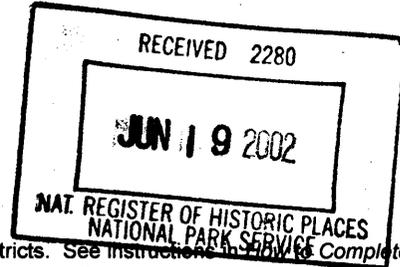


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

450  
828



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions to how to complete the National Register of Historic Places registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Pearl High School  
other names/site number Martin Luther King Magnet at Pearl High School

2. Location

street & number 613 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue North NA  not for publication  
city or town Nashville NA  vicinity  
state Tennessee code TN county Davidson code 037 zip code 37203

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered/significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Robert Y. Hays 6/18/02  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. ( See Continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register.
- other,  
(explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Case Ashlee

8-2-02

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Pearl High School  
Name of Property

Davidson County, Tennessee  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal
- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	1	buildings
1		sites
		structures
		objects
2	1	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION: school

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION: school

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: PWA Moderne

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

roof OTHER: built up roof

other METAL; STONE

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** moved from its original location.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Education \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ethnic Heritage: black \_\_\_\_\_  
 Social History \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1936-1971 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1936, 1966, 1971 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(complete if Criterion B is marked)  
 NA \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

NA \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

McKissack and McKissack \_\_\_\_\_  
 Street, Dixon, Rick (1995) \_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):** N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:  
 MTSU Center for Historic Preservation \_\_\_\_\_

Pearl High School  
Name of Property

Davidson County, Tennessee  
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 6.82 acres

Nashville West 308 NE

### UTM References

(place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 16 517967 4002207  
Zone Easting Northing

2 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

4 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jen Stoecker and Carroll Van West

organization MTSU, Center for Historic Preservation date January 2002

street & number Box 80 telephone 615-898-2947

city or town Murfreesboro state TN zip code 37130

## Additional Documentation

submit the following items with the completed form:

### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 Or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO) or FPO for any additional items

## Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Metropolitan Board of Education, c/o Dr. Pedro Garcia; Dr. Mildred Saffell-Smith

street & number 2601 Bransford Avenue; 613 17<sup>th</sup> Ave. N. telephone 615/259-8400

city or town Nashville state TN zip code 37204;37203

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

Pearl High School  
Davidson County, Tennessee

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## Architectural Description

The historic Pearl High School, now named Martin Luther King Magnet at Pearl High School, is located at the corner of Jo Johnston and 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue in North Nashville. The building lies directly across from Watkins Park and south of the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad and related railroad buildings. Directly north a few blocks on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue is the Fisk University Historic District (NR 2/9/78). The Tennessee State University Historic District (NR 6/14/96) exists west of Pearl High School. Meharry Medical College (Hulda Margaret Lyttle Hall, NR 7/2798) and the Andrew Jackson Federal Housing Project are also in the vicinity of Pearl High. This neighborhood is residential, commercial, and industrial in nature, located near railroad tracks and three African-American institutions of higher learning.

The original portion of the building that now houses Martin Luther King Magnet at Pearl High School was completed in 1937 and opened for students that same year. Named Pearl High School (Pearl High) for most of its existence, the building was designed by the prominent African-American architectural firm of McKissack and McKissack. The same firm built the 1945 and 1963 expansions to the school. The Nashville architectural firm of Street, Dixon, Rick designed the last addition to the school, the 1995 gymnasium. The building is constructed primarily of a dark red brick veneer and Art Deco stylistic elements are added in light stone over concrete. The school was a project of the Public Works Administration (PWA) and a common style name associated with PWA projects that used Art Deco design elements is PWA Moderne. The exterior of the original building maintains a high degree of integrity, with replacement windows that follow the original window lines and metal doors representing the only significant changes to the facade.

The east facade of the 1937 building faces 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue, North and is three stories high with seventeen vertical columns of windows. Three decorative entrance bays divide the facade. A large, decorative concrete central entrance represents the principal access to the school, while two small entrances, set apart with concrete, flank the primary entrance. The principal entrance bay is divided into three sections, with the outer sections projecting slightly from the larger middle section. The bay rises a foot above the roof of the brick part of the building. A vertical, Art Deco stylized banner containing the word "education" is located atop each of the projecting outer sections. Below the banner, each floor contains windows grouped in threes, with five vertical panes. Below each window in the second and third stories is a decorative panel with three vertical lines. The middle section features an Art Deco stylized clock at the top, original to the building. Four slender rows of bricks in a running bond pattern form the vertical length of the middle section. On the second and third story, the middle bay features four windows with five vertical panes. Art Deco decorative grillwork completely covers these windows and the spaces between them. Under the grillwork is the name "Pearl High School" in stylized letters carved into the stone. The first story of the middle section contains four, modern metal doors that are divided by brick columns which continue the vertical lines from the windows above. Each door has an original window above it; the two small, outer doors each containing a square window with nine panes and the two middle doors featuring a large rectangular nine-paned window.

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Pearl High School  
Davidson County, Tennessee

Between the main entrance and the small entrances, each floor contains five windows. The windows contain five sections, separated by mullions. Each section is single hung two over three. The windows are made of modern materials, however, as historic photos attest, they maintain the same style as the original windows.

The small entrance bays near either end of the building are identical both are constructed out of stone and contain a recessed middle panel with two narrow rows of bricks running vertically down the length of the building. In between the rows of bricks are two windows the top window contains sixteen panes total, arranged with two panes across and eight down. The bottom window contains four panes across and four down. Underneath the bottom window and carved above the door is a stylized winged emblem containing two figures lighting a torch. Under the emblem are two metal doors serving as the entrance to the first floor. Over the door is a light fixture covered by a vertically shaped box containing what appears to be an Egyptian or African stylized winged head with a headdress. On the side of each of the small entrance bays, are the five part windows, each single hung two over three. A stringcourse consisting of a double band of stone runs across the top of the building broken only by three entrance bays.

Connected to the original building on the north side is the circa 1963 gymnasium addition. The entrance to the gym addition is one story and follows a design concept similar to the original building, constructed with a running brick pattern and embellished with concrete. The facade contains four window groupings, each with five narrow rows of six panes. The gym addition continues north with the entrance projecting slightly from the larger part of the addition. Beginning from the south, the facade contains two metal doors below a square transom. Two concrete pilasters, decorated with Art Moderne stylizing fluting, flank the door and a metal canopy covers the entrance. Four small windows, with three panes, exist to the north of the door. An entrance identical to the first gym entrance exists to the north of the window grouping. The building then projects out to form a small ticket office, with the ticket window perpendicular to the second entrance. Three small windows with three panes hang horizontally on the facade of the ticket office. The slightly sloped roof of the gymnasium rises up from entrance section of the addition with two vents covered with aluminum sheeting.

