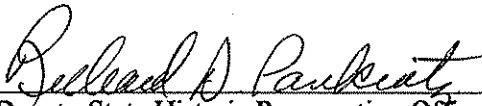
Address: 1111 N. 8th Street, Kansas City, KS 66101

National Register eligible _____

State Register eligible X

This property was approved by the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review for the Register of Historic Kansas Places on August 21, 2004.

I hereby certify that this property is listed on the Register of Historic Kansas Places.


Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

8/23/04
Date

9/95

Vernon School
Kansas City, Kansas

Description

The Vernon School (c. 1936) is located at the corner of 27th and Sewell Streets in Kansas City, Kansas. The one story brick structure, which stands on an east-facing rectangular footprint, is built on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River. A one story brick addition has been appended to the south end of the original building. A limestone retaining wall defines three sides of the school grounds. Most of the building's windows have been covered to prevent vandalism.

The east-facing facade of the original school is centered by the main entrance. Above the entrance, the otherwise flat concrete-capped roof-wall junction juts up in a low arch. Below this arch, a bas relief carving creates a focal point over the double entrance doors. These doors, inset from the plane of the facade, are approached by five concrete steps and are surmounted by a sixteen-light transom. On either side of the entrance, two single windows are separated by ribbon of three windows. Above these windows, letters in a moderne font name the building the Vernon School.

The north-facing facade is broken in to two sections. The easternmost section is fenestrated by a pair of windows, and the roof-wall junction is capped with concrete. The wall plane of the western portion of the facade stands forward slightly, and the roof-wall junction is capped with clay tile. A centrally-placed double door, surmounted by a sixteen-light transom and approached by a concrete ramp, provides access to the building from the north.

The west-facing facade of the original school building is fenestrated by three sets of two single windows separated by a ribbon of three windows.

An addition has been appended to the south-facing facade of the original school building. The west-facing facade of the addition is fenestrated by a single window at the northernmost end and a ribbon of several windows at the southernmost end. A single door provides access to the south end of the addition. The east-facing facade of the addition stands forward from the wall plane of the original school building. This face of the addition is fenestrated by a ribbon of windows on the southernmost end and a single window at the northernmost end. A single window also fenestrates the north-facing facade of the addition. A door located at the junction between the original building and the addition provides access to the school from the east.

The interior of the school was moderately altered when it became the Vernon Multipurpose Center. The original school building contained two classrooms on the east side and one large classroom on the west side of the central north-south hallway. The northeast classroom has been divided into four small rooms which serve as office space for the multipurpose center. Despite the divisions, the original blackboards and built-in cabinetry are still in place. The southeast classroom is divided in half by a partition. The large classroom on the west side of the hallway originally had wooden folding doors which could be closed to create two smaller rooms; these have been removed. A partition wall was constructed to create a separate room in the northwest

corner of the building; this area of the building has incurred water damage and is currently in the process of being repaired. The men's restroom is located in the building's northeast corner; the women's restroom is located in the southeast corner of the original building.

The addition contains a classroom on either side of the central hallway and a restroom in the northwest corner. The west classroom currently houses a local history museum. The east classroom has suffered significant water damage and is in need of repair.

Statement of Significance

The Vernon School (c. 1936) is historically significant under Criterion A for its association with the education of African-American children in Kansas City prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The Vernon School is also significant for its association with the WPA.

Historical background and significance:

From its inception, Quindaro Township was important to the development of Kansas City's African-American community and its educational opportunities. Founded in 1856 as a free-state port-of-entry and a stronghold for anti-slavery activists and free blacks, the town voted in favor of black suffrage on May 13, 1858. The first local school for black children—The Colored School of Quindaro—was also established in 1858, and was governed by an all-black school board. Years before the United States Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the Quindaro community addressed the issue of educating all of its children by creating separate educational facilities for black and white students.

