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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

St. Matthew High School, Natchitoches Parish, LA

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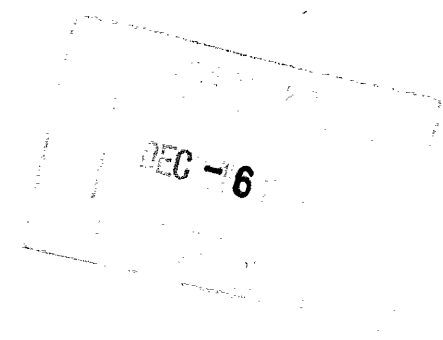
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: St. Matthew High School

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 2552 LA HWY 119

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Melrose

Vicinity: X

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: Natchitoches Code: 069 Zip Code: 71452

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.

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

Nationally: ___ Statewide: ___ Locally: X

Jonathan Fricker
Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker,
Deputy SHPO, Dept of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism

December 3, 2004
Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. 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):

Edson H. Beall
Signature of Keeper

1/20/05
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
1
1

Non contributing
0 buildings
0 sites
0 structures
0 objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: education Sub: school
Current: vacant Sub:

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: no style

Materials:

Foundation: concrete
Walls: concrete block
Roof: other: tar and gravel
Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

St. Matthew High School consists of a one story classroom section and a noticeably taller auditorium/gymnasium at the rear center. It is located in a rural setting some three miles or so from Melrose Plantation and the rural community of the same name. The “no style” facility is of concrete block construction finished in plaster. There are a few brick veneer accents. Other than deterioration (some notable), the school looks as it did upon opening in 1952.

The long low-slung classroom section (which parallels Hwy. 119) is punctuated at the middle with a taller pavilion containing the lobby, principal’s office and teachers lounge. Rising behind the central pavilion is a massive (some 5,500 square feet) auditorium/gym. At the rear of the auditorium is a one-story shop wing added in the mid-1950s. All of the foregoing elements have flat roofs. Between the auditorium/gym and the classroom wing, on each side, is a shed roofed section containing restrooms and changing facilities. The shed roofed units do not extend all the way to the front of the school (see rear view photos). An inward sloping overhang, supported on angular concrete posts, marks the front entrance. Secondary entrances are set at the end of each side of the classroom wing within brick-faced recesses.

The school has six large classrooms with copious steel frame windows. The central window panel opens outward, pivoting from the top. Three tall multi-pane steel windows pierce each side elevation of the auditorium/gym. The interiors are quite plain. Walls are painted concrete block. Floors are asbestos tiles. At the back end of the auditorium/gym is a simple opening for a stage. The ceiling structure in the classroom section is presently exposed. The original sheathing was removed due to extensive damage.

Assessment of Integrity:

St. Matthew has been vacant since 1989, and deterioration has taken its toll. There is one instance of severe deterioration – the southern most classroom (at the end of the classroom wing). Here the roof is completely gone and the top parts of the walls are damaged.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria: A X B__ C__ D__

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): NA A__ B__ C__ D__ E__ F__ G__

Areas of Significance: education; ethnic heritage

Period(s) of Significance: 1952

Significant Dates: 1952

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: Peyton and Bosworth, Shreveport (architects)
Tudor Construction (Alexandria)

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

St. Matthew High School is of local significance in the areas of education and ethnic heritage because it was the first public high school building constructed for African-Americans in lower Natchitoches Parish. Its opening in 1952 was a "coming of age" in public secondary education for blacks living in the Cane River plantation country, both in real and psychological terms. At that time it was one of only two public senior high schools for African-Americans in the parish. (The other was Central High School, some twenty-five miles away in the parish seat of Natchitoches.)

Historic Context: African-American Public Education in Louisiana

In the post-Reconstruction years, with Democrats back in control of the state, the rallying cry of the conservative political establishment was retrenchment. And with rigid segregation, the miserly appropriation had to fund a dual educational system. The end result was shameful for both races, but, of course, more so for African-Americans. The situation was at its worst in rural areas (for example, the plantation country of the lower Cane River).