North of the 1963 gym addition is the 1995 classroom addition, which also maintains construction materials similar to the original building, while its Post-modern styling reflects the design tradition of the original building. In addition to red bricks, yellow bricks create a decorative pattern in the top third of the building. The south part of this gymnasium (circa 1995) covers what was originally the north door in the 1963 addition. Four windows, with three panes each are present on the facade. A recessed door is on the north side of the windows, and connects the south part of the addition with the north section. The north section of the 1995 addition protrudes closer to the street than the foundation of the south section. The center of the north section features six red brick pilasters spaced evenly apart, with a wider space between the two center pilasters. Narrow windows with six panes exist between the outside pilasters. Four windows flank the decorative center of the facade, with two on each side. Two lines of red brick stringcourses, emphasized with yellow bricks, also top this portion of the 1995 addition. The gymnasium roof features yellow brick, is slightly recessed from the outer boundaries of this addition and rises up with a gently sloping roof. Two metal doors with a glass transom above are located on the northernmost portion of the center entrance bay. The windows contain five panes each.

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Pearl High School  
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The north elevation of the 1995 addition contains seven windows located in the upper portion of the gymnasium. The upper half of the building features a yellow brick veneer with red brick rectangular patterns in the bottom corners. The bottom half of the building is constructed with red brick. This elevation ends at the football field, which is situated between the south classroom wings of the school and the long east facade of the building.

The south elevation of the original building faces Jo Johnston Avenue and contains the south classroom wing. This elevation features similar window groupings as the front of the building. On westernmost end of the third floor, a bay window, which once provided light to a greenhouse, extends out from the building. The bay window was installed circa 1960. The bay window contains eighteen panes and is made of metal and glass. A one-story hyphen, part of the 1936-37 building connects the classroom section of the original building with the gymnasium/auditorium, also original. Mimicking the decorative brick on the front of the building, three stringcourses of stone run along the top of this hyphen. The gymnasium/auditorium contains five window groupings on its east elevation. Vertical stone lines also decorate this section. The south elevation of the gym/auditorium contains a decorative chevron with an eagle motif on each corner.

A one-story hyphen (circa 1945) connects the original gymnasium/auditorium with the vocational building classroom wing. A decorative center entrance protrudes from this hyphen, with two stone pilasters defining the section. A large window that contains three narrow panes tops two metal doors. Windows in groups of three are on either side grouping. The emblems are a two bladed fan, commerce symbol and two hammers crossing each other. On both the first and second stories, narrow two over three windows flank the entrance bay. The other windows on this elevation are two over three and are located from the entrance first in a grouping of five and then four.

The vocational building (circa 1945) closely follows the original building in style and construction. The building uses red brick veneer in a running bond pattern with light stone for decorative accents. The south elevation, facing Jo Johnston Avenue, is defined by the stone over concrete entrance bay. Over the doors is the sign "Vocational ;ducation" in recessed, stylized letters carved into the stone. This sign resembles the Pearl High sign in the front of the building. Four windows with five panes top the "Vocational ;ducation" sign. Two decorative brick lines divide the windows into three groups with two windows in the middle and one window on the outside of each narrow brick line. Three circular emblems top each window this elevation. A metal canopy tops these doors.

The west elevation is the rear of the school building. Its brick walls are broken at symmetrical intervals with bands of metal windows for the individual classrooms. The elevation lacks decorative elements found on the rest of the building. Parking lots and a metal chain link fence, installed circa 1990, separate this section of the school from the street and sidewalks, as a way of limiting access into the campus area.

The interior of the building represents a typical central hall school lined with classrooms. Maintaining many of its original features, the interior retains a high degree of integrity. The entrance features two Art Deco

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stylized columns, with carved feathers at the top and bottom. A two-tone green terrazzo floor is accented with a black zigzag pattern found around the perimeter of the lobby and also circles around the columns. Original wood trophy cases exist on either side of the central hall and also at the opening of each side hall. Fluorescent lights hang from the ceiling. The principal's and guidance offices are new space divisions located on either side of the main entrance. Metal lockers line the hallways of the first floor. Most of the classrooms contain the original wood doors with glass transoms over them. Wood floors with an alternating checkerboard design are present in most of the classrooms in the original building. Also present are wood bookcases with glass doors and wood lined chalkboards, now containing dry erase boards. Acoustic tile ceilings have been added, however, the window heights were unchanged when the ceilings were lowered. The entrance lobby is presently being remodeled to hide ductwork.

The second and third floor classrooms and hallways also maintain many original features. Staircases in the 1937 building feature wood handrails and posts. Each stair is capped with a decorated metal plate. The entrance to the stairwells, previously open, have been filled in due to fire codes. The library on the second floor contains wood trim around the main room and on the smaller offices at the end of the room. The library also contains the some of the original bookcases. On the third floor, what was originally a large music room, has been divided into two large classrooms.

The 1937 Gymnasium/Auditorium also known as the Pearl High Alumni Auditorium, contains the original hardwood floor and a large number of original wood folding chairs, arranged for stadium seating, fill the south wall. The space underneath the stadium seating contains the auditorium entrance and lobby and the former girls' and boys' locker rooms, which is now the Pearl High School Archives.<sup>1</sup> Modern plastic folding chairs are situated on the gym floor facing the large stage area. The north side of the auditorium features an open stage that is slightly scalloped at the top and contains a hardwood floor with a basket weave design. Large windows line the other walls of the auditorium, most of which are covered by heavy theater-style curtains. Acoustic ceiling tile covers the original wood plank ceiling and circular fluorescent lighting drops down from the tiles.

A brown and cream tiled hallway connects the original building with the 1945 addition built for vocational education, which is used currently for fine arts classes. This portion contains original wood doors that open to a small theater on the north side and metal doors that open to the outside to the south. The building contains a major corridor with two narrow hallways projecting from this corridor to the south side. Concrete blocks form the walls and linoleum tile is on the floors.

The 1963-64 gym addition exists north of the original building and is connected by a long concrete block constructed hallway. On the east side of the hallway are weight and fitness rooms. The cafeteria and kitchen are located on the west side of the hallway. A narrow hallway connects this area with the gymnasium. Four outside entrances exist on the east side of a small lobby for the gym. A concession stand and doors to the ticket office are also present on this wall. The gym is accessible through metal doors on either side of the large trophy case on the west wall of the lobby area. The gym is defined by a large basketball court with a wood floor. Seating exists on either side of the court, the south side has seating from the ground level up and

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the north side contains two levels of seating. The ceiling has drop circle lighting with large metal beams running across it. What was formerly a football field, now a soccer field, runs horizontally behind the gym addition.

