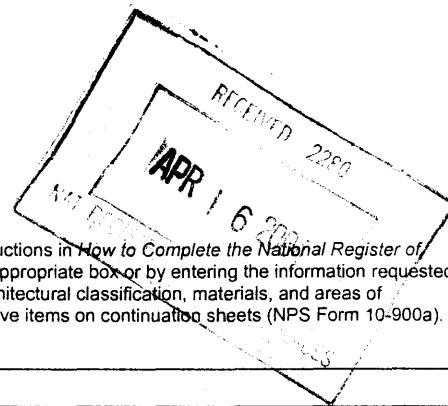


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations 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 an 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 Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 900 5th Street not for publication N/A

city or town International Falls vicinity

state Minnesota code MN county Koochiching code 071 zip code 56649

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Nina M. Archabal 4/6/04

Signature of certifying official Date

Nina M. Archabal, Director and State Historic Preservation Officer, MN Historical Society
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 certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper

Edson H. Beall

Date of Action

5/26/04

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	
2	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structure
0	0	objects
2	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

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

Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION: School

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL: Civic

RECREATION AND CULTURE: Auditorium

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19th and 20th CENTURY REVIVALS:

Classical Revival

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

roof ASPHALT

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

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 or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION

SOCIAL HISTORY

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Period of Significance

1914-1948

Significant Dates

1914, 1937

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Bell, Tyrie and Chapman (Baker School)

Fisher, Naime (Backus School)

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

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

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Citizens for Backus/AB

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property 1 acre

International Falls, MN-ON
1999

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1.	<u>1</u> <u>5</u>	<u>4</u> <u>6</u> <u>9</u> <u>5</u> <u>2</u> <u>6</u>	<u>5</u> <u>3</u> <u>8</u> <u>2</u> <u>9</u> <u>8</u> <u>8</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2.			
3.			
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4.			
	Zone	Easting	Northing

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	<u>Daniel J. Hoisington</u>		
organization	<u>Hoisington Preservation Consultants</u>	date	<u>8/29/03</u>
street and number	<u>PO Box 13790</u>	telephone	<u>651/415-1034</u>
city or town	<u>Roseville</u>	state	<u>MN</u>
		zip code	<u>55113</u>

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	<u>Citizens for Backus/AB</u>		
street & number	<u>PO Box 1067</u>	telephone	
city or town	<u>International Falls</u>	state	<u>MN</u>
		zip code	<u>56031</u>

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

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 7 Page 1

Description

The Alexander Baker (1914) and E. W. Backus (1936) Schools are located on the south side of Highway 11/71 in International Falls, Minnesota. The property, encompassing blocks 43 and 44, is one-quarter mile south of the Rainy River, part of the boundary between the United States and Canada. The buildings are situated on a one-acre lot on the western edge of the downtown commercial area, one block west of the Koochiching County courthouse (NRHP, 1977).

The property is bounded by U.S. 71 on the north, on the east by Ninth Avenue, and on the south by Fifth Street. A two-story brick building, formerly the Forestland School, is located approximately one hundred feet due west of the Baker and Backus Schools. It is now used for offices for community organizations. To the south, there is a residential area with the Saint Thomas Catholic Church to the east across Ninth Avenue West.

The Baker and Backus Schools, although built more than twenty years apart using different architectural styles, retain a visual unity due to their massing and use of a similar brick exterior finish. Both buildings employed a U-shaped plan, with a primary rectangular block of three stories, running roughly east-west, and three story wings on either end, running roughly north-south. There is no access between the two schools' wings, with a clear demarcation on the outside of roughly fifty feet.

The two buildings share a common wall with the south side of the Baker School connected to the Backus School's combined auditorium and gymnasium (which also serves as the stage), constructed in 1936. Primary access between the two buildings is through a single entry door at the rear of the gymnasium/stage area.

Alexander Baker School

Built in 1914, the Alexander Baker School plan is U-shaped with a central long rectangular block and two rectangular wings. The building is three stories with a full basement with a concrete foundation and a steel framework sheathed in a dark brown brick. The original structure had 38,472 square feet. The cornice is raised with modillions and dentils. At the center of the north elevation, a slight parapet displays the name of the school etched in stone. The roof is flat with built-up asphalt sheathing. There is a large brick chimney in the rear of the original building (but now the center).

