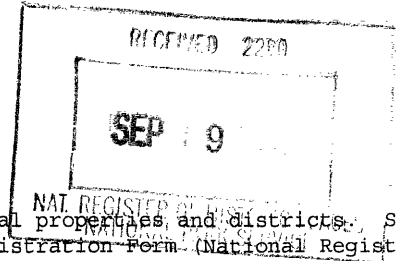


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM

1277



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in 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 any 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: Mary Lee Nichols School

other names/site number: N/A

2. Location

street & number 400-406 Pyramid Way not for publication N/A

city or town Sparks vicinity N/A

state Nevada code NV county Washoe code 031 zip code 89431

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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. (     See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ronald M. Jones, SHPO  
Signature of certifying official/Title

17 September 2002  
Date

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:

X 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):     

Edson H. Beall 10/31/02

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 (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

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: EDUCATION Sub: School

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: SOCIAL Sub: Civic

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19<sup>th</sup> AND 20th CENTURY REVIVALS

Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

roof Composition shingle

walls Brick

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.) See 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 our history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- 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/achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Education  
Architecture

Period of Significance 1917-1936  
Significant Dates 1917, 1920, 1936  
Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A  
Cultural Affiliation N/A  
Architect/Builder F. DeLongchamps/U. Bernasconi

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

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography** (Cite books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets). See 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 .32 acre

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	<u>11</u>	<u>263550</u>	<u>4379810</u>	3	_____	_____
2	_____	_____	_____	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 Mella Rothwell Harmon  
organization State Historic Preservation Office date July 15, 2002  
street & number 100 N. Stewart Street telephone 775-684-3447  
city or town Carson City state NV zip code 89701

**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 Foster Grandparent Program  
street & number 1552 C Street telephone 775-358-2768  
city or town Sparks state NV zip code 89431

**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 listings. 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 the 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 Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 7. Description

Mary Lee Nichols School is located in Sparks, Nevada on the northeast corner of Pyramid Way (originally Eighth Street) and D Street. Built in 1917, and enlarged in 1920, the school operated until 1970, when it was sold to a non-profit organization. Its architecture is derived from the Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival style popular for school buildings at the time. Reno architect Frederic DeLongchamps designed the little primary school the same year he was commissioned to prepare the plans for Sparks High School. DeLongchamps was especially proficient at a variety of Period Revival styles, and designed a number of excellent Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival buildings in Nevada and northern California.

Mary Lee Nichols School was constructed on four city parcels comprising 14,250 square feet in the O'Sullivan Tract, one of Sparks's earliest additions. The 3,634-square-foot building's primary façade faces west, with a small lawn in front, and the playground at the rear. The original 1917, 1,834-square-foot structure was rectangular with a three projecting bays that contained a central entrance, and lavatories and cloakrooms on each side. The entrance opened into two classrooms directly behind. The classrooms extended less than four feet on either end of the building. Two additional classrooms totaling 1,668 square feet were added to each end of the building in 1920 to accommodate an increase in school enrollment.

The building, which sits on a concrete foundation, is sheathed in red brick laid in common bond, although the original plans called for a coating of stucco. It has since been painted white. A sill course encircles the building accentuating its low horizontality. The entrance bay is bracketed by two side bays each topped with a stepped parapet with a flat roof behind. The original plans and historic photographs indicate that the parapets were originally rounded, but at some point prior to 1966 the line of the parapets was flattened. The roof over the classrooms is low-pitched and hipped, and covered in composition shingles. Eaves extend well beyond the walls. Extensions of the main roof overhang the central doorway and two secondary façade doors; large brackets support them. Windows are one-over-one, double hung sash arranged singly and in groups of three. They are topped by radiating brick, segmental arches, and rest on projecting sills. The triple windows share a continuous sill.

In addition to the two-classroom expansion in 1920, the school was modified in 1936 to upgrade the heating system with new radiators, and the construction of a storeroom and boiler room, adding 132 square feet at the rear of the building. Frederic DeLongchamps designed all of these modifications, as well as a front landscaping design prepared in 1927.