The football field (1948) is a contributing site. (C)

A large metal utility shed (circa 1995) exists directly north of the building and is a non-contributing building, due to its date of construction. (NC, due to date of construction)

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Pearl High School  
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## Statement of Significance

Pearl High School in Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its exceptional significance in the history of African-American education in Nashville and for its significant association with the social history of Nashville. As the city's second public African-American high school, Pearl High School became an educational center for the fine arts, music, and sports, especially after the construction of specific rooms for those activities in 1936-1937 to 1945. Later in the nineteenth century, a high school program was added to the curriculum graduating its first class in 1898. As the only high school for Nashville's blacks until the 1950s, Pearl High School quickly became a state leader in African-American education and annual host for the Middle Tennessee Colored Teachers Association meetings. The Pearl community, including the administration, teachers and parents, provided a quality educational experience for students despite equipment, salaries and opportunities that were grossly inadequate in comparison with white public high schools.

Pearl High also holds significance as one of two major black schools in Nashville built with Public Works Administration (PWA) funds during the New Deal of the 1930s. According to a 1931 survey report written by Dr. Frank Bachman of the George Peabody College for Teachers, the building occupied by Pearl High at the time of the Great Depression was found to be grossly inadequate. Progressive educational reform ideas generated by the Bachman report and other outlets greatly influenced the design and location of the new Pearl High. Located near Fisk University, Meharry Medical College and Tennessee A & I State College (now Tennessee State University [TSU]) in the heart of North Nashville's black community, Pearl High exemplifies the 1930s concept of a neighborhood school. Nashville's McKissack and McKissack, the nation's first African-American architectural firm, designed an impressive, Art Deco influenced structure keeping in step with progressive ideas about education. For the first time, Pearl High enjoyed a library, gymnasium/auditorium, modern science lab, a professionally designed football field, and special rooms for music and vocational arts, and extracurricular activities. It was in these rooms that Pearl High established its outstanding academic, music, and sports programs. The 1936-37 building housed Pearl High longer than any of its previous locations and is the only extant historic building now associated with this century-long tradition of educational excellence embodied in the name Pearl High School. The building has undergone alterations with additions and modern windows, but retains its overall integrity.

Pearl High provided a refuge for Nashville's African Americans during the derisive years of segregation. Despite unequal treatment from the outside world, Pearl High's faculty created a family atmosphere that is celebrated by alumni even today. Closely connected to Civil Rights activities at neighboring universities Fisk and Tennessee A& I State College, Pearl High students and teachers were part of the force that affected change in Nashville's segregated society. This change was realized dramatically on the basketball court in 1966, when the Pearl High Tigers, coached by Cornelius Ridley, won the first integrated state basketball tournament. One of that team's star players, Perry Wallace, would be the first African American to play basketball (for Vanderbilt University) in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Although token integration by

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a handful of white students occurred in the late 1960s, Pearl continued as a largely black high school until 1971, when the Nashville School Board began to enforce the desegregation of its educational facilities and utilized district resources to bring about integration. Pearl High educated an integrated student body until its closing in 1983. The building reopened in 1986 as Martin Luther King, Jr. Magnet High School for Health Sciences and Engineering. It was renamed the Martin Luther King Magnet at Pearl High School in the fall of 2001.

When it opened in 1937, the McKissack and McKissack-designed Pearl High building represented a new chapter in an already cemented institutional legacy. The importance of Pearl High's history is especially evident in a speech given by Principal J.A. Galloway at the dedication of the 1936-37 building. "It is our purpose to dedicate the new Pearl High School tonight, but as we do this, we must first rededicate ourselves to the lofty ideals and traditions which have come down to us from the previous high schools that have borne this honored and revered name."<sup>2</sup>

## Background

Pearl School began in 1883 as a grammar school for African Americans on what is now Fifth Avenue South. It remained in the area known as "Black Bottom" until 1917 when the school outgrew its building due to an ever-expanding student population. Particularly during the turn of the century, the Black Bottom neighborhood thrived with several African-American owned businesses, such as clothing stores, a funeral home, doctor's office and a black medical center including Meharry's Hubbard Hospital, Mercy Hospital, and Millie Hale Hospital.<sup>3</sup> In 1883, this area provided the location for one of Nashville's first brick schoolhouses, the Pearl School. The school was named for Joshua F. Pearl, a Union soldier during the Civil War and Nashville's first superintendent of schools.

In the 1880s, only Pearl School and Meigs School<sup>4</sup> provided public education for Nashville's black grammar school age children. Both schools quickly achieved capacity enrollment, and many more children were denied education because of limited school size and resources. This situation reflects the low priority that public education held in post Reconstruction Tennessee. Faced with depressed agricultural markets and a large state debt, Tennessee legislators focused little attention on schools for people who could not afford a private education. And the little money that was appropriated for public education went mostly into white schools.

Despite these challenges, Nashville's African-American citizens pressed harder for the education of their children. James C. Napier, a black city councilman, convinced the council to approve a resolution to supply high school classes for black citizens in 1884.<sup>5</sup> This resolution did not go into effect until 1886, when Mrs. Sandy Porter attempted to enroll her son, James Rice Porter, in the white public Fogg High School. The city refused to admit Porter and other black students.<sup>6</sup> Large meetings took place within the black community as a

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Pearl High School  
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result of Nashville's refusal to provide secondary education to African Americans. These protests forced the Board of Education to begin offering ninth and tenth grades at the black Meigs School.

Principal D.N. Crosthwaite and teachers J. Ira Watson, J. M. Turpin, and L.T. Jackson were among those who established the early high school classes.<sup>7</sup> During the 1897-98 school year, the high school department at Meigs School transferred to Pearl School. At that time, Pearl became a combination elementary and high school. In June of 1898, the first graduating class from Pearl High School stepped across the stage thus beginning the enduring legacy that secures Pearl High's place in Nashville history.

Due to overcrowding, in 1917 the Nashville City government authorized the building of a new facility for Pearl High.<sup>8</sup> This three-story structure stood at 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue North and Grant Street near Fisk University.<sup>9</sup> The program for Pearl High's commencement exercises for this year demonstrates the atmosphere of tension and hardship endured by the African-American community. The valedictory address, entitled "Bend to the Oar, Though the Tide Be Against You" was presented to audience members at the Ryman Auditorium (NHL 1/3/01). The ceremony closed with a chorus of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," subtitled in the program as the "National Hymn for the Colored People of America."<sup>10</sup> Written by Fisk professor James Weldon Johnson, the contents of this program demonstrate a connection between the Pearl High faculty and students to Nashville's black community, as it reflects the early twentieth century struggles endured by African Americans in Nashville.

