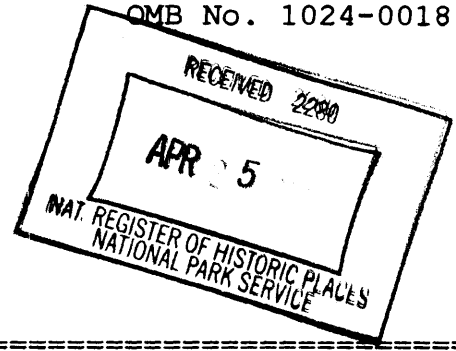


480

NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

1. Name of Property

historic name L'Ouverture Gymnasium
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number SE corner South 14th Street & East Chickasaw Avenue not for publication N/A
city or town McAlester vicinity N/A
state Oklahoma code OK county Pittsburg code 121
zip code 74501

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this _____ property be considered significant _____ nationally _____ statewide X locally. (N/A See continuation sheet for additional comments.)


Signature of certifying official

April 24, 2006
Date

Oklahoma Historical Society, SHPO
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 commenting or other official

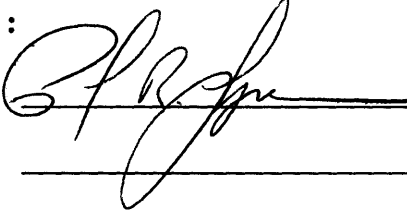
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this 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): _____



Date

5/26/06

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

=====

5. Classification

=====

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

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

=====

6. Function or Use

=====

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>RECREATION AND CULTURE</u>	Sub: <u>sports facility</u>
<u>RECREATION AND CULTURE</u>	<u>auditorium</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>VACANT/NOT IN USE</u>	Sub: _____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

=====

7. Description

=====

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: WPA Standardized Style

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE:sandstone

roof ASPHALT

walls STONE:sandstone

other Addition: BRICK walls with a
CONCRETE foundation

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 the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- 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)

ECONOMICS

Period of Significance 1933-1934

=====
8. Statement of Significance (Continued)
=====

Significant Dates _____

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
 N/A

Cultural Affiliation _____

Architect/Builder Civil Works Authority, builder

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

=====
9. Major Bibliographical References
=====

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

Previous documentation on file (NPS)
 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: _____

=====
10. Geographical Data
=====

Acreage of Property Less than 1 Acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	<u>15</u>	<u>248730</u>	<u>3868050</u>	3	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
2	<u>N/A</u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

N/A 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 Cynthia Savage, Architectural Historian, for the OKC L'Ouverture Chapter, Inc.

organization ARCH Consulting date December 2005

street & number 346 County Road 1230 telephone 405/459-6200

city or town Pocasset state OK zip code 73079

=====
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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name School District #80, McAlester Public Schools

street & number P.O. Box 1027 telephone _____

city or town McAlester state OK zip code 74501

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 9

L'Ouverture Gymnasium
name of property
Pittsburg County, Oklahoma
county and State

SUMMARY

The L'Ouverture Gymnasium, located in McAlester, Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, is a one-story, rectangular, native sandstone building constructed in 1933-1934 by the Civil Works Authority (CWA) and its immediate successor, the Emergency Work Relief Program (EWRP). The building has an asphalt-covered, barrel roof which is badly deteriorated and a stone foundation. The single windows with concrete sills have all been boarded. The original front entries were infilled with stone in the mid-1950s when a brick addition was added to the west side of the building and a new entry created through the addition. There are two door-sized openings on the rear of the building which are also boarded. Towards the front of the building, there are two brick chimneys built into the stepped stone parapet wall. Decorative details include stone buttresses with concrete caps dividing all elevations; decorative green asphalt shingles on the round-arched upper wall of the south elevation; a stepped, stone parapet with a concrete coping on the north side; a continuous concrete band which encircles the building and variously serves as the window header or sill; and, a concrete table on the north side inscribed with "L'OUVERTURE-AUDITORIUM".

The west side of the building is nearly total covered with a one- and two-story, red brick, flat-roofed addition with a concrete foundation. Off the north side of the two-story section of the addition and extending partially around the northwest corner of the original building is a one-story, brick, flat-roofed section which shelters the nonoriginal, double, metal, glazed, paneled doors and a concession area. The addition was constructed in 1956.

While the deterioration of the building, particularly the demise of the roof, and the boarding of the doors and windows is notable, the gymnasium retains sufficient historic character to convey its significance. The addition, confined largely to the west elevation and easily differentiated due to the different building material and smaller scale, does not adversely impact the ability of the building to convey its historic significance.