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 7. Description, continued

### Integrity

With the exception of a coat of white paint over the original brick exterior,<sup>1</sup> a modern metal-framed entry door, and a change in use, the school building retains a remarkable level of integrity. The line of the parapets over the two bays were originally rounded, as shown in historic photographs and the original plans. A 1966 photograph in the School District's records show the flat roofline as exists today. There are no records to indicate when the modification occurred, but since DeLongchamps designed so many school buildings for Sparks, and he was in practice until 1965, it is reasonable to assume he may have been consulted on this alteration. The new owners of the building are sensitively restoring it to serve Sparks's Foster Grandparent program. Since all of the original plans still exist, accurate preservation can be achieved.

## 8. Significance

Mary Lee Nichols School is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A for its role in the educational history of Sparks, Nevada, and criterion C as an excellent example of a modest educational building designed by Nevada's pre-eminent architect Frederic DeLongchamps in the Mission architectural style. A thematic National Register nomination was prepared for DeLongchamps's buildings in Reno and Minden (listed August 6, 1986), however, Mary Lee Nichols School is not being included under this cover, due to its specific geographical and historical focus.

### Criterion A

#### Sparks, Nevada

The Central Pacific Railroad had passed through the Truckee Meadows since 1868, at which time Reno was established as a railhead for the booming gold and silver mines of the Comstock Lode. The closest division point and repair facility was Wadsworth, 30 miles east of Reno. The Southern Pacific Railroad (SP) took over the Central Pacific in 1885, but it was not until New York capitalist Edward H. Harriman acquired the SP in 1900 that changes to the route through the Truckee Meadows were made. The re-route eliminated dangerous curves, excessive grades, avoided areas subject to flooding, and shortened the line, by-passing Wadsworth. Truckee, California was considered for the new division point, but railroad

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<sup>1</sup> Based on photographs of the building when it was appraised for sale in 1966, the white paint was applied after Washoe Association of Retarded Children, Inc. purchased it in 1970.

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 8. Significance, continued

officials ultimately settled on a location in the Truckee Meadows east of Reno (Rainshadow Associates 1993).

The railroad acquired the Mary Wall Ranch and properties of William Thomas near the community of Glendale, Nevada, just east of Reno. Real estate speculators gobbled up the ranch lands surrounding the railroad's holdings, and quickly platted and marketed housing tracts. Between 1903 and 1904, the Newton Tract, the O'Sullivan Tract, and the Lincoln Park Addition were established. The railroad established "The Reserve" and developed it into 64 housing lots for long-time employees who were to be moved from Wadsworth. Parcels in the Reserve were priced at \$1 each and sold through an informal lottery. Over the summer of 1904, dwellings in Wadsworth were torn down or moved in sections to the new division point. About 70 homes were relocated to the Reserve, while others filled lots in the other housing tracts. The Reserve was limited to residential buildings, so the new business district was established at the southern end of the Robison Tract along its boundary with the Reserve. The railroad yards were laid out in early 1905, with miles of sidetracks, hundreds of switches, a roundhouse with 40 stalls, and the largest turntable in the world. The repair shops were the most extensive and advanced of the time (Rainshadow Associates 1993).

The new community was first known as East Reno, and then some consideration was given to the names New Wadsworth and Glendale. The first post office was named Harriman when it opened in September 1903. Mr. Harriman did not approve of the honor, however, so in April 1904 the town was officially named Sparks, after Nevada's popular governor John Sparks. Sparks incorporated in March 1905, and the new community of 1,200 souls quickly elected a mayor and city council. City government immediately faced challenges from the lack of adequate sanitary facilities to the need for a volunteer fire department (Rainshadow Associates 1993).

In addition to comfortable working-class residential neighborhoods, Sparks offered a full range of commercial services including its own financial institution, the Bank of Sparks, and a wide selection of retail businesses. An electric trolley system operated between Reno and Sparks from 1904 to 1927. In Sparks, railroad union officials succeeded in keeping gambling halls, saloons and brothels to a minimum, unlike Reno where these activities were major factors in the local economy. Sparks functioned as a company town from its inception until the shops were closed in 1956 (Rainshadow Associates 1993).