Challenging the status quo had intensified after black World War I veterans returned to a country that tolerated social and economic injustice at home while fighting for freedom abroad.<sup>11</sup> Change occurred right up the street from Pearl High at Fisk University in the late 1920s as students and alumni forced the university President out of office due to his paternalistic attitude and actions.<sup>12</sup> Many Pearl High teachers attended Fisk for either their undergraduate or master's degrees and continued to discuss issues of race with their high school students. Fisk professors also worked with Pearl High students in research projects, most notably those conducted under the direction of Charles S. Johnson, the nationally renowned African-American sociologist. Johnson joined the Fisk faculty in 1927 as the director of the Department of Social Research. During his tenure, the Department published twenty-three books and established the People's College, a settlement house that provided numerous training courses for the local black community including business, journalism, drama, and literature classes in addition to health and wellness clinics.<sup>13</sup> Under the direction of Charles S. Johnson, Fisk master's degree candidates studied the social characteristics of different groups of Pearl High students. Some examples of research include; student intelligence studies, comparing the personalities of Pearl High student leaders versus student non-leaders, and the career choices of Pearl High graduates.<sup>14</sup>

Pearl High quickly became a leader in black education not only in Nashville, but also within the Middle Tennessee region. Several sessions of the Middle Tennessee Colored Teachers Association met at Pearl High over the years with Pearl High instructors presenting the sessions. The *Nashville Globe and Independent*

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reported that the Tennessee State Association of Teachers in Colored Schools 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Session was held at Pearl High and Tennessee A & I State College. The *Globe* listed Carter G. Woodson, the nationally prominent African-American historian, as speaker for the 1934 program.<sup>15</sup> According to bandleader Marcus Gunter, owner of William Gunter and Sons Funeral Home across the street from the school, Pearl High regularly became the meeting place for the teachers' association each October.<sup>16</sup>

The efforts at educational improvement and reform occurring among the African-American community of educators reflected a nationwide movement toward progressive education. Not only did public education officials strive to improve curriculum and teaching methods, the physical buildings that housed educational institutions also fell under the reformer's searchlight. In Nashville, the 1931 Bachman report provides an example of progressive zeal aimed at improving education by criticizing the aging school building stock and encouraging the construction of modern facilities. This report, conducted by Frank Bachman of the George Peabody College for Teachers, ranked Nashville in the lowest group among Southern cities for providing adequate facilities, supplies, and reasonable teacher salaries.<sup>17</sup> Photographs in the report detailed the grim condition of Nashville public schools, with the situation especially poor in black schools. Also implicit in Bachman's report is the progressive idea that the physical facilities of schools should reflect modern curricula, including rooms for industrial education, physical education, and extracurricular activities.<sup>18</sup>

The 1931 Bachman report singled out the Pearl High building (circa 1917) as "inadequate with an unsatisfactory environment."<sup>19</sup> The report further cited the school as having "no gymnasium, library, rest rooms, student activity rooms, custodial services rooms or health service rooms." The Bachman report's final pronouncement on the 1917 Pearl High building signed its death warrant, indicating that it "should be abandoned for senior high purposes."<sup>20</sup> However, with the U.S. economy slowing down at the end of the 1920s, the outlook appeared grim for the Nashville's inadequate school facilities. In 1931, Pearl High parents and teachers took matters into their own hands and sought to remedy the school's lack of a library. They scheduled Professor L.S. Shores of Fisk University to give an address entitled "How to Secure a Library," at their April meeting.<sup>21</sup> The Parents and Teachers Association also designated a "book week," which included a book drive for Pearl High.

## 1936-1937: The New Deal builds the modern Pearl High building

New Deal programs intervened both in Nashville and across the country to provide greatly needed funds to rebuild, renovate, and repair public schools.<sup>22</sup> Beginning in 1933, Nashville began to take advantage of the large amount of federal relief money available through the Public Works Administration. Along with Pearl High, East High (NR 1/25/02 as East Nashville High and Junior High Schools), West End High, and Cameron Junior High (a black school) were built as a result of PWA funds in addition to several other junior high and elementary schools.<sup>23</sup> As well as stimulating the local economy, New Deal schools were built as modern educational facilities, with the goal of developing architectural plans in accordance with new comprehensive curriculum ideas. Moving beyond the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic subjects,

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New Deal school building design created space for auditoriums, shops, laboratories, and fine arts classrooms.<sup>24</sup>

At the dedication of the Pearl High School building in 1938, Dr. James Nabrit, president of the American Baptist Seminary in Nashville hailed the new facility as “representing the nation and the matchless vision of President Franklin Roosevelt through the WPA.”<sup>25</sup> Pearl High remains as a physical legacy to this important New Deal phase of school construction, unique because of its African-American heritage. For the first time, and primarily as the result of federal money, black students in Nashville had an architectural showplace in which to attend classes. Completed for a cost of \$336,000, Pearl was hailed as the cutting edge among public high schools.<sup>26</sup> Offering facilities for a comprehensive educational program, the 1936-37 building contained laboratories for biology, physics, chemistry, bookkeeping, typing, foods and clothing. In addition to scientific labs, auto mechanic, metal work, masonry and woodworking shops were available. Music represented a special focus in the new Pearl High building with a large third floor “Music Room” complete with a stage and smaller practice, library, and instrument rooms located off the larger area. The Gymnasium/Auditorium also provided a stage and large seating area for fine arts performances. Faculty and alumni remember that the building seemed to gleam with copper trim and marble terrazzo on the floors.<sup>27</sup>

Also important to the Pearl High community was that the designer of the school was the local firm of McKissack and McKissack, the nation’s first African-American owned architectural firm.<sup>28</sup> The firm began in the early 1900s, with Moses McKissack III operating as the only black architect in Nashville until his brother Calvin joined him in 1922 and they formed McKissack and McKissack, Architects. Before partnering with his brother, Calvin taught architectural drawing at Tennessee A & I State College and Pearl High.

In the 1920s, McKissack and McKissack secured many large contracts for black businesses throughout the state, thus gaining recognition and respect for their designs. As recognized leaders in the African-American community, McKissack and McKissack were responsible for building many residences, churches and educational buildings. With PWA funds earmarked for the new Pearl High, this firm became the logical choice for the school’s design. However, the school was the only large federal commission in Nashville that came the firm’s way—other schools, public buildings, infrastructure projects, and public housing projects went to the city’s white architectural firms.<sup>29</sup>

Seventeenth Ave North and Jo Johnston provided the location for the new Pearl High. Formerly known as “Line Street,” the road that became Jo Johnston represented the racial dividing line for the city. The white population lived south of Line Street and the black population lived north of this street. Pearl High stands directly north of this historic dividing line. In a 1938 article in the *American School and University Journal*, Calvin McKissack wrote this of the Pearl High location, “The site is well located with respect to the Negro population, a Negro park, the two-million-dollar housing project for Negroes, Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and the A. and I. State College.” He also emphasized that the building was an answer to

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the many problems noted in the 1931 survey and that it reflected the best principles of modern school design. He explained:

Nashville's new Negro high school was planned to house a modern secondary school program. It contains laboratories for biology, physics, chemistry, bookkeeping, typing, foods, and clothing; and shops for auto mechanics, metal work, masonry, and woodworking. Special rooms are provided for mechanical drawing, fine arts, and a model apartment. Music has received special attention in this plant. There is a large chorus room, practice rooms, an instrument room, and a music library. The entire plant was designed around the library as the central unit. Study halls were omitted, but the cafeteria dining room was placed next to the library so that it may be utilized as an auxiliary reading room. The plant provides adequate, well-lighted sanitary facilities well distributed throughout the building, and the necessary offices, rest and health rooms, and work rooms for the administration of the school.<sup>30</sup>

The school, thus, catered to past notions of what was proper education for African-American youth in its vocational education classrooms and its labs for bookkeeping, typing, and domestic work. But it clearly provided a huge step forward in creating better cultural opportunities, especially through music, and gave African-American youth science facilities unheard of in the older school building.

