

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

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

OMB No. 1024-0018

Cohn High School, West Baton Rouge Parish, LA

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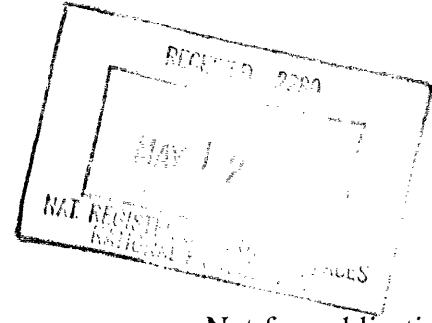
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Cohn High School

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 805 North 14th Street

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Port Allen

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: West Baton Rouge Code: 121 Zip Code: 70767

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

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

5/11/04 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

6/22/04
Date of Action

5. CLASSIFICATION

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

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

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
3
3

Non contributing
buildings
sites
structures
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: Not in Use

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: No Style

Materials:

Foundation: Concrete
Walls: Asbestos (gym), Concrete Block (Classroom Buildings)
Roof: Asphalt Shingles
Other:

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Cohn High School stands on a corner in a residential neighborhood of the West Baton Rouge Parish town of Port Allen. It consists of three unstyled buildings -- two, one-story concrete block structures erected during the 1949-1950 school year and known as Buildings A and B and a frame one-story gymnasium which was moved to the site before the start of classes in the late summer of 1949. The masonry buildings stand side-by-side with a small court-like space between them. The gym stands behind the masonry buildings and is centered upon the court. The high school now shares its campus with an adjacent elementary school also named Cohn. However, it was the only facility on the site when it opened. Each of the three historic buildings which form the high school has received some alteration. However, the candidate retains its National Register eligibility as a milestone in the educational and ethnic heritage of West Baton Rouge Parish.

The gabled roof gymnasium was the first building on the site. It began life as a pre-fabricated, portable building at Baton Rouge's Ryan Airfield, a World War II military base, and was moved across the Mississippi River to West Baton Rouge Parish as part of the preparations for the school's opening.¹ It is a large open space with a stage at one end and bleachers along both sides. The parish school board installed asbestos shingles on the gym's exterior at some point during the 1950s, but no further changes have been made on the interior. Entrance is through four sets of double doors, two on the building's east side and two on the west. One of the east entrances is served by a recently added handicap ramp, as the gym is still used by the children attending the elementary school.

Buildings A and B are similar in appearance, with rectangular shapes and hipped roofs. Each is pierced by several large openings containing bands of metal windows with horizontal panes. Most of the windows are boarded over to protect them from vandalism. Both buildings have hallways with concrete floors, while the classroom floors are tiled. The concrete block walls separating the hallways and classrooms are pierced by large transoms and doors featuring large panes of glass in their upper halves. Porous tiles installed in a grid pattern form the ceilings. Both buildings are now used for storage but are otherwise vacant. Neither has been maintained and both have suffered from this neglect. Ceiling tiles have fallen and many floor tiles are broken. The glass transoms are painted over and some of the glass panels in the doors are broken or entirely gone. In addition, covered walkways have been attached to the buildings to

¹ Although the gymnasium was moved to the Cohn High School site from across the river, it is not being treated as a moved building under National Register guidelines because it was moved before the school opened and remains on the site where it was placed in 1949 in preparation for receiving the school's first students.

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facilitate movement among the structures and the modern school with which they share the site.

The building's floorplans are not identical. Building A contains a hallway shaped like the letter "L". Double doors piercing the north and west elevations provide access to both parts of this corridor. In addition to classrooms, this building contains a small teachers' lounge and boys and girls restrooms. At some point kitchen facilities were installed on one end of Building A, but it has not been otherwise altered. Building B's interior is organized around a long central hall with classrooms on each side and double doors on each end. Both long elevations of this structure have been altered by the installation of upward rolling metal doors -- one on the east elevation and two on the west -- where windows once existed.