The boundaries for this nomination include only the historic gymnasium building. The gymnasium is the only building erected in McAlester by workers under the auspices of the CWA and the EWRP. While both programs authorized improvements to the other school buildings in McAlester, the work consisted only of painting and other deferred maintenance work on the buildings and upgrading of the school yards. Workers under these programs also improved numerous roads and drainage ditches within and around McAlester, in addition to a variety of other community service projects, such as a community garden and

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sewing rooms. Overall, the L'Ouverture Gymnasium is the best tangible resource in McAlester associated with these early work-relief programs created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to assist citizens during the trying years of the Great Depression.

The gymnasium is located towards the northwest corner of the block. The original L'Ouverture school building was situated directly east of the gymnasium and also fronted onto East Chickasaw Avenue. The circa 1908 school building was demolished in about 1952 when the existing main building was erected. Located on the southeast corner of the block, the new building fronts onto East Cherokee Avenue, from which it is now addressed. North of the school block is a large park with an historic pool and bathhouse. Residential construction typifies the blocks to the east, south and west of the building.

EXTERIOR DESCRIPTION

Typical of New Deal-era work-relief projects, the L'Ouverture Gymnasium was constructed of rusticated sandstone, including the foundation of the building. The stone was laid in a systematic coursed ashlar pattern with all courses atypically equal in height. The projected beaded mortar joints are another striking feature of the masonry work on the building. This type of mortar joints are also found on other New Deal-era buildings in Oklahoma. The barrel roof of the building has severely deteriorated so that much of the asphalt covering is gone and some of the wood framing members have collapsed as well. Nonetheless, the distinctive shape of the roof remains apparent. On the north side of the roof, built into the end sections of the stepped stone parapet of the north wall, are two red brick chimneys. The chimneys have brick corbeled tops.

The gymnasium is built on an uneven site. The south side of the block noticeably slopes downward from the north side of the block. The north elevation, the front of the building, is level and one-story in height. Towards the far south side of the one-story east elevation, the ground begins to slope downwards and a concrete ramp with metal rails bridges the gap to the parking lot and main school building located south of the gymnasium. To compensate for the uneven site, the south elevation is two-stories in height, as is the west elevation. The tall, uneven, concrete foundation of the red brick addition allows the brick portion of the wall to be even on all sides.

Although constructed in 1933-1934 and, thus predating the Works Progress Administration (WPA) program by over a year, the gymnasium is stylistically

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classified as being in the WPA Standardized style. This style of buildings, peculiar to programs associated with the New Deal-era, is characterized by a high level of craftsmanship; the use of native stone; restrained use of stylistic features; allusions to various architectural styles, frequently popular modern styles such as Art Deco and Moderne; and, most importantly, an enduring, rustic, functional fortitude compatible with the trying times of the Great Depression. The L'Ouverture Gymnasium exhibits all of these characteristics and is an excellent example of a Depression-era, government-sponsored, work-relief building project. With the vertical element of the buttresses, the stepped parapet and the horizontal effect created by the concrete banding, the building exhibits a modest Modern Movement stylistic influence.

The north elevation of the building serves as the facade. The barrel roof is obscured on this side by the stepped stone parapet, capped with a concrete coping. The parapet is symmetrical with the steps on either side being of uneven sizes and the end steps stepping up. Centrally located below the parapet is a large concrete table, inscribed with "L'OUVERTURE-AUDITORIUM." Immediately above and below the table are two narrow concrete bands which correspond directly to the length of the inscribed words so they are slightly shorter than the table. The lower wall of the facade is divided into three sections by two symmetrical, stepped, stone buttresses with concrete caps. The buttresses extend to just below the bottom concrete band under the concrete table. The central section contains only four boarded single windows with a continuous concrete sill and header. The windows are located high on the wall; the continuous concrete band which serves as their sill continues around the building and on the other elevations acts as the window header. The flanking sections of the north elevation are identical. Centrally located in both sections at-grade level were single entries with wide concrete headers. The headers extend over the edges of the doors into the wall. Both entries have been infilled with stone laid almost identical to the original wall. The edges of the doors, however, remain clearly evident by the continuous vertical mortar joint. Except for the concrete band which continues around the other sides of the building, the end sections of devoid of other ornamentation or fenestration.

The east elevation is symmetrically divided into six sections by full-height, stone buttresses with concrete caps. Within each section except for one are two single windows. The windows are now boarded. The windows have separate concrete sills and continuous concrete headers formed from the concrete band which encircles the building. In the second to last section on the south side

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of the elevation, there are no windows but a single boarded entry with a wide concrete header matching those on the facade. Above the entry in this section is the continuous concrete band which serves as the header for the windows in the other sections and encircles the building at this level.