The new building site kept Pearl High close to one of its major benefactors, Fisk University, at the center of Nashville's black community. Fisk had owned the land before its transfer to the city for the construction of the high school. The modern school thus promised Fisk a better-prepared student for college education.<sup>31</sup> This location also closely linked Pearl High to Fisk University, and many of Pearl High's teachers attended Fisk for either their undergraduate or advanced degrees.<sup>32</sup>

The opening of the new school brought about excitement and pride within the Pearl High community. "We thought it was the grandest thing," said Beula Newton Aaron, a 1938 graduate, "but not everything was new for the students, even though the building was."<sup>33</sup> Aaron remembered using old books from the white schools that had pages and covers missing and writing in them. Second-hand supplies were the result of segregation as well as the difficult economic conditions brought about by the Depression. However, the issuing of old equipment and used supplies to black students continued beyond the 1930s in Nashville. The lack of instruments and music literature handicapped the efforts of the high school's first music teacher, Jordan D. Chavis. In the late 1940s, Bandleader Marcus Gunter refused a truckload of used instruments from the white Hume-Fogg High School (NR 10/16/74). He originally requested new ones, and would accept nothing less. The new instruments arrived soon, and Pearl High became one of the better-equipped bands. Over the next generation, from 1947 to 1974, Gunter, who had been schooled in music at Tuskegee Institute, developed a music program second to none. The Pearl High marching band was known for its vigorous, high-stepping style. He also developed a fine orchestra band, which even recorded albums for Century Records in the 1960s, in addition to a respected choral and vocal music program. One of the most prominent musicians to

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graduate from Pearl was Marion Moore, an opera star of the 1960s. Other prominent musicians included Milton Turner, a jazz drummer who played with Ray Charles, trumpeter Joe Davis who played with James Brown and Charles Dungey, who played in Duke Ellington's band.<sup>34</sup>

New equipment for other school programs proved much more difficult to get. The federal government may have provided the city with a modern education plant, but that did not ensure that the city would keep Pearl High's equipment on par with that of the newly constructed white schools. The use of substandard supplies and equipment for African-American schools within the Nashville Public School system continued. Unequal treatment within the school system mirrored the societal inequalities of Nashville itself. According to historian Don Doyle, "by the 1950s, the races in Nashville had never been more segregated."<sup>35</sup> City zoning policies, public housing, and redlining practices among realtors and banks shaped the racial make-up of Nashville neighborhoods. With the white population moving to suburban areas and black residential concentration mostly inside the city, Jim Crow dictated not only the use of public spaces, but was also reflected in the neighborhoods of Nashville.

Segregation also meant a smaller job market for African Americans, with the majority of opportunities in the unskilled, lower-wage occupations. Nashville's black professionals served a segregated client base, which limited the growth of business and forced many of them to move north.<sup>36</sup> Separate back entrances to movie houses and other places of business, seating in Jim Crow balconies and at the back of buses represent just a few of the ways that racial segregation was designed to remind blacks of their inferior status.

In some ways, segregation emphasized the centrality of schools and churches for the black community. The allegiance that alumni feel toward Pearl High is evidence of the key role the school played in Nashville's African-American community. Geraldine Johnson Searcy, Pearl High class of 1960 said, "Our life existed at Pearl. We couldn't go to the Krystal or any place like that and hang out."<sup>37</sup> After school plays, sports, and clubs consumed Pearl High students outside of school. Ted Lenox, who graduated from Pearl High in 1942, remembered special events held annual at Pearl High such as Homecoming bonfires, May Day celebrations, and Cotton Balls. Almost every event had a fundraising component; for example, the winner of Miss Pearl High was the contestant who raised the most money for the school. School publications, such as the *Pearl High Voice* provided forums for students to explore issues of race within the safety of the Pearl High community.<sup>38</sup> In 1936, the same year construction on the new Pearl High School began, Dorthea Mae Williams wrote an editorial in the *Voice* entitled, "Why there should be a course of Negro History in the high school."<sup>39</sup> Pearl High faculty and staff continued to create an environment within the walls of the New Deal building that enabled students to question and challenge the segregated world around them.

Most of Pearl High's faculty held advanced educational degrees and teachers worked with students to cultivate excellence within the school's academic, music and athletic programs. According to Marcus Gunter, member of the Pearl High faculty for over thirty years, there was a family atmosphere among the students and teachers at Pearl High and a concerted effort to make the students feel important, especially in segregated

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Nashville. "Everybody was somebody," Gunter remembered.<sup>40</sup> The Pearl High class of 1966 motto: "Striving Higher, Ever Forward" summed up the school's tenor despite the overcrowded facilities, used equipment, and underpaid teachers. Prominent educators who came from Pearl High include Hazo Carter, the president of West Virginia State University; the children's book author Patricia McKissack; Dr. Ada Jackson, the former National President of the Pan-Hellenic Council and Dr. Mary Frances Berry, chair of the US Commission on Civil Rights.<sup>41</sup>

The desegregation of schools represented a critical issue early in the Civil Rights movement, and Nashville proved no exception. The 1954 ruling of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, KS* declared that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" and therefore unconstitutional. A year later, the Supreme Court ordered schools to desegregate with "all deliberate speed." An East Nashville family tested this legal precedent in September of 1955, when the public school system expected their son to commute to Pearl High, though he lived much closer to the white East High. Pearl High student Robert W. Kelley became the primary litigant in what proved to be a landmark case in the eventual integration of Nashville's public school system. *Robert W. Kelley, et al versus Board of Education of Nashville* demanded open admission to Nashville's public schools regardless of race.<sup>42</sup> The next year a federal district court ordered a plan for desegregation of Nashville Public Schools, although follow-up hearings, decisions, and further litigation kept the case open to the late 1990s.<sup>43</sup> The plan developed by the school board, known as the Nashville Plan, offered a slow moving, piecemeal attempt at desegregation.<sup>44</sup> Even this gradual plan proved too much for white segregationists, some sought recourse by harassing black families, boycotting and picketing schools and even fire bombing one integrated elementary school.