Except for the metal doors in Building B, the changes to the school are insignificant. The gym's asbestos shingles have been in place almost from the school's opening and, as a popular 1950s sheathing material, do not look out of place. The windows are intact behind the boards. The three buildings certainly retain enough integrity to meet National Register standards, as any former teacher or student of Cohn High School would easily recognize the facility should he or she return to the site today. As the first secondary school for African American children in West Baton Rouge Parish, Cohn High School is an outstanding candidate for the National Register.

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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 History/Black

Period(s) of Significance: 1949-1954

Significant Dates: 1949

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: Goodman & Miller, Architects-Engineers
A. B. Broussard, Sr., Contractor

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

Cohn High School is locally significant in the areas of education and ethnic heritage because its opening in the fall of 1949 represented the first time secondary education was available within West Baton Rouge Parish for African-American children. Although the nomination's period of significance ends in 1954 (the fifty-year cutoff), the school continued to be the only source of secondary education for black students until integration began to impact the parish's educational program in the 1960s.

Located directly across the Mississippi River from the city of Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge Parish is rural and agricultural in nature. Given this background, the parish's attempts to provide education for its children did no more than mirror those of most other parishes in the state. For many years these attempts came nowhere close to meeting the need. Louisiana, for the most part, did not make significant progress in public education until the early twentieth century, whether for whites or blacks. The watchword among late nineteenth century politicians was retrenchment, and although provision for public education was made in various statutes, funding was woefully inadequate for even a single school system, let alone the dual system mandated by segregation. Another factor was the general lack of interest in public education. Private education, such as that offered by the Catholic Church in South Louisiana, was considered more desirable. Public education bore the stigma of "pauper" education. In short, its customers were those too poor to go to private schools.

What developed in the post-Reconstruction years under the name "public education" was often a public-private system in which the state contributed some funding, with local sources providing the building and other necessities. Among African-Americans, churches played a prominent role. An important phenomenon across the state was a so-called public school being held in a church or in a building on church property. As T. H. Harris, State Superintendent of Education from 1908-1940, reported in his autobiography: "In most cases Negro churches were used for schoolhouses and the only equipment in these churches were the benches used for church services."

These efforts were augmented with various private philanthropic funds aimed at improving African-American education in the South. The most notable among these was the Rosenwald Fund, which made possible the construction of 393 elementary schools in Louisiana between 1914 and 1932. At roughly the same time a combination of philanthropies addressed secondary education through what were called parish training schools. Here the emphasis generally was upon industrial/agricultural work 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).

Public education for blacks in West Baton Rouge Parish remained quite limited even into the post World War II era. A 1947 document describing West Baton Rouge's resources sums up the situation quite succinctly:

The parish has 12 negro [sic.] schools located at Addis, Arbroth, Chamberlin, Choctaw, Erwinville, Lobdell, Lukeville, Mulatto Bend, Port Allen [a Rosenwald School], Silvery, St. Paul and Winterville, with a total registration of 1,098. These schools are so located that they serve the majority of the negro pupils [i.e., they were located near plantations accessed by unpaved lanes].

There are 38 white teachers, 24 negro teachers, a visiting teacher and a Jeanes agent. The average number of white students per teacher is 25.5 whereas, the number of negro students per teacher is 36.4. . . .

Six of the 12 negro schools are in Parish-owned buildings, the other six are housed in churches and lodge halls. The present buildings are not large enough to accommodate the negro children. The Parish does not offer education facilities beyond the seventh grade.

This last statement comes as something of a shock because, by this date, almost all other Louisiana parishes had

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provided some type of secondary education (either parish training schools or full-fledged high schools). The source also fails to clarify that some of the elementary schools still lacked indoor toilets, heat and electricity.

Children wishing to pursue an education beyond the seventh grade had few and difficult choices. By the 1940s, secondary schools for African-Americans existed in Iberville Parish (immediately south and west of West Baton Rouge) and the city of Baton Rouge (across the river to the east). There may also have been one in Pointe Coupee Parish, which borders West Baton Rouge on the northwest. Some students left their parents' homes to live with family or friends or board with strangers so that they could attend these schools. Others walked from home to the Port Allen ferry landing, paid to ride the ferry, and then either walked or road a city bus to McKinley High School or the Southern University Lab School in Baton Rouge. (One former student remembered how difficult it was for an African-American child to obtain seats on the ferry and the bus.) However, most teenagers could not afford to board or ride public transportation. Nor did they have access to automobiles which could take them from their isolated rural homes across the bridge to Baton Rouge.