Doggedly determined that their children would have an education no matter what, blacks often relied upon their own resources, small as they were. What typically developed was a "public" school that was and wasn't. Actually it was a public-private effort with blacks providing a building and the school board providing some funding, perhaps for a teacher and some supplies. (The arrangement varied from place to place.) The building was space in a lodge or benevolent association hall, or more likely, a church. As T. H. Harris, State Superintendent of Education from 1908-1940, observed: "In most cases Negro churches were used for schoolhouses and the only equipment in these churches were the benches used for church services."

African-American churches (Protestant) doubling as schools were pervasive in rural Louisiana in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They remained the sole source of public education in some rural areas of the state into the 1940s. Instruction was not religious – there just happened to be "public" school held in a church, or sometimes in a one room schoolhouse on church property. And while public funding for black education increased in the early twentieth century, it remained most definitely a separate but unequal system. In the first three decades of the twentieth century public education for whites improved dramatically as "modern brick schools" were built in town after town. But such fine facilities were largely unknown to blacks.

Private sources help to fill the gap between inadequate public funding and the great need. Chief among them was the Rosenwald Fund, which helped to erect 372 rural schoolhouses in Louisiana between 1916 and 1929. (One in four rural black schools was a Rosenwald school.) In South Louisiana, the Catholic Church provided parochial schools, as it did in Natchitoches Parish, a French Catholic enclave in an otherwise Anglo-Saxon Protestant region.

A combination of philanthropies in the early twentieth century addressed secondary education through what were called parish training schools. But here the emphasis was generally upon industrial/agricultural education rather than the classic academic high school curriculum. In the 1920s full-fledged high schools were limited to a handful of good size cities (4-5). While a study of the growth of African-American public high schools has yet to be done, research to date suggests that many parishes (counties) received their first public high schools for blacks in the 1940s.

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Natchitoches Parish and the Candidate

With 1,264 square miles, Natchitoches is among Louisiana's largest parishes. It runs roughly 40-45 miles in a north-south direction and is some 30 miles at its widest (east-west) point. Cane River (actually an oxbow of the Red River) meanders through the parish, beginning in the parish seat of Natchitoches and continuing through the rich plantation country to the south. Because of plantation settlement patterns in the antebellum period and a notable free people of color population, the parish had (and has) a large African-American population – 45% of the total population in 1950.

St. Matthew's is located in the heart of the Cane River plantation country, some three miles from Melrose Plantation and the small community of the same name. Its pupils in the early days were what long-time principal Noble Butler aptly referred to as "plantation children." Parents worked the cotton fields (typically on land owned by someone else), as did the students themselves. Mr. Butler recalls the school year (even as late as the 1950s) being interrupted by the cycle of cotton.

St. Matthew's history has been pieced together from school board minutes and interviews with former students and Mr. Butler, the principal from 1947 to 1972. The school traces its origins to a "church school" established at St. Matthew (Baptist) Church in 1916. (Students have been interviewed for this nomination who went to the church school in the early to mid 1920s.) The teacher was Percy Brunson, who is considered the school's "founding father." He was paid \$25 a month from public school funds.

The first mention of St. Matthew in Natchitoches Parish school board minutes is November 1, 1938, when the following deed was accepted: "From the Board of Deacons of the 3rd Baptist St. Matthew Church, ½ acre more or less, on which will be erected a negro school building known as the St. Matthew School, consideration of which will be \$1.00." On July 3, 1939, the school board accepted a bid for the construction of a three-room wood frame school for St. Matthew. When Noble Butler arrived in January 1947, classes were being held in the three room school, the church, and a farm house a local man allowed them to use.

In the very beginning St. Matthew's was an elementary school. By 1944, per an extant school play program, it is being referred to as "St. Matthew Junior High," with reference to freshmen, sophomores and juniors. To graduate from high school, a student had to transfer to Central High in the parish seat of Natchitoches (about 25 miles away). A milestone in St. Matthew's history was the school board's October 4, 1947 approval of the school as "a senior high school effective beginning of the school session 1947-48." Noble Butler clearly recalls the campaign, in 1947, to secure this status from the school board. He had to have 100 names of potential students on a petition, which he secured by visiting young people in the cotton fields.