Unlike the two elevations described above, the rear elevation is two-stories in height. The upper rounded wall of the south side is covered with decorative, green, asphalt shingles with wood now visible underneath. Below this, the stone wall is divided into three sections by two full-height stone buttresses with concrete caps. The center section is void of any architectural features or fenestration, save for the continuous concrete band which encircles the building. Below the shingles and above the concrete band are two sets of single windows in each of the outside sections. As with all the windows in the building, these windows have been boarded. The windows have no header and the continuous concrete band serves as the continuous sill. At-grade level in both flanking sections are single doors with single windows to the outside. The door and window in each section has been boarded and has a wide continuous header. The windows also have wide concrete sills.

The majority of the west elevation is covered by the 1956 red brick addition. Like the east elevation, the west wall was likely divided into six sections by full-height stone buttresses with concrete caps. The southernmost section remains visible and is two-stories in height with two single windows set high in the wall that have been covered with wood. The concrete band which encircles the building serves as the continuous concrete header for the windows. Each window has a concrete sill.

The red brick addition was constructed in 1956 as part of a \$26,000 dollar remodeling program for the gymnasium. At the time, the stage was removed, the length of the court extended and additional seating added to the building to allow a 350 person capacity. Additionally, new dressing rooms and concessions stands were built.¹ The addition is one- and two-stories in height with a tall concrete foundation and flat roof. On each side of the two-story portion of the addition, beneath a metal flashing along the uppermost wall, is a wood coping. The south wall of the addition, attached at the buttresses separating the southernmost section of the original west elevation, is void of any openings. The west wall of the addition contains sixteen windows openings, eight on each level. The windows are symmetrical with concrete sills. The

¹The McAlester (Oklahoma) Democrat, 15 November 1956.

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windows have been boarded but the metal, awning, two-over-one frames are visible on some of the upper floor openings. Flanking the windows on the west elevation on either side are metal drain spouts.

Attached to the north side of the addition is the one-story section of the addition. This section also has a flat roof but with a short, wood, boxed cornice. Due to the boxed cornice, this section does not extend as far to the west as the two-story section. There is a single window located on the west elevation and a single window on the east wall. Both windows have concrete sills and have been boarded. The double, metal, glazed, paneled entry is inset under a flat roof supported by a full brick wall on the north side. The entry is set even with the east wall of the addition and the roof covering it extends over the original west entry in the historic gymnasium facade.

ALTERATIONS

Although the condition of the building is poor, the gymnasium retains a fairly good degree of integrity. The only major alteration to the building is the 1956 addition. The addition is clearly demarcated by the red brick construction material. Although sizable, the addition does not match the original building in overall height or width. Except for a small extension on the north elevation, the addition is principally confined to the west elevation. Overall, the addition does not impede the ability of the gymnasium to convey its historic significance as a New Deal-era work-relief construction project.

Other changes to the gymnasium, primarily consisting of the demise of the roof and boarding of the windows and doors, relate to the non-use of the building. Presently, alumni of the school are working to bring the building back into service, possibly as a museum or activity center. One of their first anticipated actions is to restore the roof. While lamentable, the changes caused by the vacancy of the building do not destroy the integrity of the gymnasium, particularly the qualities of location, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

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SUMMARY

The L'Ouverture Gymnasium is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, specifically the Civil Works Authority (CWA) and Emergency Work Relief Program (EWRP). While the CWA was technically a separate program, the EWRP was a component of the relief program under the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA). These programs, along with the other New Deal agencies, not only bolstered the local, state and national economy through the trying years of the Great Depression of the Thirties but also contributed a lasting legacy to Oklahoma's built environment.

The L'Ouverture Gymnasium was the only building constructed by the CWA in McAlester. Started in late 1933, the building was finished by mid-1934, taking slightly longer than the CWA existed. As with numerous other CWA projects, the gymnasium was finished by workers employed by the FERA's EWRP. The CWA was the first federal public work-relief program initiated by FDR's administration, largely to aid citizens in need through the harsh winter of 1933-1934. The program was abandoned in the spring of 1934, "having served its purpose of helping people weather the winter..."² Importantly, the CWA set the precedence of work-relief over the "dole" which was believed to have a negative impact on the psyche of the unemployed. The FERA and EWRP picked up immediately after the CWA, continuing the work-relief initiated by the CWA with a few modifications.