As the movement for Civil Rights progressed in early 1960, Nashville's African-American college students became heavily involved in the training of nonviolent protest. Sit-ins, bus boycotts, and demonstrations became important tools in demanding an end to segregation.<sup>45</sup> Nashville's four African-American higher learning institutions, Fisk, Tennessee A& I (TSU), American Baptist Theological Seminary, and Meharry Medical College provided a nucleus of students for training in the philosophy and methods of nonviolent protest.<sup>46</sup> As an historical African-American institution, the lessons learned at Pearl High helped galvanize Nashville's black community that stood in support of the protests. When a student march on the Davidson County Courthouse (NR 3/23/87) was planned for April 19, 1960, the college student leaders decided to march from Tennessee State to Fisk and then planned for their first stop to be at nearby Pearl High School, where they hoped many students would join the non-violent protest. Pearl High teacher Marcus Gunter remembers the April 19<sup>th</sup> march on the Davidson County Courthouse when the "momentum came from Tennessee State, they came by and picked up our students. I wasn't going to stand in the hall and tell them they couldn't go."<sup>47</sup> Pearl High students involved in the march numbered in the hundreds, making a real difference to the presence of the protest. Once they reached the county courthouse, the marchers publicly challenged Mayor Ben West to end the segregation of lunch counters. The mayor agreed, and recommended that the city's lunch counters be integrated. The following day, April 20, 1960, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a mass meeting at Fisk University, attended by hundreds of Pearl High students.<sup>48</sup>

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Pearl High scored another victory against segregation, this one on the basketball court. In 1966, the Tennessee Secondary Schools Athletic Association (TSSAA) held its first integrated basketball tournament. Previously, the state championships were segregated with Pearl High's basketball team dominating the majority of the tournaments between 1939 and 1964.<sup>49</sup> In addition, Pearl High's basketball team often participated in the National High School Tournaments. After a team one the state championship, they went to a national competition. These competitions were sometimes held at the nearby TSU campus. Over the years, both the women and men's teams won national championships.<sup>50</sup>

The school had developed a nationally known football and basketball program, which produced such notable players as the National Football League's Joe Gilliam, the National Basketball Association's Ted McClain and UCLA's Ronald (Ronnie) Lawson, Sr. By the 1960s, with a limited amount of other competitive African-American teams to play in the area, Pearl High's team had to travel around the South for games. In 1966, Coach Cornelius Ridley led Pearl High's basketball team to an undefeated season and qualified for the first integrated state high school basketball tournament. Earlier that year, the team had lost in an integrated exhibition game by only one point to the predominately white Father Ryan High School.<sup>51</sup> According to *Sports Nashville*, this loss added to the already high expectations for the championship game as it thought by some that the team might "choke under the pressure." Pearl High's team quickly made it clear that "choking" was not an option. Newspaper reports indicate that the Pearl Tigers displayed a "high level of athleticism, one that had not been seen before."<sup>52</sup> Reportedly, all the players could slam-dunk and the bent basketball rims at Vanderbilt's Memorial Gym hung in testimony to their skill. Their opponent, Memphis Treadwell, was defeated easily. Pearl High's team posted a perfect season of thirty-one wins and had a two-year 43-game winning streak. Five players from Pearl High received college basketball scholarships, including Perry Wallace who went on to become the first African American to complete four years in the SEC conference at Vanderbilt University.<sup>53</sup>

Even though Tennessee's high school sports competitions became desegregated in 1966, Nashville's schools were integrated in name only. Found by the Supreme Court to be unconstitutional in 1965, the "grade-a-year" plan actually succeeded in creating further residential segregation by allowing white families enough time to move to the suburbs.<sup>54</sup> In July of 1970, District Court Judge Miller attempted to settle the earlier lawsuit brought by Pearl High student Robert Kelley and end Nashville's gradual desegregation by ordering the school board to submit a plan within 30 days for the desegregation of the staff and student populations and also to identify the construction of buildings that would aid integration. The busing of students outside of their residential neighborhoods became implicit in this order.<sup>55</sup> Though this order did not bring about instant integration, it did force the Nashville school district to seriously consider the changes that would have to occur for the actual integration of its schools. New "comprehensive" high schools were built to attract students from a diversity of backgrounds and interests. Money was budgeted for the busing of students to create a ratio in schools that reflected the total population of the school district. This ratio and a subsequent

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“acceptable” busing plan was set forth in the landmark 1971 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Co.*<sup>56</sup> In 1971, Nashville implemented its court ordered desegregation plan.

The Nashville school district began moving faculty and staff among its schools, which brought about the beginning of the end for Pearl High. Though it offered a comprehensive curriculum in both the vocational, liberal and fine arts, Pearl High’s smaller size could not compete with the 1970s definition of comprehensive secondary education. This modern critique of the neighborhood school threatened to close the Pearl High building in the late 1970s. Community protest saved the high school for a few more years until 1983, when the city’s desegregation plan combined Pearl High and Cohn High into the new Pearl-Cohn High School. A few years later, the former Pearl High building became the Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet School, which built upon the earlier legacies to make its own reputation in both academics and sports. In late 2001, the school name changed once again to Martin Luther King Magnet at Pearl High School.

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### **Verbal Boundary Description and Justification**

Pearl High School occupies 6.82 acres on the attached Davidson County Tax Map 092-08. The nominated boundaries represent all of the historic property associated with the school during its period of significance.

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Photos by:    Carroll Van West  
                  MTSU Center for Historic Preservation  
Date:           November 2001 and January 2002  
Negatives:    Tennessee Historical Commission  
                  Nashville, TN

East facade, facing northwest  
1 of 54

Entrance details, east facade, facing west  
2 of 54

Entrance details, east facade, facing west  
3 of 54

Entrance details, east facade, facing west  
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Entrance details, east facade, facing west  
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East facade, facing southwest  
6 of 54

East facade, facing southwest  
7 of 54

East facade, 1960s addition, facing west  
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East facade, 1960s and 1990s additions, facing northwest  
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East façade, 1990s addition, facing northwest  
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East facade, 1990s addition, facing southwest  
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East facade, 1990s addition, facing west

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North elevation, 1990s addition, facing southwest

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South elevation, facing north

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South elevation, facing northeast

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Bay window detail, south elevation, facing north

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South elevation, facing northwest

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Entrance detail, south elevation, facing north

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Hyphen, south elevation, facing north

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South elevation, facing northeast

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Vocational Building, south elevation, facing northeast

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Vocational Building, south elevation, facing northeast

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West elevation, facing northeast

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Football field, facing northwest

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Lobby and school office, facing southeast

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Trophy case, lobby, facing west  
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West hallway from lobby, facing west  
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Trophy case, lobby, facing east  
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Hallway, from hyphen, facing east  
29 of 54