### Sparks Schools

Sparks's population in January 1904 was reported to be around 1,200. By 1920, it had grown to 3,200. Needless to say, the population included school-age children, and to serve them Washoe County established the Sparks School District as early as March 1904. That fall, classes were held in the Baptist

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

### 8. Significance, continued

and Congregational Churches. Sparks's first dedicated school was the Grammar School, which opened in January 1906 on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Prater Way.<sup>2</sup> Sparks did not get a high school until 1917, the same year Mary Lee Nichols School was built. The High School was located on 15<sup>th</sup> Street and was designed by Frederic DeLongchamps in the Classical Revival style. The student population in Sparks had reached 686 by the summer of 1917 (*Sparks Tribune* July 9, 1917), and by the fall, the *Sparks Tribune* was reporting that "attendance at the Sparks schools will be greater this term than at any other period in the history of the city" (September 17, 1917). Further, with the residential areas moving eastward from the town center, the school board saw a need to "place a small grade building in the eastern part of the town to care for the little tots who are entering school, yet who are rather small to make the journey to and from the larger building" (*Sparks Tribune* January 22, 1917).

Initially referred to as the "Ward School at 8 and D," by September 1917, the school board had decided to name the "small grade building" the Mary Lee Nichols School, after the late Miss Nichols, a well-loved primary teacher in Sparks. The *Sparks Tribune* reported, "the naming of the school for Miss Nichols would be only a just and proper tribute to her long years of faithful service, and would help keep fresh the memory of her helpful and loving ministry to the children of Sparks and to hand down the tradition of her unselfish devotion to the teaching profession" (September 17, 1917).

It was hoped that Mary Lee Nichols School would be ready for the opening of the fall session, but a delay in obtaining supplies from the coast set back the opening by more than a week (*Sparks Tribune*, October 15, 1917). The dedication exercises were held the evening of Saturday, October 20, 1917. Frederic DeLongchamps was unable to attend, but Mr. C.A. Brennen was appointed to read Mr. DeLongchamps's statements presenting the building to the school trustees. Mrs. Baker the chairman of the school board "very graciously accepted the building and pleasingly told of the true appreciation for the people and architect, who made it possible for the board to build a much needed primary school in the eastern park of Sparks" (*Sparks Tribune*, October 24, 1917). The evening continued with prayers, singing, and tributes to Mary Lee Nichols. Miss May Sullivan was appointed principal of the new school. Her assisting teacher was Miss Ann Cozzalo (*Sparks Tribune*, October 15, 1917).

By the summer of 1920, the *Sparks Tribune* was once again reporting that "attendance at the Sparks school this year is expected to be largely in excess of the attendance at any time within the history of the

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<sup>2</sup> Sparks Grammar School was renamed Robert Mitchell School in 1924, after a principal who had died in 1913. The school building was demolished in 1938, to be replaced by the present Robert Mitchell School, which was funded and built by the WPA and designed by Frederic DeLongchamps.



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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 8. Significance, continued

local schools” (August 23, 1920).<sup>3</sup> To accommodate the burgeoning student population, additions were planned for both the high school and Mary Lee Nichols School. Frederic DeLongchamps was engaged to prepare the plans for the improvements. As with original construction, opening of the school was delayed. This time the delay resulted from the fact that the lumber yard shipped the wrong kind of windows.

The 1920 addition was designed to match the original building in materials, scale, and design. The plans called for the “false rafters to match those in present building; all windows and wood work to be the same as in present building; brick sill to line up with present brick sills; present belt course to continue around new addition; all interior finish to be the same as in the present building; and shingles doubled every sixth course to match present work” (NC1215 NAA1/67/4). The specifications called for “Reno Press Brick Company’s best common brick” (NC1215/55).

In 1927, Frederic DeLongchamps prepared a landscape and sprinkling plan for the front of Mary Lee Nichols School, and further upgrades to the school were made in 1936, when DeLongchamps designed a 132-square-foot boiler room at the rear of the building to support the installation of new steam radiators in the classrooms. At some point in time, one of the cloak rooms was converted to a small kitchen in order to provide hot lunches.

By 1956, the Reno School District and Sparks School District were merged into the Washoe County School District, and by 1966, the demographic make-up of the neighborhood had changed to the degree that Mary Lee Nichols School was closed and placed up for sale. Photographs included with an appraisal prepared in September 1966, show the little red brick building to be in good condition and, with the exception of the change to the parapets,<sup>4</sup> looking just as it did following DeLongchamps final work on it in 1936. It was not until 1970 that a buyer for the school was found. The Washoe Association for Retarded Children, Inc. (WARC) purchased the building for \$35,625, the value set by the 1966 appraisal. WARC owned the building until 2002, when it was acquired by the Sparks Foster Grandparent program.