The L'Ouverture Gymnasium was intended to serve both as an auditorium and gymnasium; however, the CWA workers inscribed the concrete table affixed to the facade of the building with the name "L'Ouverture Auditorium." In contrast, the local newspaper during the time of construction consistently referred to the building as "gymnasium." Combined with the current preferred use of "gymnasium" by alumni of the school and others, this nomination uses the common name of L'Ouverture Gymnasium rather than the inscribed L'Ouverture Auditorium.

BACKGROUND

Located in Indian Territory, the land on which Pittsburg County and the community of McAlester is situated was first part of the vast original Choctaw

²George Brown Tindall, America: A Narrative History, 2nd edition (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 1118.

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Nation, granted to the tribe in 1820 in the Treaty of Doaks Stand and covering much of what is now southern Oklahoma. Seventeen years later, the Chickasaws formed an alliance with the Choctaws and were largely removed to the Choctaw lands in Indian Territory by 1840. Quickly chafing at their incorporation into the Choctaw Nation, the Chickasaws began rallying for their own tribal domain. In 1855, the matter was resolved by the Choctaw-Chickasaw Treaty which divided the old Choctaw Nation into three areas. The Choctaw tribe retained the east one-third of their original lands in Indian Territory. The Chickasaw tribe gained their autonomy from the Choctaw tribe and the center one-third of the original Choctaw Nation in exchange for \$150,000 paid to the Choctaws. The final one-third of the old nation was perpetually leased to the United States government for \$800,000 with the Choctaws receiving three-fourths of the money and the Chickasaws the remaining \$200,000.³

In 1869, J.J. McAlester, formerly of Arkansas, settled in the Choctaw Nation at the crossroads of the California Trail and the Texas Road. McAlester, with partner T.H. Hannaford, opened a tent store to serve wagon trains traversing the area. Within three years, McAlester bought out his partner and married Rebecca Burney, a Chickasaw Indian. Due to this marriage, McAlester, a white man, became a citizen of the Choctaw Nation and, therefore, entitled to acquire title to land within the Choctaw Nation. In 1872, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway (MK&T) completed a line right by McAlester's store. Additionally, the MK&T constructed a station and ticket office near the McAlester store, naming the station "McAlister" which is how McAlester's family spelled the name. In 1885, the U.S. Post Office changed the spelling to the familiar "McAlester." Auspiciously located by the railroad, soon the community was thriving.⁴

One of the major attractions of the developing town was the presence of coal. McAlester knew of the coal deposits when he first settled in the area. Although McAlester began mining the coal when he settled there, the first commercial coal mine opened in the area in 1875. Operating under the name

³Arrell Morgan Gibson, Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 48-49, 62-64, 75-76.

⁴Pittsburg County Historical and Genealogical Society, Inc. Pittsburg County, Oklahoma: People and Places (Wolfe City, Texas: Henington Industries, Inc., 1996), 517.

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L'Ouverture Gymnasium
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Osage Coal & Mining Company, the mine quickly made a profit. However, a disagreement arose over the sale of the coal with the Choctaw tribe which felt the coal was part of their land. Coleman Cole, Chief of the Choctaw tribe, pronounced a death sentence on J.J. McAlester for the sale of Choctaw property. This sentence was later dropped after an agreement was reached between the mining company and the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes. This agreement called for the mining company to pay a royalty to the tribes for coal that was mined.⁵

In 1889, the Choctaw Coal and Railway Company completed a line connecting the rich coal field on the east to the St. Louis and San Francisco (Frisco) Railroad line at Wister and on the west to the MK&T near McAlester. Due to a disagreement with J.J. McAlester over the right-of-way through McAlester, the new line was built 1½ miles south of the existing community. This new line resulted in the growth of a new town, South McAlester. In 1890, a post office was established at South McAlester. Development in the new community was quickly booming, while the original McAlester to the north did not fare as well. One of the major booms to South McAlester was the location of a federal court in the town in 1890. Due to the presence of the court, many lawyers located to the new settlement.⁶

Both McAlester and South McAlester incorporated in 1899; McAlester on 23 January and South McAlester on 9 November. In addition to the booming coal industry, both towns benefitted from a flourishing agricultural industry. Due to the excellent rail transportation system in place, food distribution also became a major industry. In September 1903, the Indian Territory Traction Company began operating a line linking McAlester to the South McAlester business district and to the residential areas to the south and east. In 1907, an act of Congress joined the two McAlesters into one city, simply named McAlester. That year also brought the joining of the twin territories, Indian and Oklahoma, into the state of Oklahoma. As part of the statehood process, McAlester was named the county seat of Pittsburg County. The nearby town of Krebs protested the selection of McAlester as county seat of Pittsburg County. An election on 26 September 1908 settled the dispute with McAlester triumphing over Krebs.⁷

⁵Ibid., 517.