Hallway to Vocational Education, facing southeast  
30 of 54

Hallway, Vocational Education wing, facing south  
31 of 54

Staircase to second floor, Vocational Education wing, facing north  
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Auditorium entrance, facing southeast  
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Auditorium, facing north  
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Auditorium seating, facing east  
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Auditorium, facing south  
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Auditorium seating, facing southeast  
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Stage and flooring, auditorium, facing north  
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Second floor hallway, from Vocational Education to PWA (original) building, facing east  
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Office, second floor, PWA building, facing north  
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Staircase, second floor, PWA building, facing southwest  
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Staircase, second floor to first floor, PWA building, facing south  
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Second floor hallway, facing south  
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Library, facing south  
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Library, facing north  
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Second floor, history classroom, with original built-in bookcase, facing northeast  
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Staircase, PWA building, first floor to second floor, facing north  
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Second floor hallway, PWA building, facing north  
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First floor hallway, PWA building, facing north  
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Hallway, 1960s gymnasium addition, facing east  
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1960s gymnasium, facing southeast  
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Trophy case, 1960s gymnasium, facing southwest

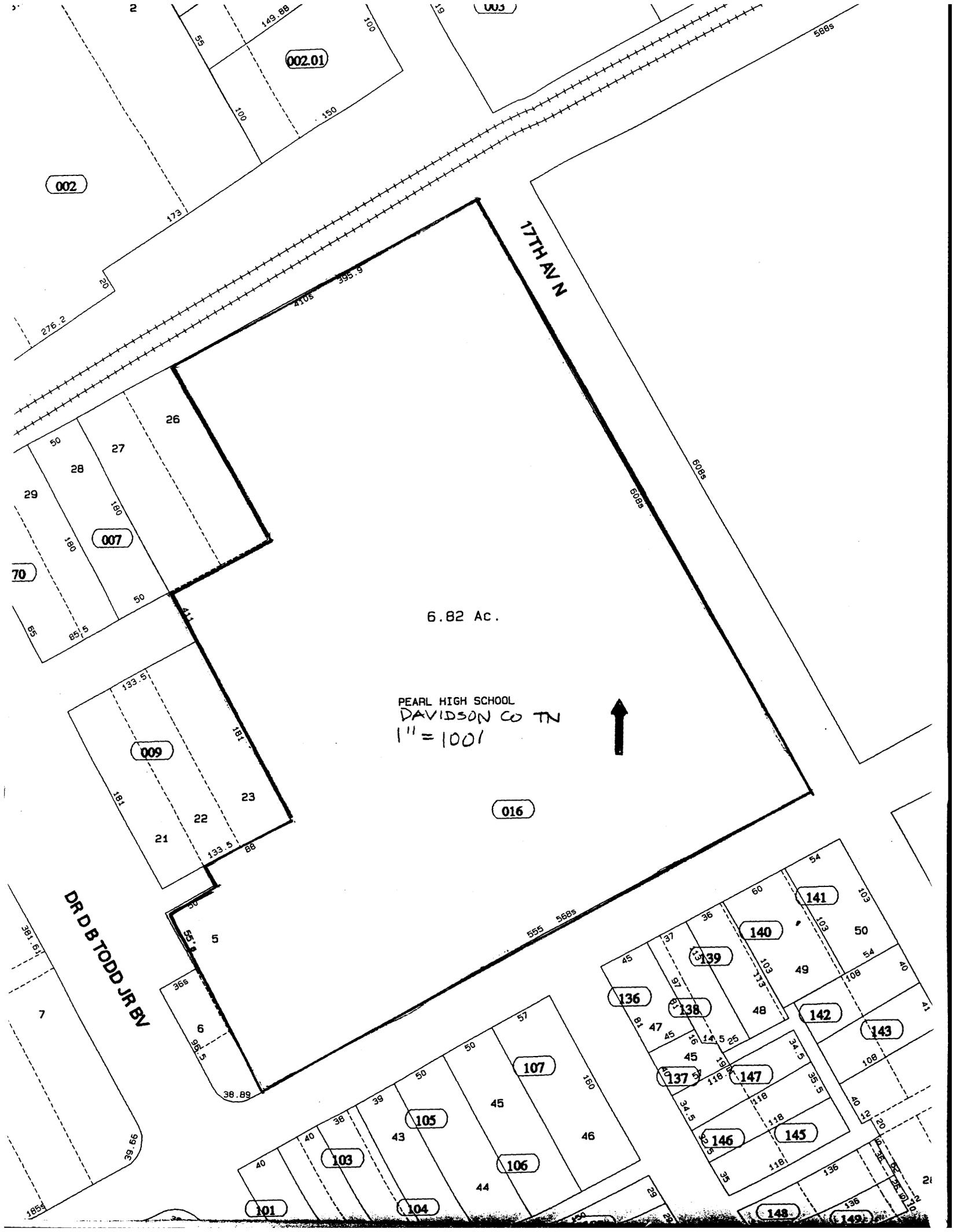
52 of 54

Auxiliary gymnasium doors, 1990s addition, facing north

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New firewall at staircase, first floor, PWA building, facing northeast

54 of 54



17TH AV N

6.82 Ac.

PEARL HIGH SCHOOL  
DAVIDSON CO TN  
1" = 100'