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the 1920 school census reported 81 fewer students than in 1917, the previous time record-breaking school attendance was reported (*Sparks Tribune* September 10, 1920).

<sup>4</sup> Although no records have been found to explain why the parapets were modified, it seems unlikely the school district would go to the expense of making the design change for purely aesthetic reasons. The Truckee Meadows lies in an active earthquake fault zone, and in 1955 a relatively severe earthquake hit the region about 50 miles southeast of Sparks. That event or a similar one may have damaged the original parapets requiring their reconstruction.

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 8. Significance, continued

### Criterion C

#### *The Work of a Master—Frederic DeLongchamps*

Frederic DeLongchamps is considered to be Nevada's pre-eminent architect. DeLongchamps was not only prolific and artistic, but over the course of his 58-year career, he demonstrated a phenomenal level of proficiency in the full range of architectural styles that were popular during those years. The breadth of his talent can be demonstrated through a comparison of his first commission, the Washoe County Courthouse, to one much later in his career. The 1910 courthouse is soundly classical, following all the rules of scale, massing, and decoration. In contrast, Reno's Union Federal Savings and Loan building<sup>5</sup> of 1959 is competitive with the works of modernist architects with international reputations.<sup>6</sup>

DeLongchamps's talents are especially remarkable when one learns that the man had no academic training in architecture, but rather held a degree in mining engineering from the University of Nevada in Reno. He came by a solid understanding of construction and architecture, however, from his father, Felix Delongchant, a builder of note in Nevada. After college graduation, DeLongchamps embarked on a mining career, but a lung ailment cut short that goal. Following a brief stint as a draftsman with the U.S. Surveyor's Office in Reno, DeLongchamps made his way to San Francisco after the April 1906 earthquake, where he apprenticed with an architecture firm and was exposed to the formality of the *École des Beaux Arts*. One can assume that his natural appreciation for structural stability (miners tend to want to prevent entire mountains from falling in on them) was reinforced by his post-earthquake experience. All of DeLongchamps buildings exhibited exceptional engineering and structural soundness. His designs also demonstrated a fondness for brick and stone, no doubt influenced by the extensive fire damage he would have witnessed in San Francisco, as many buildings managed to withstand the quake only to be destroyed over the following days by fire.

In 1907, DeLongchamps returned to Reno and entered into a partnership with Ira W. Tesch, a former colleague at the U.S. Surveyor's Office. This firm won commissions for some 30 building between 1907 and 1909. DeLongchamps's first solo commission was the Washoe County Courthouse (1910), which he won as the result of a design competition in 1909. Over the next ten years, DeLongchamps designed 103

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<sup>5</sup> The UFSL Building at 195 S. Sierra Street, which has served as a county office building for years, is slated for demolition in 2002.

<sup>6</sup> The UFSL has been compared to the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan designed by Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander in 1958. The USFL employs *brise-soleil*, first employed in modern architecture in 1933 by Le Corbusier on the *Maison Locative Ponsik* in Algiers.

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 8. Significance, continued

buildings, including the Nevada buildings at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco and the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego. In keeping with the goals of exposition designers, DeLongchamps employed the Classical Revival style for the Panama-Pacific Exposition and Spanish Colonial Revival at the Panama-California Exposition. He was awarded a silver medal by the Board of Consulting Architects of the Panama-Pacific Exposition for "having planned a structure that far surpasses those of many states." He was also one of eight finalists in the San Francisco Civic Center competition (Kuranda 1986).

DeLongchamps's expertise and importance was recognized by the State of Nevada in 1919, when the state legislature appropriated \$520,000.00 for a capital building program and authorized the appointment of a Supervising Architect. DeLongchamps was appointed State Architect by State Engineer Scrugham. The position was abolished after two years, but reinstated in 1923, with DeLongchamps winning reappointment. He held the position until 1926, when the position was abolished again.<sup>7</sup> As State Architect, DeLongchamps was responsible for a number of government buildings, including the Nevada Industrial School in Elko (1919), the Nevada State Hospital, Sparks (1920), the Heroes Memorial Building in Carson City (1920), the Nevada State Building in Reno (1926) (Kuranda 1986).