The first step toward a high school for West Baton Rouge's black citizenry occurred in October 1948 when the Cohns (a white family), through two family corporations, donated land for a school to the local school board. The deed stipulated that the land should never be used for any purpose other than education, the new school should be built within five years, the building should be named in honor of Henry Cohn, Jr. and Sophie Farnbacher Cohn, and it should contain a suitable plaque commemorating this dedication. The population the school was intended to serve was not stipulated in the deed. Whether there might have been a private understanding that the school was to serve African-Americans is unknown, but a high school for black teenagers was certainly the parish's most pressing educational need at that time.

Several steps had to be completed before Cohn High School could open. Local officials hired Goodman & Miller, an architectural and engineering firm, to plan two new classroom buildings for the site. As mentioned in Part 7, they also obtained a large, pre-fabricated building from Ryan Airfield in Baton Rouge and moved it across the Mississippi River to the school's campus. Recruiters hired a teaching faculty of three men and three women; all came from outside the parish because no African-American living in West Baton Rouge Parish was qualified.

Although construction on the new buildings was far from complete, the school opened at the start of the fall 1949 term. All the children, including transfers from the African-American high schools in other parishes, met in the former military building. To facilitate this temporary usage, math and shop teacher James Gray, assisted by his shop students, partitioned the interior into ten classrooms (five on each side), a central gym with a stage at one end, a small kitchen (the children ate lunch at their desks) and restrooms/showers. Once buildings A and B opened, Gray and the youngsters converted the old military facility into a larger gymnasium by removing the classroom partitions and building bleachers along the sides where the classrooms had previously been located. (They left the stage in place.)

There is some confusion concerning the number of grades offered at Cohn High. Although at that time high school was generally considered to be grades 9 - 12, Mrs. Wilhemenia Williams DeCuir states that she attended grade seven there when the school opened in 1949. Course offerings remembered by Mrs. DeCuir and other former students include social studies and American history, English, math (including geometry), science (Biology and Chemistry), home economics, and industrial arts (shop). One also remembered business courses, i.e., typing and shorthand; but another former student contradicted that statement. It may be that the curriculum expanded as time passed. Drama must have been an early elective, for a historic photograph in an old annual shows that the school offered its first play in the gym in 1949. The English teacher supervised this effort. The gym allowed some physical education and sports activities; before long the school fielded boys' and girls' basketball teams. Within a short time, the girls' team won the championship of the African-American league. The gym also served as the site for events such as PTA meetings, fashion shows and other community activities.

The two new buildings opened in the fall of 1950. In addition to indoor restrooms, heat and electricity, they offered several general classrooms as well as specialized spaces for subjects needing laboratories. (All the laboratories were too small, and even a single class could not use them at the same time.) Former students interviewed for this nomination also remember an office and a teacher's lounge. One remembered being allowed to eat lunch in the home economics classroom. Another remembered a library, but by 1957 all library books for the African-American students

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were housed in a different school. One classroom had a piano, which allowed the teaching of music, and by 1952 part of the gym had been partitioned off to create a band room. Band members had to furnish their own instruments. The band had no uniforms; so the children attempted to dress alike whenever they marched.

Early attendance figures are unavailable, but former students remember that the school served teenagers from twenty plantations scattered across the parish. One bus (which was probably privately owned) was provided to transport them to class, but they had to walk out to the buses when rain made the rural dirt roads impassable. According to another historic photo, the school's first graduating class (spring 1950) counted sixteen young men and women. In 1956 (two years beyond the period of significance but the earliest year for which information is available), 319 children enrolled at Cohn High School.