Now all twelve grades were available to young people of color in the area. One could graduate from high school. To accommodate anticipated increased enrollment, the school board approved money for construction materials to expand the school. Noble Butler, also a carpenter, headed the local volunteer construction crew which added four rooms to the original three room school on a tight schedule the summer of 1947. The expanded status and physical plant is reflected in soaring enrollment figures and increased number of teachers. For the 1946-47 school year, six teachers were instructing 185 students. By 1949-50, there were ten teachers and 304 students.

Undoubtedly increased enrollment led to the construction of the candidate – a "modern brick school" to house the high school. Former student James W. Anthony remembers the school being so crowded that

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the class taught by the principal, civics, met in the principal's office. School board minutes do not indicate when the new purpose-built high school was initially approved, but by March 7, 1950, Peyton and Bosworth of Shreveport had been chosen as the architect. The construction was "substantially complete" by December 4, 1951, at which time the School Board officially accepted the building. It appears that the new school was not occupied until mid-1952. This large expansion of the St. Matthew physical plant is clearly reflected in enrollment figures and numbers of teachers, from 304 students and 10 teachers in 1949-50 to 566 students and eighteen teachers in 1952-53. The small school that began in a church some 30 to 40 years earlier had "truly arrived."

Within the historic period (using the Register's 50 year cutoff), the St. Matthew School had grown dramatically. In a six year period in the late forties and early fifties, the number of teachers and students tripled. This was possible, of course, because of expansion of the physical plant, first with the four room addition in 1947, and culminating with the erection of the candidate 1951-52. None of the earlier construction on the campus survives, leaving the brick high school to tell the story of rapid educational advancement for people of color along the lower Cane River. (The frame three room school expanded in 1947 is long gone. A church survives on adjacent property, but it is a later structure, not the one where school was held.)

When asked to explain how people associated with St. Matthew felt about the erection of the new school, Noble Butler replied that it "meant everything." He felt that the school board's investment of public dollars to provide a first-class modern brick school to local African-Americans (the type whites already had) lent "credibility." In his opinion, the attitude toward the school changed with the new high school - there was increased pride - an attitude of "we've made it," so-to-speak. Mr. Butler recalls one "sour note." He and the faculty were anxious for everything in their new school to be new (rather than the all-too-often cast-me-downs from white schools). Some were disappointed when the chairs were old ones recycled from white schools. Mr. Butler recalls telling teachers, "Seats don't handicap learning."

During the historic period, St. Matthew was the only senior high school for people of color in the plantation country of the lower Cane River. Local Catholic youth went there as well because the parochial school (St. Joseph's) did not offer high school grades. Former students interviewed for this nomination recall how they referred to their alma mater as "the university" (meaning that it was a first-class educational institution). They also fondly remember legendary educators/administrators such as Myra Friedman and Noble Butler. Mr. Butler's equally legendary motto was "Look sharp. Be sharp. Stay sharp."

St. Matthew continued in operation as a high school until 1989. In 2003, the Natchitoches Parish School board donated the property to the newly formed St. Matthew School Community Association, Inc. The association is in the process of finding funding sources, with the goal of restoring the school for use as a community center. To date, a feasibility study has been conducted and the group has received a \$20,000 grant from the Cane River National Heritage Area.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

St. Matthew School Oral History Project. Tapes of interviews with former students and Noble Butler, principal, housed at Northwestern State University Archives, Natchitoches.

Natchitoches Parish School Board Records. Copies of relevant documents in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Butler, Noble. Phone interview with Donna Fricker, Division of Historic Preservation, August 23, 2004. Typescript in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Souvenir Program, "The Ghost of Roaring Pines," St. Matthew Junior High School, May 28, 1944. This program includes an invaluable photo of the wood frame three room school authorized in 1938. Northwestern State University Archives, Natchitoches.

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
- 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 (Northwestern State University Archives)
- Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 4 acres

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**
 15 501100 3498680

Verbal Boundary Description: See attached 1947 plat map. Nominated acreage is shown as "Natchitoches Parish School Board, 4.00 acs."