By 1917, Frederic DeLongchamps's solo architectural firm was a going concern. The collection of his architectural drawings, housed at the Special Collections Library at the University of Nevada, Reno (NC1215), indicate that DeLongchamps completed plans for at least 23 buildings that year. These commissions ranged from residences, schools, churches, government buildings, and commercial buildings, to a mausoleum. That year, DeLongchamps's style palette drew from a variety of Period Revival styles, Classical Revival, bungalows, and a single American Foursquare. Two school buildings he designed that year followed Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival models, which DeLongchamps knew well from his experience at the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego two years prior.

Newspaper articles about the construction of the Mary Lee Nichols School suggest that the school construction budget was a major issue to the Sparks School District, especially since a new high school was currently under construction as well. This concern for cost is represented in the school's simple design and plan. One notable aspect of DeLongchamps's architectural work, was his interest in taking into account the needs, tastes, and desires of his clients, while providing the highest quality of design within whatever constraints were placed upon him.

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<sup>7</sup> The position was never reinstated, making DeLongchamps Nevada's first and only State Architect.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 8. Significance, continued

Frederic DeLongchamps employed draftsmen to help him with his workload. The plans for Mary Lee Nichols School were drawn by George L.F. O'Brien. George O'Brien came to Nevada in 1916 from San Francisco, where he had attended the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art (which was destroyed by fire the day following the 1906 earthquake) and the San Francisco Atelier Beaux Arts Society. DeLongchamps had been in San Francisco in 1906, where he apprenticed with an as yet identified architectural firm. The architectural business was brisk that year and the years following, as San Francisco rebuilt itself after being so thoroughly destroyed. It is intriguing to wonder whether DeLongchamps encountered the young O'Brien in San Francisco during those years. DeLongchamps maintained an architectural office in San Francisco for a number of years, and one might speculate whether O'Brien was employed by DeLongchamps there before coming to Reno. Unfortunately, the records to confirm or refute these notions have not yet been uncovered.

At any rate, George O'Brien came to Nevada in possession of sufficient architectural credentials and presumably was quickly engaged by DeLongchamps, if, in fact, his appointment was not pre-arranged. Over the years, the two men developed a satisfactory working relationship, because in 1939, George O'Brien became a full partner in the firm of DeLongchamps and O'Brien. In 1962, the two took a third partner, Hewitt C. Wells, and until DeLongchamps's retirement in 1965, the firm was known as DeLongchamps, O'Brien, and Wells. Although a competent architect himself, O'Brien served the business end of the partnership, which was needed to keep the firm on a steady course. DeLongchamps had a reputation as a "nice guy" and a "fine man," traits that do not necessarily ensure a profitable business.

DeLongchamps, both alone and later in partnership, was Nevada's most successful architect, if indeed success can be correlated with sheer volume of work. During his career, DeLongchamps produced architectural drawings for more than 500 buildings. His success can be more accurately gauged through the value communities with DeLongchamps's buildings place on them today.

### Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival Architectural Style

The Mission architectural style was generally popular from 1890 to 1920. Although the Mary Lee Nichols is undeniably a restrained example of the style, it represents an important representation of the principles of the Mission style in Sparks, Nevada. Others have described the building's style as Spanish Colonial Revival or Spanish Eclectic,<sup>8</sup> but the diminutive parapets along the front elevation are the style-defining features of the school, placing it soundly within a turn-of-the-twentieth-century Mission model.

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<sup>8</sup> The catalog for the DeLongchamps architectural collection at the University of Nevada, Reno Special Collection library describes the school as "Spanish Colonial."

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 8. Significance, continued

The influence of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture on DeLongchamps's design of Mary Lee Nichols School can not be completely discounted, however, in light of his recent success at the Panama-California Exposition.