The first (ground) floor shows horizontal banding in the brick work. There are two primary entrances, located on the ground level of the north elevation in the corners between the main block and the wings. Entrance is gained through metal-framed double personnel doors and a fixed plate glass transom. The doorway entry projects slightly, embellished with a mosaic pattern and capped with a stone cornice with stolid modillions.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 7 Page 2

The two top stories are visually demarcated from the first floor with a stone belt course. These stories show rows of five windows on each of the extending wings, with the center block showing two rows of four grouped windows with paired windows in the center. In the central block, there is a superb series of mosaics, depicting scenes of Native American life. Neither newspaper accounts nor architectural plans reveal the creator of these mosaics.

Based on evidence from historic photographs, the windows were originally wood-framed, double hung windows with six over nine glazing. These have been replaced with fixed panels above and casement type metal frame windows below.

The east and west elevations have simple fenestration, capped by the continuation of the cornice and belt course above the first floor windows. The center sections of these elevations are slightly recessed with a strip of five windows on each floor. On the west elevation, there is a single metal-framed entry door on the ground level, plus a one-story bay.

Interior Features

The Baker School interior plan is U-shaped with a central long rectangular block and two rectangular wings on either end. The first floor has a long corridor with entrances to classrooms and offices, situated on the exterior wall. A central doorway connects to the gymnasium/ auditorium that links the Baker and Backus Schools. The second and third floors are similar, with a long central corridor and classrooms on the outside edge. Many of these rooms retain original wood floors, coat rooms, and built-in cabinets. Particularly interesting are the concrete stairways with metal ornamental work, the library room on the second floor with original shelves and rolling ladder, and a fireplace on the ground floor — in a room first used for domestic science classes — with its mosaic terra cotta finish.

E. W. Backus Junior High School

The E. W. Backus Junior High School, located to the south of the Baker School, was built in 1936-37 and reflects many elements of the Art Deco style of architecture. The original structure had 72,801 square feet. The primary (long) elevation faces south to Fifth Street.

The center section on this elevation is slightly recessed with buff-colored, smooth concrete and stone finishes, and three grooved half columns that give the front a strong vertical emphasis. Above the third floor windows, there is a course with a chevron geometric pattern. Below the third floor, the wall has vertical grooves capped by a floral ornament. The Deco-theme is continued with ornamentation around the windows. Just below the cornice, the name of the school is inscribed in Deco-style lettering. First floor windows have a wide floral pattern lintel. The cornice is an unadorned buff-colored smooth finished concrete with a flat roof using built-up asphalt sheathing.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 7 Page 3

Windows on the two wings, facing south to Fifth Street, are paired with metal frames, casement style openings on the lower level and a solid panel above. Historic photographs show rectangular wood framed, double hung windows, in sets of three — a larger window in the center flanked by two smaller windows.

There are two primary entrances located up steps from the ground level on either side of the primary block, slightly extending from the main block. The surrounds are concrete and stone with a floral ornamental pattern above the glass double personnel doors with plate glass above the doors.

The east and west elevations have simple fenestration, with twelve rectangular windows on each floor. There is a concrete belt course between the first and second floors, plus a course below the first floor windows. The course above the third floor windows continues the chevron pattern found on the main south elevation. On the east, there is a metal-framed double personnel door on the ground level and a concrete ramp to provide vehicular access to the basement boiler room and storage areas.

Interior Features

The Backus School is a fine example of the Art Deco style, beginning with the entrances toward Fifth Street. Stepping up a shallow set of stairs, one encounters ticket booths with decorative metal grates opening to ticket booths. The east-west hallway has marble wall panels and a terrazzo floor extends between the entrances, retaining its original light fixtures. The auditorium features a sloping main floor with an expansive second floor balcony. Many of the original Art Deco interior finishes are intact, including lighting fixtures, geometric wall decorative finishes, metal ornament and grates, and wood trim with vertical banding. Along the side walls, the original plaques or mottos remain, with themes of “character, peace, education, religion, Americanization, and music,” as described in the *International Falls Press* coverage of the dedicatory program.

The basic interior floor plan, without the auditorium, is U-shaped. On the first floor, the corridor provides access to office space on the south (outside wall) and to the auditorium on the north. On the second and third floors, these east-west corridors are lined with metal lockers. On the second and third floors, the halls lead to four large classrooms on each floor. Many rooms retain their original wood cabinets and floors. Particularly interesting are the basement level locker rooms that retain their original cage lockers. The basement also has a large band room with a small stage, suitable for more intimate performances than the large auditorium.