⁶Ibid., 517.

⁷Ibid., 518-521.

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L'Ouverture Gymnasium
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Coal underlies nearly 14,500 square miles of 19 counties in eastern Oklahoma. The majority of coal is high-grade bituminous, ideal for generating steam. In 1898, nineteen companies mined coal in Indian Territory. Within twelve years, the number of companies had more than doubled to fifty-three. Until 1920, coal reigned supreme in southeastern Oklahoma. Following this, the demand for coal decreased as railroads, a major coal consumer, began using oil rather than coal. The decline was temporarily halted during World War II when coal was again in great demand. By 1950, the coal industry in southeast Oklahoma was rapidly declining.⁸

During the heyday of coal mining in southeastern Oklahoma, McAlester reaped many benefits. At the turn of the century, the combined population of McAlester and South McAlester stood at 4,125, with McAlester boasting 646 residents and South McAlester having 3,479. By 1910, the population of McAlester stood at 11,774, with the city being firmly entrenched as the coal region's financial and commercial center. Ten years later, the population dropped by about a thousand before rebounding to 11,804 in 1930. Despite the Great Depression, growth continued to be modest in McAlester through the 1930s so that by 1940 there were 12,401 residents. Spurred by war-related industries, specifically a major Naval Ammunition Depot which presently continues in operation, McAlester experienced a major population boom in the 1940s with the 1950 Census recording 17,878 citizens.⁹

In 1910, another momentous economic event of lasting import occurred for the town of McAlester, the opening of the state's main penitentiary on the north edge of town. The state legislature designated McAlester as the site for the new prison in March 1909 with work beginning immediately, mostly with prison labor, on the new complex. The first prisoners occupied the new prison in

⁸Ibid., 521. See also Oklahoma Historic Preservation Survey, "Historic Context and Predictive Model Document: Architectural/Historic Intensive Level Survey of Coal Mining Related Resources of Pittsburg County," (Available Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1990), 11 and 45-46.

⁹Oklahoma Historic Preservation Survey, "Survey of Coal Mining Related Resources," 49. See also Pittsburg County, Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, 521 and The Daily Oklahoman, (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), 20 June 1954.

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L'Ouverture Gymnasium
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1910. The prison continues in operation to the present day and has throughout the decades provided McAlester with a major economic support.¹⁰

Another banner event occurring in McAlester in 1910 was the graduation of the first class of students at the L'Ouverture school. Constructed in about 1908, the school served the black community of McAlester as required by Oklahoma statute. Previous to the construction of the new school building, African-American students attended classes at area churches and Curry Hall.¹¹ The 1907-1908 Polk's Directory for McAlester lists two black schools, Curry School at 215 East Delaware Avenue and Lagrone School at 1305 East Chickasaw Avenue. While the 1908 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map did not include the Lagrone School as the mapped boundaries did not extend east of Tenth Street, 213 East Delaware Avenue is noted as a public school for black children. By 1913, the two-story, rectangular building at 213 East Delaware Avenue had been demolished and the school at 1416 East Chickasaw Avenue, commonly called L'Ouverture, was noted as the "2nd Ward School (Negro)."¹²

That both schools were public city schools is notable as, in general, the school system in Oklahoma was designed so that members of the majority race in the school district, either African-American or white, composed the school board, which had authority over the local school district. The county then maintained a separate school for the minority students or made arrangements for their transfer to a compatible racially composed school in another district. Although legal under the doctrine of "separate but equal," this frequently put the separate school, usually the black school, at a major economic disadvantage. The majority school was supported by a tax levied on all property in the district, not to exceed fifteen mills. The minority school was maintained by a tax levied on all property in the county, not to exceed one mill and subsequently two mills.

¹⁰ See also Pittsburg County, Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, 521.

¹¹"L'Ouverture Alumni 1907-1968, Tenth Reunion, 2002," n.p., 2002, (Available Southeastern Public Library, McAlester, Oklahoma), 1.

¹²Polk's Directory, McAlester, Oklahoma, 1907-1908 (Available Research Library, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma). See also Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, McAlester, Oklahoma, 1908 and 1913.

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The L'Ouverture School continued in operation as McAlester's separate school until 1969. A new school building was constructed in 1951-1952 as part of a county-wide bond issue to improve Pittsburg County's separate schools. The original building of the L'Ouverture School was demolished following completion of the new larger building. By the mid-1950s, black children from the nearby towns of Canadian, Crowder, Carbon, as well as African-American students from all over McAlester, were bussed to the L'Ouverture school. In 1955, desegregation of the McAlester schools was initiated using an "optional plan." Students residing outside the school's area were given the "...the option of enrolling in the elementary area serving their area or using school transportation facilities to L'Ouverture." At the time, twelve elementary students took advantage of the plan with both the junior high and high schools remaining racially separate.¹³ As with many other communities, full integration of the McAlester school system did not actually occur until the early 1970s. Thus, while the demolition of the original L'Ouverture school building in 1952 resulted in a loss of the tangible connection to the early history of black education in McAlester, much of the story remains embodied by the existing school buildings.