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries correspond to historic property lines for the parcel of land upon which the candidate stands. The building shown behind the candidate on the attached USGS map is an abandoned elementary school outside the nominated acreage.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register staff

Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

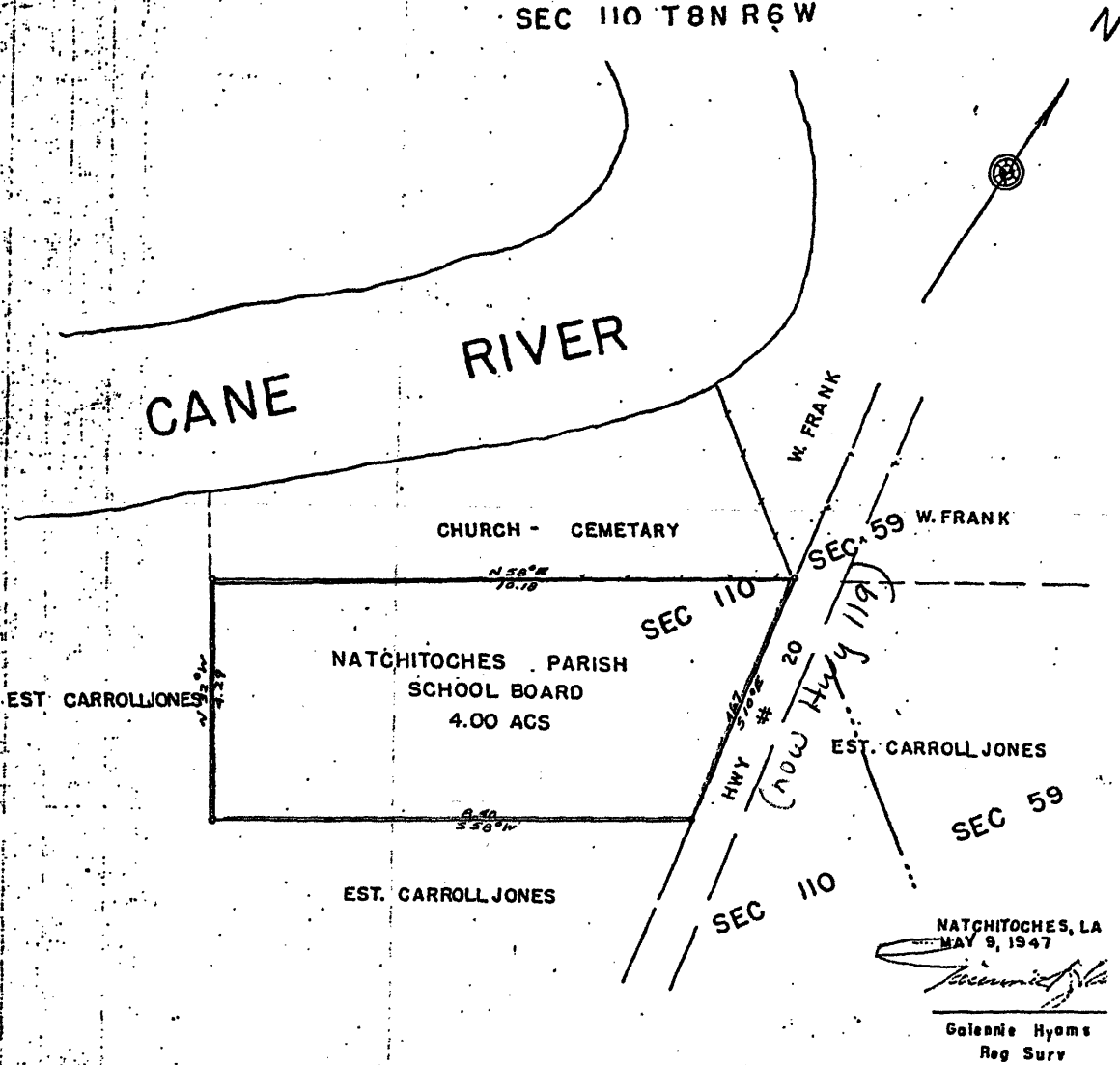
Telephone: (225) 342-8160

Date: August 2004

PROPERTY OWNERS

St. Matthew School Community Association, Inc.

MAP SHOWING LAND BELONGING TO
NATCHITOCHE PARISH SCHOOL BOARD
 ACQUIRED FROM
 ESTATE OF CARROLL JONES
 SEC 110 T8N R6W



St. Matthew High School
 Natchitoches Parish, LA

1" = 200'

Note: The above 1947 plat map
 uses chains for measurement.
 This was converted into
 feet for the above scale.