The two styles are of course similar, but differ mainly in their beginnings and historical associations. The Mission style gained popularity prior to the turn of the century. It drew inspiration from the romanticized ideal of the Spanish missions in California, and its popularity tended to be limited to the American West and Southwest. Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, which held broader appeal from 1915 to about 1940, was promoted at the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego. Exposition designer, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, who had authored a study of Spanish Colonial architecture, wanted to go beyond the Mission style in order to emphasize the full range of Spanish precedents throughout Latin America (McAlester and McAlester 1990:418).

It is also useful to understand the local trend in grammar schools during this period. Reno, Sparks's neighbor to the west and Nevada's largest city at the time, built four elementary schools between 1912 and 1916 in the Mission style. Compared to Mary Lee Nichols School, these four, known as the Four Spanish Sisters or the Spanish Quartet, are grand examples of the Mission Style.<sup>9</sup> Considerably larger, and more highly ornamented, the Spanish Quartet were designed by local architect George Ferris. The school board of Reno School District No. 10, specifically identified the Mission style as the ideal architectural style for elementary schools. Beginning in the latter nineteenth century, educators began to recognize that other aspects of the educational experience were as important as the curriculum. Health, safety, physical comfort, and exercise became major considerations in the planning of school facilities. By 1910, the one-story school building was considered the ideal, as it allowed for safety (particularly fire safety), good heating and ventilation, adequate lighting, and the opportunity for physical activity.

In Nevada, the notion of a healthy educational environment was more specific. It has been reported that Reno's school superintendent B.D. Billinghamurst, requested the Mission style for the four new grammar schools because of his own interest in the style. Further, in his 1915 report to the 27<sup>th</sup> Session of the Legislature, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction stated that Mission architecture was "especially adapted to one-story structures." He added, "There is nothing better for school purposes than one-story buildings. The one-story plan eliminates the stair climbing so destructive to the nervous strength of pupils and teachers, and also renders danger from fire impossible" (Bogohosian 1982).

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<sup>9</sup> Two of the quartet remain, McKinley Park School, which is now the McKinley Arts and Culture Center, and Mount Rose School, which continues as a public school. Both of these buildings are listed in the National Register.

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

### 8. Significance, continued

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, a number of Nevada schools were built in the Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival style. In southern Nevada, the Westside School in Las Vegas (1923) and the Pioche Elementary School (1909) were in the Mission style (as was the 1935 addition to the Logandale School), and the Las Vegas Grammar School (1936) and the Boulder City Elementary School (1932) were in the Spanish Colonial Revival style.<sup>10</sup> Throughout Nevada, the Mission style tended to be relatively rare in residential buildings, but Spanish Colonial Revival was a popular Period Revival type found in Nevada neighborhoods prior to World War II.

### Summary

Mary Lee Nichols School is significant for its role in the growth and development of the town of Sparks and the local educational system. It is also an important, and fully intact, representation of Frederic DeLongchamps's ability to meet the needs of his clients in an aesthetically pleasing and functional manner, and even in small-scale commissions, to deliver architecturally distinctive products. The school is also representative of the preference for Mission-style schools during the early years of the twentieth century.

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<sup>10</sup> Las Vegas Grammar School, Westside School, and Boulder City Elementary School are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and Logandale School is listed in the State Register of Historic Places.

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

## 9. Bibliography, continued

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## 10. Geographical Data

### Boundary Description

The National Register boundaries of the Mary Lee Nichols School includes the 14,250 square-foot parcel identified as Assessor's Parcel Number 033-245-09, Washoe County, Nevada, located in Section 5, T.19N, R.20E.

### Boundary Justification

Resource boundaries include all land commonly associated with the lot identified as Washoe County, Nevada APN. 033-245-09.



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Mary Lee Nichols School, Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada

**Photograph 1**

Property Name: Mary Lee Nichols School  
Property Location: Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada  
Photographer: Mella Rothwell Harmon  
Date: August 4, 2002  
Location of Negative: State Historic Preservation Office  
100 N. Stewart Street  
Carson City, Nevada  
Description: Front elevation, facing east

**Photograph 2**

Property Name: Mary Lee Nichols School  
Property Location: Sparks, Washoe County, Nevada  
Photographer: Mella Rothwell Harmon  
Date: August 4, 2002  
Location of Negative: Nevada State Historic Preservation Office  
100 N. Stewart Street  
Carson City, Nevada  
Description: Front elevation, facing northeast