However, as this project involved only the L'Ouverture Gymnasium due to a variety of reasons, the educational significance and integrity of the L'Ouverture School complex was not assessed. On an educational basis, the gymnasium is not significant without the larger main school building. Despite this, the gymnasium is historically significant as the only building constructed in McAlester by the CWA and the FERA's EWRP. While much narrower in focus, the CWA was a critical step in the development of work-relief projects under the New Deal program engineered by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration to assuage the suffering of citizens during the greatest economic crisis in American history. While a later work-relief program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), is given credit for bringing McAlester "...to its knees and then its feet..." during the 1930s, the CWA and EWRP started the process of public work-relief construction projects.¹⁴

¹³The Daily Oklahoman, 14 August 1955 and 9 September 1955.

¹⁴"This is McAlester, Oklahoma", (Available "McAlester" Vertical Files, Research Library, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma).

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HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

The first two decades of the twentieth century were prosperous ones for McAlester as the coal mining industry was at its peak, the million dollar penitentiary was up and running and crop production was up. By about 1930, however, the city's prospects had considerably dimmed. In addition to the decline in coal use in the 1920s resulting in the closure of mines, McAlester was further economically devastated by the agricultural crisis of the late 1920s and 1930s. Hurt by overproduction, infestations and drought conditions, Oklahoma farmers were also at a disadvantage due to the lack of land ownership. In 1930, sixty-two percent of Oklahoma farmers were tenant farmers, representing the highest rate of tenancy in the Midwest. Significantly, the tenancy rate in Pittsburg County and the other southeast Oklahoma counties averaged ten to fifteen percent higher than the rest of the state. With no tangible ties to the land, tenant farmers were essentially a dispossessed people searching for sufficient economic means to subsist. Thus, they moved frequently and often lived at below poverty standards. Their plight was compounded during the depression years by the drought conditions which reduced farm incomes even further, leaving them with little choice but to resort to the relief system or migration out of Oklahoma. With widespread unemployment by 1932 due to closing mines and inadequate yield, the economic distress was such that hunger marches became a frequent occurrence in Pittsburg County.¹⁵

In efforts to stimulate the national economy and assist citizens in distress, President Roosevelt legislated twenty-nine different acts between 1933 and 1939. The bills were structured to sustain various parts of the economy. The majority of acts sought to provide some type of relief for the unemployed. The Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) of 1933 was one of the first bills to aid the destitute. This act channeled federal money to state and local agencies, which then dispensed the funds to impoverished families. Other than direct money, relief was dispensed under the auspices of the FERA in the form of limited work-relief projects. These projects sought to preserve the dignity of the unemployed by allowing them to work for their money rather than receive an

¹⁵Richard W. Fossey, "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" A Study of Oklahoma's Cultural Identity During the Great Depression," The Chronicles of Oklahoma LV:1 (Spring 1977), 14, 22. See also W. David Baird, "Final Report: WPA Structures Thematic Survey (Phase III), (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Oklahoma State University, 1987): 5.

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abhorrent handout from the government. The work-relief program under the FERA went through several stages of development. Early projects were essentially state projects which happened to use available FERA funds.¹⁶

In late 1933, the Roosevelt Administration established the federal Civil Works Authority (CWA) in response to the large scale unemployment still incapacitating the nation. The CWA was considered a separate organization from the FERA although the same people administered both programs with much collaboration in activity. While the CWA was in operation, however, the FERA work-relief program was discontinued. Solely a federal program, the CWA employed the jobless in building various public construction projects. At its peak in January 1934, over four million people were employed. Intended only as an interim program, Roosevelt discontinued the CWA in March 1934 due to excessive cost and the fear of creating a permanent relief class.¹⁷

The FERA took over for the terminated CWA, establishing the Emergency Work Relief Program (EWRP) to continue the work of the CWA by finishing its projects and undertaking new public works projects. Under the EWRP, work-relief projects fell largely in the jurisdiction of the state but with limited federal regulations. These regulations mandated that employment was granted through local relief agencies who determined need and pay scale; projects had to fall within broad FERA categories; the work had to meet certain federal regulations; and, all projects had to have a sponsor. Although effective in assisting the destitute for two years, the FERA ceased operation in May 1935. Critically, the CWA and EWRP served as a model for subsequent work-relief programs.¹⁸

In August 1933, "Approximately 350 representatives from school, municipal and county units of government..." from fifteen Oklahoma counties met in McAlester for a day-long conference to discuss the proposed national public work-relief program. The program called for the state to receive an appropriation of about

¹⁶Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943 (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 2-7. See also William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 120-123.