Integrity

The buildings retain their integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Alterations have been minimal. In 1949, the school district built a small, one-story addition

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 7 Page 4

was built in the space between the Baker and Backus wings on the east side. The windows are the primary exterior alteration to the property's historic materials and workmanship. In 1978, the school district installed metal frames and panels in both buildings. In 1995, a sprinkler system was installed in Backus. There was extensive hail damage to the roof of the Alexander Baker School in 1996. Leakage is evident with water damage to some ceilings.

In 2002, following a public debate about the future of the building, the school district sold the school to a non-profit community organization, Citizens for Backus/ AB. Its auditorium, the largest in a hundred mile radius, hosts concerts and other performances, with several organizations leasing space within the former E. W. Backus School.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 1

Significance

The Alexander Baker and E.W. Backus Schools, located in International Falls, Minnesota, are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for their local significance under Criterion A. The buildings represent the historic themes of Education, Social History, and Politics and Government during a period of significance from 1914 to 1948.

The early history of International Falls, Minnesota, located on the border between the United States and Canada, is inextricably linked to the growth of the paper industry in northern Minnesota. In 1900, the village of Koochiching had only 256 residents. As part of Itasca County, a legal transaction required a trip of one hundred miles to the county seat of Grand Rapids. No rail lines reached the area and roads were generally poor.

Within a few years, the business ventures of lumberman E. W. Backus dramatically altered the community. By 1920, it had grown into a small city of 13,520 people, now known as International Falls, the county seat of Koochiching County. To meet the needs of its growing population, the city built the Alexander Baker School. Following its opening in 1914, the school quickly became an important community center, educating not only the town's youth, but providing space for adult education, agricultural extension classes, and teacher training. Fourteen years later, although burdened by a collapsed economy during the depression, the community built an additional school in 1935-36, named after Backus, and funded in part by a grant from the Public Works Administration.

Architecturally, the buildings stand as well-preserved examples of early twentieth century school architecture. The property relates to two statewide historic contexts, including "Northern Minnesota Lumbering, 1870s-1930s" and "Federal Relief Construction, 1933-1941."

Alexander Baker

Alexander Baker (1827-1899) was born in Scotland and came to the United States in 1850. After serving in the Civil War, he prospected for copper and iron in the Lake Superior area. In 1870 Baker built a cabin on the site of the Mando Paper Mill and spent the rest of his life prospecting, trapping and trading. Credited with starting the settlement that became International Falls, Alexander is buried in the garden of his nephew, Joseph Baker, who joined his uncle in 1881. (Unpublished manuscript, n.d., Koochiching County Historical Society)

E. W. Backus

Edward Wellington Backus, a Minneapolis lumberman, transformed the remote town of International Falls, Minnesota, in the first decade of the twentieth century. Born in Jamestown, New York, in 1860, he grew up near Red Wing, Minnesota. Working his way through the University of Minnesota (although he never graduated), Backus took a position with the Lee-McCulloch Lumber Company in 1882, then acquired the business three years later. By 1889, the E. W. Backus Company was the second largest

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 2

lumber company in Minneapolis. Looking for additional investments, he formed the Backus and Brooks Company with associate William F. Brooks in 1899.

In business moves of stunning audacity, Backus bought property on the American side of the waterfall on the Rainy River, then received permission from the province of Ontario in December 1903 to build a dam for power generation. Work on the structure began within a month. His financial interest extended across the border into Fort Frances, Canada, where he obtained a pulpwood company and announced plans for a new mill in that city. He also acquired a sawmill at Kenora, Ontario, on the shores of Lake of the Woods. To link his envisioned empire, Backus and his associates invested \$4,000,000 in a railroad system, building the Minnesota and International Railway from Brainerd to International Falls, completed in 1907.