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DR D B TODD JR BV

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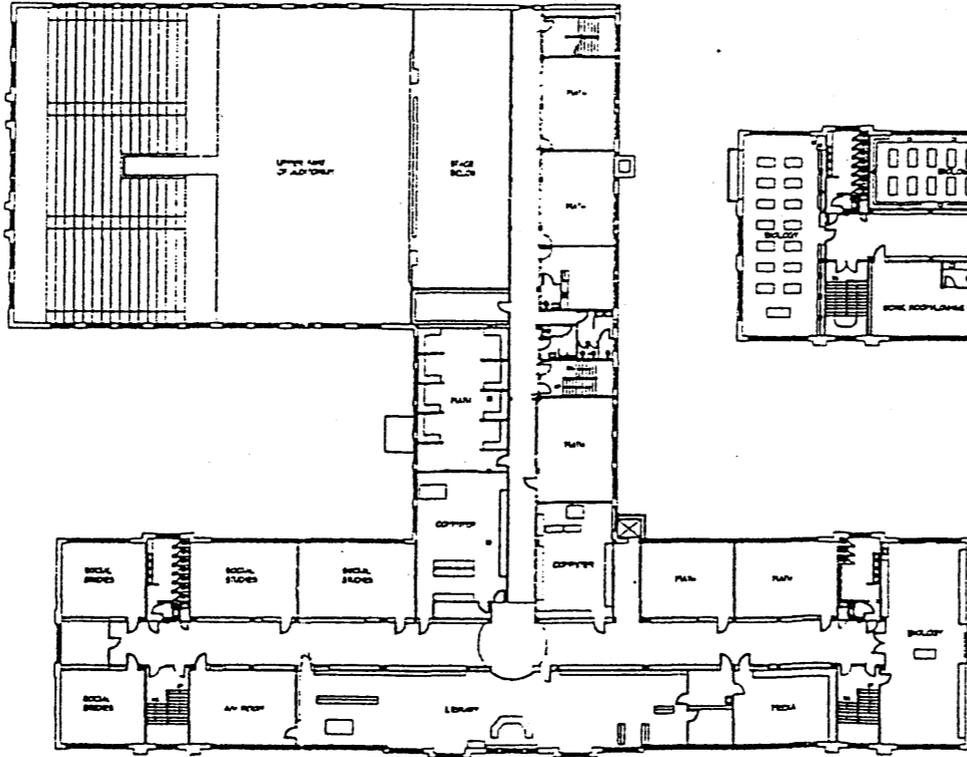
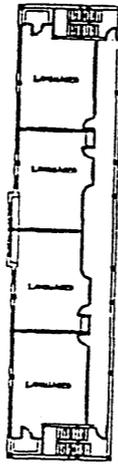
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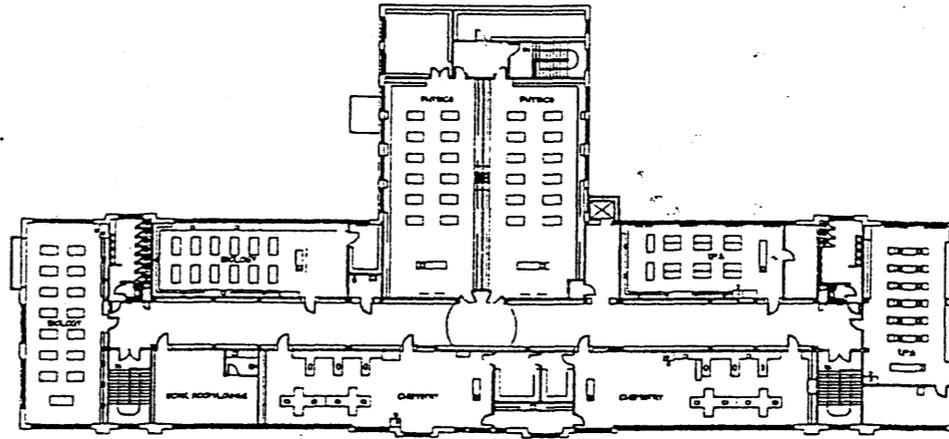
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PEARL HIGH SCHOOL  
DAVIDSON CO. TN

VOCATIONAL WING  
SECOND FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



THIRD FLOOR PLAN

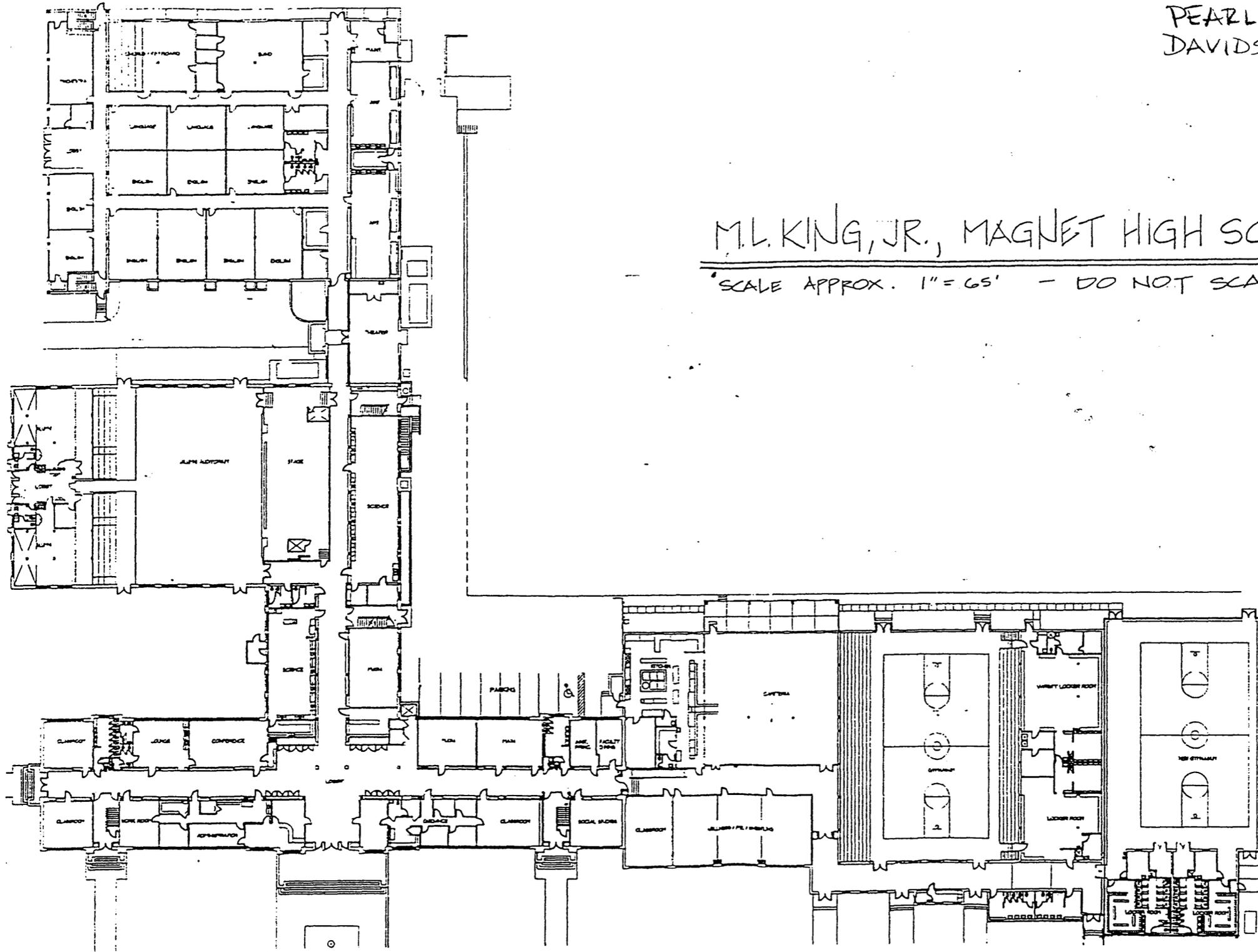
M.L. KING, JR., MAGNET HIGH

SCALE APPROX: 1"=65' - DO NOT SCALE

PEARL HIGH SCHOOL  
DAVIDSON CO. TN

# M.L.KING, JR., MAGNET HIGH SCHOOL

SCALE APPROX. 1" = 65' - DO NOT SCALE



RAILROAD

395.9'

PEARL HIGH SCHOOL  
DAVIDSON CO TN

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.  
MAGNET SCHOOL

PLOT PLAN

SCALE: 1"=100'