¹⁷Final Report, 2-7. See also Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 120-123.

¹⁸Ibid.

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\$3.3 million dollars from the federal government. The money was then to be made available to "...cities that desire to construct projects and give employment to idle men." The participating cities would receive a donation of thirty percent of the project cost with the remaining seventy percent to be repaid within a period of forty years. Although "...very few definite projects were outlined...", the need for school repair and construction were stressed in both the morning and afternoon sessions.¹⁹

The CWA was formally created in November 1933. Notably, the program "...was conceived and implemented in haste, and many of its projects were "make-work" jobs such as leaf-raking and ditch-digging...". Within weeks, Carl Giles of Norman was named as "Civil Works Administrator for Oklahoma." This was somewhat unusual as the appointment of Giles left the existing state relief organization with authority only over direct relief cases. Giles immediately announced plans to employ over 76,000 men statewide on useful projects at an average pay of \$12 per week. All able-bodied men listed on the relief rolls were to be immediately transferred to the "...work rolls under Giles' administration."²⁰

At the end of November 1933, it was announced that Pittsburg County would received \$259,000 for civil works projects. According to the local newspaper, the money was to be split between the various government entities in the county and only new projects would be considered. Only those able-bodied men registered at the federal registration office of C.H. Hinton would be employed on the projects. At this early stage, most work was anticipated to be devoted to grading and repairing mail and school bus routes.²¹

With a quota of 1,621 men in Pittsburg County, the CWA program was able only to put to work a fraction of the reportedly 8,000 countians registered for work. The county government planned for ninety percent of the CWA program allotment to be spent on labor costs with the remaining ten percent to go to pay for materials. With about 800 men toiling on roads and other county projects, the city of McAlester sponsored two projects for canal and street improvements

¹⁹The McAlester (Oklahoma) Democrat, 31 August 1933.

²⁰Tindall, America, 1118. See also The McAlester Democrat, 23 November 1933.

²¹The McAlester Democrat, 30 November 1933.

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involving 221 men. The balance of the county quota, 600, was to be put to work on school projects.²²

While the CWA relieved some of the economic pressure on the local branches of government, the implementation of the program in Pittsburg County was not without its problems. In late December 1933, a mass meeting resulted in an investigation into the administration of relief in Pittsburg County. According to M.L. Misenheimer, state legislator, "...foremen on relief work apparently were attempting to see how many of their own relatives they could place on the relief rolls." Through early January at least, "...dissension over civil works employment in Pittsburg County, coal mining region, remained at high pitched with the problem untouched through regular relief channels."²³

Despite the problems, by the second week of January 1934, CWA workers were at work in the schools of McAlester, as well as the other towns in the county. The majority of the work in McAlester involved repairing the existing school buildings and improving school yards. However, the CWA undertook one construction project for the McAlester school system, the building of a new gymnasium at the L'Ouverture School. The foundation of the gymnasium was finished by this stage of the program with work continuing to meet the anticipated mid-February deadline terminating the CWA program.²⁴

At the peak of the CWA program, January 1934, the quota for workers in Pittsburg County was raised to 3,000 men. With additional funding provided by Congress in early February 1934, the CWA program was extended six weeks past its original mid-February deadline. Nonetheless, in a nationwide reduction of the program in latter February, the quota in Pittsburg County was reduced to 1,300 men. The CWA continued in operation through the end of March 1934 with work on the school projects in McAlester progressing nicely. During the first week of April 1934, local relief school supervisor, Dewey Loveall, announced that all "...the Pittsburg county school relief projects were transferred this week from the CWA registration to the new FERA set up...".²⁵

²²Ibid., 21 December 1933.

²³The Daily Oklahoman, 30 December 1933 and 5 January 1934.

²⁴The McAlester Democrat, 11 January 1934.

²⁵Ibid., 11 January 1934, 22 February 1934 and 5 April 1934.
See also The Daily Oklahoman, 3 February 1934.