With the completion of the dam in 1909, the city gained electrical power, augmented in 1914 by a second dam at Kettle Falls. The first paper mill, owned by the Backus-controlled Minnesota and Ontario Paper Company, went on line in May 1910. By the end of the year, four machines produced a daily output of 164 tons. In 1912, International Lumber Company's saw mill opened, employing five hundred men and cutting 125,000,000 feet of lumber per year. Its Canadian sister firm, the Fort Frances Pulp and Paper Company, began production in 1914.¹

In 1912, two Backus subsidiaries—the International Bridge and Terminal Company and the Minnesota, Dakota, and Western Railway—completed a bridge across the river between International Falls and Fort Frances. At the opening ceremonies, “the center of the bridge was decorated, the south half with the star spangled banner and the north half with the Union Jack, then in the center the flags are intertwined together and also float side by side.” Backus declared that “he was grateful for the part he had been permitted to play in the bringing about of these conditions and that it now gave him great pleasure to remove the last barrier to the free intercourse between these cities and countries.” He then literally picked up the barrier and tossed it into the river.²

International Falls

Within a decade, the northern outpost turned into a small city, labeled by a real estate developer as “The City of Destiny.” One resident recalled the town in 1904, when “the majority of the houses consisted of tents, cedar-bark houses and small log cabins. The streets were few and the sidewalks fewer.” Only eight years later, the local newspaper reflected the unabashed optimism of its citizens, declaring:

The Falls is practically a new town; three years ago they had scarcely anything except the falls; now they number nearly 5,000 souls with the prediction of doubling inside of another year. Lots in the business district are now selling from \$2000 to \$10000 each. Residence lots will soon be

¹ *International Falls Press*, 28 March 1912. Hereafter noted as *IF Press*.

² *IF Press*, 1 August 1912.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 3

scarce at \$500 each. When it is taken into consideration what a wonderful power the great paper mill, the immense stone business blocks, the vast tract of agricultural lands and the ideal geographical center and its six railroads now centering there, one cannot help believe but what International Falls will soon be in size to Minneapolis or Saint Paul.³

Between 1910 and 1920, the population grew from 6,431 to 13,520 people. With the city, the public school system underwent a rapid transformation. The first school, located in a log cabin, opened in the village of Koochiching Falls (later International Falls) in 1894. L. A. Ogaard, the first teacher, noted, "I had absolutely no qualifications for teaching but was drafted." The school moved to a slightly larger log structure in 1898. One student recalled, "This schoolhouse was situated at the edge of the forest where its dozen students assembled. Luckily the teacher had a set of school books. The first graders learned the alphabet from cracker boxes or anything which had letters on it." By 1903, enrollment climbed to sixty pupils.⁴

When Koochiching County was organized in 1906, the large unincorporated territory fell under the guidance of the county superintendent of schools, led in its first years by the remarkable Annie Shelland. She became a well-known figure — called the "the most interesting woman in the state of Minnesota today" by a gushing reporter — as she campaigned for the improvement of rural roads. In 1915, Shelland moved to Saint Paul where she took a post as supervisor of rural education at the state Department of Education.⁵

The city schools, though, were managed by two organized school districts: #4 for International Falls and #7 for South International Falls. In 1908, District #4 built a seven-room frame school at Eighth Avenue and Third Street. The high school program, however, did not begin until September 1909 with an initial enrollment of 110 students.

With the opening of the mill, the school system was overwhelmed with new pupils, increasing from 180 students in 1910, to 300 in 1911, then 379 in the fall of 1912. The seven-room building was overcrowded, so some classes were held in the Baptist, Lutheran, and Methodist churches. When the state high school inspector toured the school, he made it clear that a new building and larger faculty would be required.

³ *IF Press*, 6 June 1912.

⁴ *IF Daily Journal*, 15 September 1938; "Graduation Week Recalls Schools of an Earlier Day," *IF Press*, 28 May 1936.

⁵ *IF Press*, 6 March 1913; Letter from J C. Kohlhasse to M. C. Colmer, 7 March 1973, in Annie Shelland Williams File, Minnesota Historical Society.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 4

Alexander Baker School

In February 1912, the citizens passed a school bond issue for \$125,000 by a vote of 123 to 14, after which the school board hired the architectural firm of Bell, Tyrie and Chapman to design the building. The partnership was relatively new. Charles Emlen Bell was born in 1858 in McLean County, Illinois. After practicing for several years in Council Bluffs, Iowa, he established his reputation with the design of the Montana state capitol in 1898 and the South Dakota state capitol in 1904. By 1904, he opened an office in Minneapolis. His work included courthouses for Martin County, (Fairmont) Minnesota, Cass County, (Fargo) North Dakota, and Brown County, (Green Bay) Wisconsin, all listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Bell designed the Koochiching County Courthouse, completed in 1909, so that his work was familiar to local residents.⁶