Although the original town site of Quindaro was largely abandoned by 1862, the area received an influx of Exodusters who came to Kansas after the Civil War in search of freedom from the oppression they continued to suffer in the South. Throughout the period, Quindaro continued to offer African-Americans educational opportunities. In 1862, the Freedman's University was opened to teach freed slaves and their children to read, write, and perform a variety of trades. This facility was closed in 1877, but reopened as Western University in 1881 under the sponsorship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1896, Bishop William Tecumseh Vernon was appointed by the A.M.E. Church to the position of president of Western University. Under Vernon, who lobbied for and received funding from the Kansas State Legislature, the school's program offerings and physical plant grew.

At the turn of the century, the Colored School of Quindaro was renamed the Vernon School, in honor of William Tecumseh Vernon. By 1936, the original building which had carried the name had become overcrowded and was condemned as a fire hazard. The school district voted in favor of a \$15,000 bond issue to build a new school; the Public Works Administration (PWA) contributed an additional \$10,000 in grant money towards the project. WPA workers demolished the old building and by January 10, 1936, the *Kansas City Call* was reporting that the foundation was in and the brick walls were being laid. By March 23, the structure's exterior was complete and work had commenced on the interior walls. The completed building cost \$23,000 to construct. Bishop W.T. Vernon himself delivered the keynote address at the building's

dedication ceremony on September 4, 1936. Both the first Vernon School and its replacement were located adjacent to the south side of the Western University campus.

The new five-room brick school was designed by local architect Joseph Radotinsky. Joseph Radotinsky, born in 1902, moved with his parents to Kansas City, Kansas, in 1909. During his school years, Radotinsky worked a number of part-time jobs, including that of draftsman for the architectural firm of Rose and Peterson. Radotinsky enrolled in the architecture program at the University of Kansas and graduated in 1924. After a failed business venture, Radotinsky joined the architectural firm of Thomas W. Lamb, whose credits included Kansas City's Midland Theater, in New York. While in New York, Radotinsky attended Columbia University and won the gold medal in the New York Municipal Arts contest. In 1928, Radotinsky returned to Kansas City and joined the firm of Archer and Gloyd; in 1931 he became a partner in the firm. Shortly after returning to Kansas City, he was appointed State Architect by Governor Clyde Reed; he continued to hold this position until 1934. By 1938 he had been named the official architect for the Board of Education of Kansas City, Kansas. In 1957, Radotinsky, Raymond E. Meyn and Fred M. Deardorff formed an architectural firm which disbanded in 1966. Radotinsky continued in individual practice until his retirement in 1970. Among his works are the Sumner High School, the Federal Building, and the auditorium interior of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Building in Kansas City, Kansas; Forbes Air Force Base in Topeka, and the American Hereford Association Building in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Vernon School, constructed in a minimalized Art Deco style, reflected the restrictions and goals of WPA architecture. Because WPA workers were often unskilled in the construction trades, plans had to be simple and relatively easy to carry out. The Art Deco style, with its hallmark geometric patterns and projections, could be simplified without losing all of its modern flair. Therefore, a restrained Art Deco design was often the choice of architects on WPA projects. In addition, the federal government hoped that creating solid, prominent structures would encourage the American people to have faith in the solidity and security of their government. The simple, modern design executed in native stone presented the citizens of Quindaro with an image that was both progressive and reliable.

The Vernon School served its community as an elementary school until 1972. In 1966, the Washington Unified School District, of which the Vernon School was a part, was annexed by the Kansas City school district. Although the 1954 landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* had found racial segregation of schools to be unconstitutional, de facto segregation continued to plague the Kansas City schools for many years; enrollment at the Vernon School remained all-black for its entire career as an elementary school. In 1972, as a result of Kansas City's ongoing struggle to desegregate its schools, a new Quindaro Elementary School was built to replace the Vernon School and a prior Quindaro Elementary School building. Although many of the other historic elementary schools replaced at this time were razed, the Vernon School was sold to the AME Church for use as a community center. The Vernon School continues to serve in this capacity, offering community members of all ages a venue for a wide variety of craft classes, educational programs, and opportunities to socialize.

Bibliography

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