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Not complete in time for the graduation of the class of 1934 on May 18, work on the L'Ouverture Gymnasium was set to be "...complete within a few days." The following week, thirteen men were called to report for work on the project. There was no further mention of the construction of the gymnasium in the McAlester newspapers. Presumably the gymnasium was complete as previously indicated and put into service for the 1934-1935 school year.²⁶

Contrary to previous claims in draft National Register nominations for the L'Ouverture Gymnasium, the construction of the gymnasium likely did not provide employment opportunities for the black community in McAlester. While a federal program, the hiring of workers was left in the control of locals. Thus, unemployed blacks were typically discriminated against with jobs often going to white workers who, regardless of qualifications or, in some cases, even if they were from the community, were employed first on the basis of race. This was true nationwide and even on construction projects for black schools and hospitals. These discriminatory practices were evident in many New Deal-era programs, particularly in the early years, including the FERA, CWA, WPA, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and National Recovery Act (NRA) programs. However, increasingly from the mid-1930s forward, efforts were made from the federal level to reduce discriminative practices. Although still open to abuse on the local level, these efforts increased opportunities for blacks to receive jobs and other aid. Overall by 1939, African-American income from the various New Deal programs nationwide, both work and direct relief, almost equaled black income from agricultural and domestic work.²⁷

Although the CWA program offered little to the black community in the form of direct monetary aid, the enhancement to educational facilities by this program and the other New Deal-era programs was beneficial. This included construction of schools and hospitals, as well as housing under the Public Works Administration (PWA). Overall, a drop of 10 percent in the illiteracy rate

²⁶Ibid., 17 May 1934. See also The McAlester (Oklahoma) News-Capital, 18 May 1934 and 20 May 1934.

²⁷The Black Dispatch (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), 1 February 1934, 23 August 1934 and 6 September 1934. See also Joe William Trotter, Jr., From a Raw Deal to a New Deal? African Americans 1929-1945 (Oxford University Press: New York, New York, 1996), 21-61.

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among African-Americans during the 1930s was doubtlessly aided by the increased government spending on education.²⁸ Importantly, cognizant that recreation and athletic competition were greatly influential on the formation of character, educational spending in the 1930s by the government included the construction of such educationally-related facilities as gymnasiums and athletic fields.

The only building constructed in McAlester by the CWA and EWRP was the gymnasium at the city's black school. The intent of the project, to provide the school with space for "...assembly meetings and high school athletics...", provided the community with improved educational facilities. The building continued to be used as originally intended for over twenty years. In the mid-1950s, the auditorium function of the building was dropped due to the construction of an auditorium in the new main school building. At that time, the stage was removed, the seating expanded with new dressing room facilities and a concession area being added by a brick addition to the stone building. The gymnasium continued in service through the remaining years of the L'Ouverture School. By the mid-1980s, the building was used for storage purposes by the school district with it falling into disuse in more recent years. Currently, an alumni group, the OKC L'Ouverture Chapter, Inc., is initiating work to bring the gymnasium back into use, possibly as a museum or activity center.

In all, the CWA expended over \$900 million dollars on projects across the United States. The largesse of the program was also responsible for the demise of the CWA as the excessive cost was a determining factor in its dissolution. Within Oklahoma, the CWA spent nearly \$18 million dollars with \$302,971 of that in Pittsburg County alone. The CWA projects in Pittsburg County had a total value of \$316,657. The FERA and its EWRP further boosted the Oklahoma economy by an additional \$46,732,902 in outright grants. From the FERA program, Pittsburg County received a total of over \$1.2 million dollars between April 1933 and December 1935.²⁹

While the local allotment of the relief money was tarnished by racism and other corrupt practices, the CWA and EWRP/FEAR programs were critical in providing economic aid to community and state governments during the nationwide crisis. Additionally, the end result of the many construction projects of these

²⁸Trotter, Raw Deal to New Deal?, 44.

²⁹The Daily Oklahoman, 27 September 1936.

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programs, such as the L'Ouverture Gymnasium, proved to be of lasting usefulness to their communities. The functional fortitude expressed in these stone edifices reflects the strength of character of those who weathered the most debilitating economic crisis of the twentieth century. Overall, the L'Ouverture Gymnasium is an excellent representation of the economic value of the CWA and EWRP/FERA programs within McAlester.

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

From the southeast curb at the intersection of South 14th Street and East Chickasaw Avenue, go forty-three feet east and sixty-nine feet south to the corner of the building; then go seventeen feet east; then seventeen feet south; then forty-three feet east; then ninety feet south; then forty-eight feet west; then fourteen feet north; then sixteen feet west; then seventy-five feet north; then two feet east; then seventeen feet north to point of beginning. Block 407, Original Townsite, McAlester, Oklahoma.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundaries include only the property directly associated with the **L'Ouverture Gymnasium**.