In 1909, he took on two partners, William W. Tyrie and George Chapman. Both came from New York state and graduated from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. They practiced together in Ogdensburg, New York, for a few years until Chapman left for Minnesota. In 1908, Tyrie followed his friend to the Twin Cities. Architect William Gray Purcell described the pair as "a couple of bright, energetic fellows, wise in business ways, experienced in architects' conventions."⁷

The partnership with Bell lasted only a few years, although two of their buildings, the Brookings County, (Brookings) South Dakota, Courthouse and the Brookings School, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1913, before the completion of the Baker School, the partners went separate ways. Tyrie and Chapman went on to gain a reputation as major designers of educational buildings in Minnesota and South Dakota, including schools in Saint Cloud, Chisholm, New Ulm, and Aurora, Minnesota.

Their knowledge of school construction played a vital role in the firm's success. The state Department of Education, through its administrative guidelines, pushed local districts to hire architects who specialized in school buildings. As the local newspaper described the Baker School, "No structure of its kind has been more carefully planned, the best advice from the state school authorities in regard to requirements necessary to receive the maximum of state aid in the different departments had been obtained and followed."⁸

The school board let the contract to the Gray Construction Company of Watertown, South Dakota, at a cost of \$140,000. Construction began in July 1912 with work completed by the end of 1913. Students

⁶ Ronald Ramsey, "The Strange Case of Charles Emlen Bell: an episode in the professionalization of architecture," Association for Practical and Professional Ethics Conference, Dallas TX (February 1998).

⁷ William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota.

⁸ *IF Press*, 4 June 1914.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 5

commenced classes in January 1914. Earl Pendergast, a student, provided a local newspaper with a witty commentary on life in the new building. He wrote:

Our experiences in the new high school rooms are at least varied enough to break the monotony. Monday and Tuesday we were treated to a continuous sun bath and when after we were done a turn, temporary curtains were put up at the windows the form of bath was changed to the popular Turkish. Something happened to the ventilating shaft, which caused it to exit steam for something like thirty minutes. We are thankful the drinking fountains are no longer hot springs.⁹ The building originally housed the combined grade and high schools with additional manual training and business courses. A large basement room provided space for the introduction of kindergarten to the curriculum.

Taking advantage of the additional space, the school district offered three new programs that benefited the surrounding community. A normal school provided teacher-training classes, a key source of staff for rural county schools. These classes continued at Baker School until 1924 when the program transferred to the new high school. In addition, the new building hosted an approved agricultural program, offering classes to area residents with support of the state extension service.¹⁰

The school district also conducted an adult night school, established under Superintendent E. E. McIntyre, offering English classes for the area's large immigrant population. The curriculum, however, covered a wide variety of instruction. A newspaper article described the program:

There have been about fifty enrolled in this school which includes men and some of their wives of almost every nationality represented in our city, as follows: Russians, Greeks, Fins, Austrians, Polanders, Swedes, Norwegians, and Irish. The classes that have been arranged for them run all the way from the primary grade to the high school work, and their teachers testify to rapid progress.¹¹

These night school classes continued for a decade.

The new building quickly reached its capacity as the Falls continued to grow. Within three years, the high school had seventy-five students and the grade school had 533. In response, the school district purchased Block 29, directly east of the courthouse, in 1921, and constructed a high school building in

⁹ *IF Press*, 22 January 1914.

¹⁰ *IF Press*, 13 November 1913; 1 January 1914.

¹¹ *IF Press*, 22 January 1914.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 6

1924. In that year, there were 335 students in the high school and 805 grade students in the Alexander Baker Building.¹²

International Falls in the 1930s

International Falls in 1936 was a very different community from the town of the first two decades of the twentieth century. The immediate post World War I years were heady economic times for the paper industry. In the 1920s, newspapers across the country printed more frequently as many weeklies moved to daily publication. In addition, burgeoning advertising sections increased the number of pages per issue. In 1909, Americans used ninety pounds of newsprint per capita, rising to 150 pounds per capita by the mid-1920s. By 1920 the Backus-Brooks companies were the fourth largest newsprint manufacturers in North America. In addition, Backus-Brooks engineers pioneered a method to make insulation board from the waste screenings and by-products of paper pulp. This led Backus to create the Insulite Company, which began producing the board in International Falls in 1916.

