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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Witherbee School

other names/site number

2. Location

street & number Green End Avenue

n/a not for publication

city, town Middletown

n/a vicinity

state Rhode Island code R.I. county Newport

code 005 zip code 02840

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private
public-local
public-State
public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
district
site
structure
object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing: Historic and Architectural Resources of Middletown, R.I., listed in the National Register 1636-present

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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 forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official

Date 22 Oct 1989

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

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

Signature of the Keeper

entered in the National Register

Date 11/27/89

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)
EDUCATION/schoolhouse

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)
WORK IN PROGRESS

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)LATE VICTORIAN/Queen Anne

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE

walls WOOD/shingle

roof ASPHALT

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Witherbee School (1907, John Coggeshall, builder) is a 1½-story, small (25 x 42'), gable-roofed schoolhouse. It is set on a small, irregularly shaped lot near the Green End Avenue in a residential section of Middletown. The school is 3 by 3 bays and is of balloon-frame construction, with wall cover of decoratively cut cedar shingles. It is set on the deep basement of mortared rubblestone built for an 1892 school which stood here until 1907. The ridge of the roof runs north and south; the southern gable-end forms the central section of the entrance front. Standing forward of the central section are a 1-story projecting bay and a tower, with a connecting portico. The projection is topped by a pediment which mirrors the angles of the end gable. The tower is two stories in height, and intended to hold a bell. The portico protects two entries leading into anterooms which, in turn, lead into the classroom space. The walls of the classroom facing west, north, and east each contain two windows of slightly greater height than the windows on the tower base.

On all the exterior walls, bands of plain cedar shingles (four shingles wide) alternate with bands of roundcut shingles (also four shingles wide). The six sash windows which light the classroom have four-over-four double-hung sash. The two windows on the tower and the two on the front projection have one-over-two sash, with the upper sash containing a large pane bordered by twelve smaller panes. In the attic gable ends are half round windows. Most of the windows are covered by plain storm sash.

The exterior doors are protected by a portico and lead to small vestibules, one of which was originally the teacher's room and the other the students' cloak room. Both were later partitioned (sometime before 1940) to form spaces for indoor toilets to replace the outdoor privies. A door from each vestibule opens to the classroom, 24 x 31, a high-ceilinged, well lit room. Most of the original four-foot-high matchboard wainscoting that surrounded the room is still in place. Four-foot-high blackboards are set on all walls above the wainscoting, with plaster walls above. Window surrounds are wide and heavily

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molded. Traces remain of the low platform for the teacher's desk and of bookcases on the northern wall. The floors are hardwood. In the ceiling are two vents leading to the attic. Access to the full height basement is through an exterior door at the rear of the building and through a door in the tower. Access to the attic is by a ladder at the top of the stairway leading to the basement.

Wetherbee has undergone only a few changes. Electrical lighting was introduced, probably in the 1920s; the original fixtures are in storage. A furnace was installed in the basement and cast iron radiators in the classroom. The original steps leading to the front door may have been replaced, as cement steps are called for in the specifications, and these are of wood.

The school lot is now divided between rough lawns and driveways. It also has fourteen mature trees planted soon after the 1892 school was built. The northern and eastern edges of the property are delineated by a utilitarian chain link fence, a replacement of the original pipe fence.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE
COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT
EDUCATION

Period of Significance

1907-1940

Significant Dates

1907

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Coggeshall, John

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Summary

The Witherbee School (1907, John Coggeshall, builder) is a small vernacular Queen Anne school building. The school is considered in the context "Historic and Architectural Resources of Middletown, R.I., 1636-present," property type "Educational Buildings (Primary & Secondary)." The school is eligible under Criteria A & C. The school meets registration requirements set out in the Multiple Property Submission, in that

1) it is sufficiently well preserved on both its exterior and interior to illustrate its original appearance;

2) it is typical in size, scale, construction, and design of a group of schools (4 survive) built by the Town in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to replace the earliest district schools constructed in the mid-19th century; and

3) in its location and setting it illustrates a pattern of development which was significant in the development of the town. In addition, it elucidates some aspects of the history of education in Middletown in the early 20th century.

Background

The first school here in Middletown's Second District was constructed in the 1840s and was by the 1870s severely dilapidated. In 1879/80 the School Committee report noted that the school building was "small, old and uncomfortable." Five years later School Board clerk Joel Peckham was concerned that the number of students enrolled in the Second District School was rapidly diminishing: of the total of 28 school-age children in the district, only 10-12 were enrolled. Peckham found that "many

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

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 # _____

 See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

R.I. Historical Preservation
Commission

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 1/3 acre

UTM References

A 19 308940 4597290
Zone Easting NorthingC B
Zone Easting NorthingD See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary conforms to the School House Lot shown on Middletown Assessor's map. The lot fronts southerly on Green End Avenue for c. 125 feet, with land running back northerly c. 162 feet on its western boundary (Valley Road); c. 131 feet on the easterly boundary; and c. 78 feet on its northerly boundary; a total of 14,490 square feet.

 See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

This lot has historically been associated with the Witherbee School since construction of the first school in 1892.

 See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By Dr. Sheldon J. Watts, Consultant, 350 Benefit St., andname/title Pamela A. Kennedy, Deputy Directororganization R.I. Hist. Preservation Commissiondate June, 1989street & number 150 Benefit Streettelephone 401-277-2678city or town Providencestate Rhode Island zip code 02903

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parents claim that the old house is unfit for school purposes and will not send their children for that reason, preferring to send them to Newport or to a public school, and pay their tuition rather than to punish them by sending them to the school district." In 1891, the campaign to provide the district with a suitable schoolhouse was assisted when Sophia C. Witherbee deeded property near the old school to the town of Middletown. The one-room school that was built on the new site in the following months by Joseph Coggeshall was named the Witherbee School. School construction was funded by a special levy on the rate papers of the Second District (\$2300 in 1891-2, \$1500 in 1896, and \$1350 in 1898). In the spring of 1892, the earlier school building was sold for \$25.00 and moved to the Smith Farm on Valley Road where it was used as a store house until the 1980s.