Interviews with former students show what a major impact attendance at Cohn High had on their lives. According to Mrs. DeCuir, the school provided "a better opportunity to learn." Going to this school ". . . was a wonderful experience. It felt like you were floating on top of the world to be able to go to your own school with sports and activities. The school served all African-American students in West Baton Rouge Parish, and it broadened our horizons to meet people from outside Port Allen."

Ruby Scott, who transferred to Cohn from McKinley High in Baton Rouge for her last two years of schooling, also commented on the importance of the school in her life. Mrs. Scott was very young when she had to leave home to live with others in Baton Rouge in order to attend McKinley. Her ability to return to her home parish to graduate was, she said, a dream come true for her parents. Mrs. Scott was the only child from a family of seven children to graduate from high school.

Betty Jackson Nelson, another 1949 enrollee, credited the school with changing her life. The school ". meant my whole life. I was married with a child but was able to go to college. Cohn prepared me to further my education and was an inspiration because of its setting and its family oriented atmosphere." After Cohn opened, Mrs. Nelson states, more African-American students attended college than ever before, even attending out-of-state colleges and universities. Later, some of these people returned to West Baton Rouge Parish to teach. Others became doctors, nurses, engineers, i.e., became proficient in occupations they never could have entered had it not been for Cohn High School. Mrs. Nelson is now a member of the Port Allen City Council.

A building for an elementary school was moved to the Cohn campus in 1952. Named Cohn Elementary, it was eventually replaced by a modern building which is still in service. However, as integration changed the makeup of West Baton Rouge Parish schools, the need for a centralized African-American high school decreased. As a result, Cohn High School closed in 1969. The school is deserving of National Register listing because its opening (and its very existence) was a milestone in the educational and ethnic history of West Baton Rouge Parish.

NOTE:

Plans are underway to make the historic Cohn High School an early learning center for the children of West Baton Rouge Parish. Toward this end, a group of six African-American men, known as DOC-DHL, has formed and will soon begin raising funds to restore the buildings. The group hopes to use the federal tax incentive program "to make the numbers work." It is believed that National Register listing will assist in the fund raising efforts.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Anderson, James D. *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Deeds transferring the land for Cohn High School from the Cohn Subdivision Company, Inc. and the Carolina Planting and Lumber Company to the West Baton Rouge Parish School Board, September 23, 1948; copies in National Register file.

Historic photos showing first drama presentation, first faculty, and first graduating class of Cohn High School; copies in National Register file.

Historical sketch of Cohn High School taken from an early school annual; copy in National Register file.

Interviews with former Cohn High School students Betty Jackson Nelson and Ruby Scott, December 10, 2003; notes in National Register file.

Interview with former Cohn High School student Wilhemenia Williams DeCuir, September 3, 2003; transcript in National Register file.

Interview with J. W. Vaughn, December 10, 2003. Mr. Vaughn did not attend Cohn High but served as the principal of the elementary school placed on the campus in the early 1950s. Because of the proximity of the two schools, he was well acquainted with the facility and witnessed much of what happened during the high school's early years.

West Baton Rouge Parish Development Board. *West Baton Rouge Parish Resources and Facilities*. Baton Rouge, LA: State of Louisiana Department of Public Works, Planning Division, 1947.

West Baton Rouge Parish Development Board. *West Baton Rouge Parish Resources and Facilities*. Baton Rouge, LA: State of Louisiana Department of Public Works, Planning Division, 1957.

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

Other (Specify Repository):

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 2.1 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	15	671080	3370880

Verbal Boundary Description:

See attached sketch map.

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries are drawn to include the high school's immediate setting while excluding the elementary school building and playground with which the candidate shares a campus. The boundary line was drawn at a diagonal at the southwest corner to exclude the non-contributing elementary school.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: National Register Staff