Backus' influence dominated community life in the following years. He served as an officer and trustee of the Northern Pacific Railway, the Northwestern National Bank of Minneapolis, the Newsprint Manufacturers' Association, the International Falls State Bank, the Koochiching Company (real estate), the Rainy River Improvement Company (dams, utilities, and telephone), and other subsidiary interests of the Backus-Brooks network. His partner, William Brooks, served as a state senator from 1918 until 1928, and then as a Republican national committeeman from 1910 until 1928.

During the 1920s, paper companies rapidly expanded manufacturing capacity, but beginning in 1927, the market dropped precipitously. By 1932, seven of the country's largest paper companies were either bankrupt or placed in receiverships, among them, the Minnesota and Ontario. E. W. Backus was no longer associated with the business after February 1931, when the company was forced into a receivership that continued until March 1941. Although he struggled to regain control of his empire, the fight ended with his death in 1934.¹³

The effects on the local economy were devastating—the mills were closed for almost a year between 1932 and 1933—and the city and county governments turned to federal aid programs to soften the blow. The Civil Works Administration (CWA) helped 1,090 unemployed Koochiching County workers in 1934, as the unemployed painted the courthouse, worked on road construction crews, and helped build an airfield for International Falls. Its successor, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), managed

¹² The 1924 high school building was demolished in the late 1980s.

¹³ James A. Guthrie, *The Newsprint Paper Industry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 57-75, 93-105. Backus also faced a growing opposition to his expansion plans, led by Ernest Oberholtzer. Also, History Book Committee, *History of Koochiching County: Where Trees Make the Difference* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1983), 11-13.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 7

numerous programs in the county, including road and bridge construction, a municipal dock for the Rainer, assistance for the Immigration Border Patrol, and a sewing program.

In 1933 the federal government established the Public Works Administration (PWA), aimed at providing grants and loans to spur construction. The PWA funded new buildings, with the maximum grant of forty-five percent of the total cost. Its projects tended to be larger than those financed by the Works Project Administration. As administered by Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, the PWA operated under tight fiscal control. His intention was to steer the PWA away from unnecessary and wasteful spending, avoiding the scandals that rocked the Harding administration in the previous decade.¹⁴ The selection process relied heavily on the state level boards. The Minnesota State Advisory Board appointed in July 1933, with William N. Carey, State Engineer, serving as the panel's executive officer. This body prepared a report on each application and forwarded both the report and application to Washington, including a recommendation. Factors included:

- The relation of the particular project to coordinated planning and its social desirability.
- Economic desirability of the project, i.e. its relation to unemployment and revival of industry.
- The financial ability of the applicant to complete the work and to reasonably secure any loans made by the United States.¹⁵

By the end of the program in 1941, the PWA had sponsored 666 federal and non-federal projects in Minnesota, including 252 educational buildings.

International Falls had a difficult time with its PWA applications. Its first major request, in 1934, was for money for \$230,000 for a new water works. It was rejected "on the grounds that International Falls is a one industry town, dependent on natural resources, which is subject to natural depletion and sudden possible destruction by fire. The government does not consider it advisable to take such risks with public funds."¹⁶

Another request, in 1935, was for a city hall/ recreation building. A local newspaper reported:

¹⁴ J. Kerwin Williams, *Grants-in-Aid under the Public Works Administration* (New York: 1939); John T. Flynn, "Who's Holding Back Public Works?" *New Republic*, 76 (1933): 145-148; "The New Deal: An Analysis and Appraisal," *The Economist* (3 October 1936): 5; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 70-71, 133-134.

¹⁵ Rolf T. Anderson, "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Nomination Form. 30 October 1995.

¹⁶ *IF Press*, 29 March 1934.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 8

The city council went on record last night as being heartily in favor of a new city hall and recreation building for the city and the vote to accept what is known as scheme "A" was unanimously endorsed. Steps will be taken immediately to call a special bond issue election as well as to make application for PWA funds. . . . According to proposals, the new building will cost approximately \$180,000.

The same story noted the central role of the intended architect in the application process.