On 1 February 1907 a fire caused by a recently installed boiler destroyed all but the foundation of the 1892 building. The next day temporary facilities for teaching the 36 students were found in a nearby workshop. In April the Middletown Annual Town Meeting approved a levy of \$4000 to supplement the \$1500 insurance payment on the old building and gave authority to the School Committee to approve plans and specifications for a new building. The builder was John Coggeshall, son of Joseph who had built the earlier school. Work on the new school proceeded more slowly than expected; no Witherbee School classes were held for one month of the fall term of 1907. Later that term regular classes resumed under the direction of teacher Miss Ann Sarah Ward, a veteran of six years service at Witherbee School. In 1909, the town directed that \$30.00 be used to purchase an organ for Witherbee School. If it was installed, this organ had disappeared by 1940. The last class was held at the school in 1941; during the school year 1940/41 the school was used for third and fourth grade students only.

After it was decommissioned as a school in the early 1940s, Witherbee was used for several years as an office for the Middletown School Board and later as a storage area. The school desks were removed and stored in the attic. The Board also erected light interior partition walls which have recently been removed.

In 1988, Witherbee School was leased to the Middletown Historical Society on a 99 year lease by the Town. The

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Historical Society will restore and preserve the building as an interpretive center on the history of education in Middletown.

Integrity

The Witherbee School has undergone few alterations since the end of its period of significance. Furnishings (desks, light fixtures, bell) were removed in the 1940s when the school was converted to offices for the School Board, but all were retained and placed in storage. They will soon be restored to their original locations as the Middletown Historical Society completes its restoration of the building. The platform for the teacher's desk has been removed. Asphalt roof shingles have replaced the original cedar shingled roof. Lexan storm windows have been applied over the original sash. The wooden steps at the south entrance may be replacements. The plaster ceiling was damaged in the 1980s and replaced by plasterboard.

Criteria A

In its location and setting, the Witherbee School reflects the pattern of Middletown's 19th-century development. The town was almost wholly rural, with no developed center, and only sparsely settled. To serve the educational needs of the town's children, district schools were located on roads near the center of each district. Witherbee is set on a small grassy lot near the road and at the center of the school district. Once relatively isolated (only a single house was located nearby when the school was constructed), the school is now more hemmed in by later structures, but its lawn and the large trees dating from construction of the first school on the site allow Witherbee to retain something of the rural and isolated character of its setting.

In addition, the Witherbee School can elucidate some important aspects of the history of education in Middletown. The building is an essentially intact example of the one-room rural schoolhouse in which a single teacher taught six or more grades of elementary study for 10 months each year. In its overall scheme--its scale, its separate entrances for girls and boys and its high ceiling--it is a comparatively late example of the form

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of school building advocated in the 1840s by Henry Barnard, state superintendent of education in Rhode Island and Connecticut.

School Committee records suggest how important concerns for proper hygiene and a healthy and safe environment were. Ventilation was a special concern, as witness the ceiling vents in classroom. The committee also recommended that "the tower construction be strong enough to stand the use without damage to the building of a good and proper bell." They ordered that the outside front steps be made of "good quality cement with edges and corners rounded". Perhaps following advice given to schoolhouse designers by Henry Barnard in 1848, they recommended that no windows be placed in the back wall of the school. However, the two windows found on the back wall show that this recommendation was ignored by the builder.

Criteria C

The Witherbee School is typical in size, scale, materials, design, and construction of a group of schools built by the Town of Middletown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as replacements for the first generation of district schoolhouses. Three other schools of this group survive: Paradise (1875, entered on the Register 1978), Oliphant (1882), and Berkeley (1917). Like the Witherbee, all are of frame construction, covered with clapboards or shingles, one room in size, with separate entrances for boys and girls, plain in style or vernacular adaptations of architectural styles.

Conservative in its overall plan, the Witherbee School is well in the mainstream of early twentieth-century American architecture, and is a good example of the Queen Anne style, with its asymmetrical massing and stylish detail. The exterior architectural features and decorative motifs are in keeping with a vernacular interpretation of the Queen Anne style.

Potential Archeological Resources

Witherbee School is located on site of an earlier school built in 1892 and is near the site of an 1840s school (though how near is not known, as the site of the 1840s school has not yet

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been identified). No archeological testing has taken place to determine the character or extent of subsurface remains, nor has their potential significance yet been evaluated.

Period of Significance

The period of significance for the Witherbee School begins at its year of construction and continues until 1940, when the schoolhouse was no longer used for classes.

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I. Unpublished:

Chase, Albert. "Early History of Middletown Education", 1883.

Gaudet, Joseph A. "Public Education in Middletown, Rhode Island. A Preliminary Review and a Glance at the Record, 1701 to 1787." March, 1978.

Personal interview: Barbara Mooney with S. J. Watts, Consultant, June 1989.

Records of the Middletown Public School Committee from c. 1854 to 1915 in files of the Middletown Board of Education.

Records of School District #2 in files of the Middletown Board of Education.

II. Published:

Barnard, Henry. School Architecture: Contributions to the Improvement of School-Houses in the United States. 2nd. ed. 1948.

Middletown School Committee: Annual, 1885.

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. Preliminary Survey Report, Historic and Architectural Resources of Middletown, Rhode Island, June 1979.

"Wetherbee School Burned." February 1, 1907. The News, Newport, R.I.