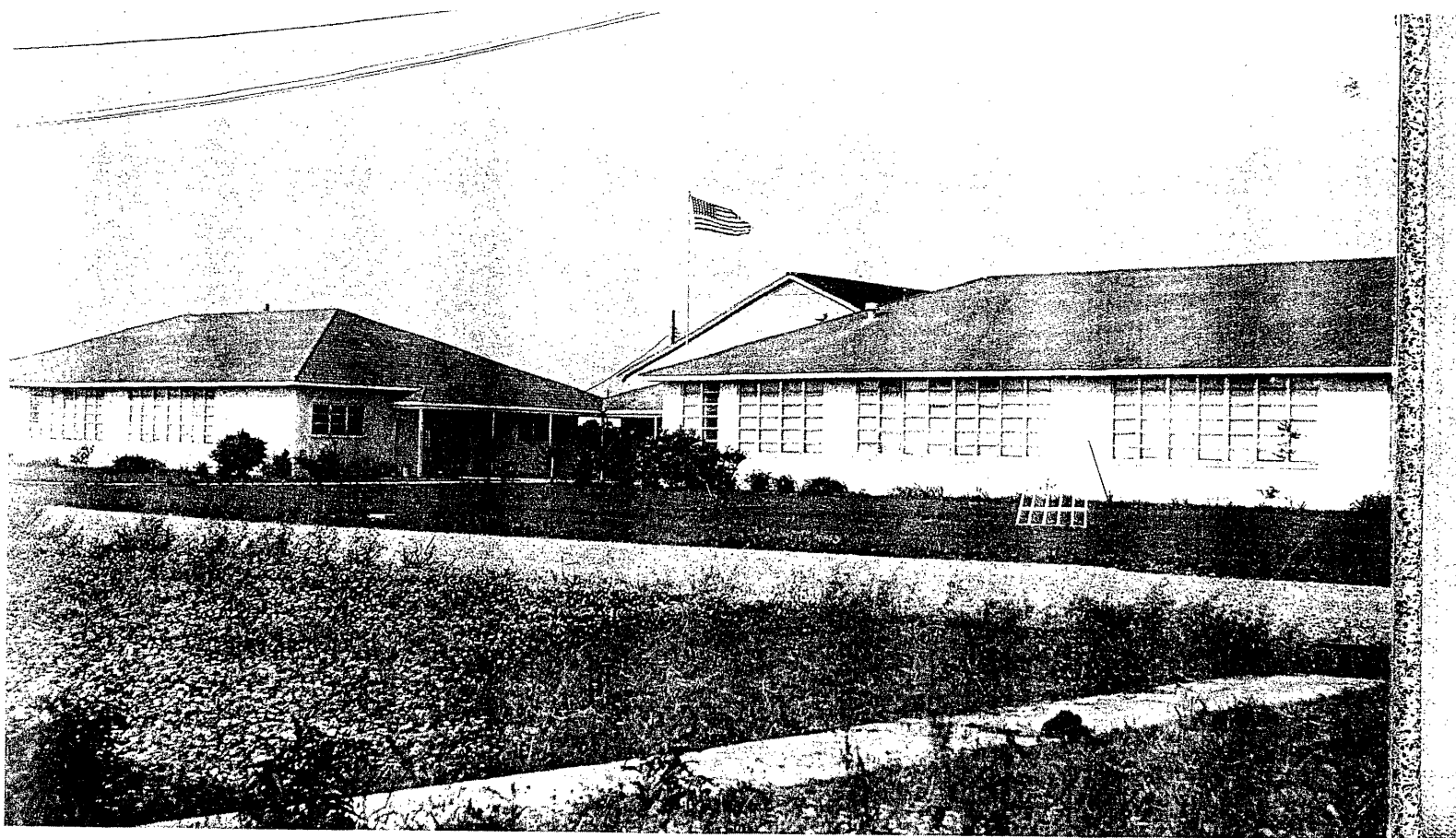
Address: Division of Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Telephone: (225) 342-8160

Date: February 2004

PROPERTY OWNERS

West Baton Rouge Parish School Board
 Jerry T. Lowe
 Acting Superintendent
 Acting Secretary-Treasurer
 3761 Rosedale Road
 Port Allen, Louisiana 70767



Cohn High School
West Baton Rouge Parish
Louisiana

mid-1950s photo

COHN HIGH SCHOOL

Port Allen, West Baton Rouge Parish, LA

Boundary: - - - - -

Scale: 1" = 75'