Nairne W. Fisher, St. Cloud architect, who drew the accepted plans was present at the meeting and presented in great detail the various procedure necessary for the securing of the government aid. Sketches and drawings of the new building were also exhibited to the members of the council.¹⁷ The state board again expressed concerns with the region's economic stability. William Carey, the state engineer, advised city leaders that a formal request would undoubtedly be refused, citing "overlapping debts of the county and school district and one of the highest per capita indebtedness in the state." Carey again cited the one-industry nature of the city's business. The city council pushed ahead, however, and conducted a public referendum. However, the bond issue lost by nineteen votes.¹⁸

E. W. Backus Junior High School

Within a few years of the construction of the Baker School, the school board recognized the need for additional space and built a high school in 1923. By 1935, the high school was bursting at the seams, partially due to consolidation, with enrollment growing from 346 students in 1924 to 756 in 1935. As the local newspaper observed,

The Falls high school, overcrowded as it was last year, will house a greater number of students this year. Monday, 750 were in attendance and a larger enrollment is anticipated. To partly alleviate crowded conditions, seventh and eighth grade class work in industrial training and home economics has been cut in half. Music classes in the same grades have been greatly increased in size.¹⁹

The State Department of Education warned the local school board that new space would be required, but held back on any sanctions, recognizing that much of the growth was directly tied to administrative

¹⁷ *IF Press*, 18 April 1935. Also 31 October 1935: Fisher designed the Littlefork Junior High School, built with WPA funds. Fisher also drew the plans for PWA funded elementary schools in nearby Ray and Loman in 1938. The PWA finally approved \$56,856 for a public library and \$54,838 for a municipal building. These were completed in 1939 with Reinhold Melander as the project's architect. See *IF Daily Journal*, 20 September 1938.

¹⁸ *IF Press*, 9 May 1935.

¹⁹ *International Falls Daily Journal*, 4 September 1935.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 9

directives to consolidate schools in nearby communities. In 1931, the county cut the school budget by a third and closed eighteen of its thirty-nine schools. Some forty-five junior high students from the nearby Holler District, for example, were shifted into the city system at the request of the state.

In response, the district school board recommended that a new junior high school be constructed, permitting the transfer of some 350 students from the high school building. They weighed several alternatives, finally determining that an addition to the Alexander Baker School was the most economical solution.²⁰

The school district applied for a PWA grant in June 1935, only to be turned down. As noted, PWA regulations capped the maximum grant at forty-five percent of the total cost. Realizing that a new school was essential, the district reapplied for a grant equal to thirty percent. To their surprise, the government came back with approval for the original request. The final hurdle was cleared when the city voters approved the school bond by an overwhelming margin of 601-35.²¹

The school board hired Nairne Fisher to design the new building, recommending that its style "be in the same simple type of architecture as the Alexander Baker school." Born in 1898, Fisher opened an office in Saint Cloud in 1922. His most notable works include the Rice (Faribault) and Pope (Glenwood) County courthouses, both listed on the National Register of Historic Places. He gained a reputation for his public buildings. In his Saint Cloud, for example, he designed St. Mary's Church, Garfield Grade School, Jefferson Grade School, the Cathedral High School building and St. Anthony's Church and School. By 1938, he expanded his firm, opening offices in Chicago, Saint Paul, and Milwaukee. Shortly afterward, Fisher moved to Washington, D.C. to direct an office.²²

With funding and drawings in hand, the school board awarded construction contracts in December. Duplaise and Kileen of Superior oversaw general construction, with plumbing, heating and ventilating by Healey Plumbing and Heating of St. Paul; electrical by Universal Electric of Minneapolis and temperature control by Johnson Service of Minneapolis. Construction moved along swiftly, although one crucial decision remained unsettled, as reported in the local news:

Unable to decide on the color of the brick for the new junior high building, members of the board . . . decided to defer selection . . . to a later date. Members would prefer to match the Alexander

²⁰ *IF Daily Journal*, October 1935.

²¹ *IF Press*, 13 June 1935; *IF Daily Journal*, 11 September 1935, 28 October 1935. This was the largest PWA grant in Koochiching County. Other approved projects included road construction and a new high school stadium.

²² Survey files, St. Cloud Heritage Preservation Commission; Northwest Architectural Archives file; *Saint Cloud Times*, 7 June 1938. Fisher died in 1980 in Deltona, Florida.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 10

Baker building in color, but have not been able to secure a close match. Nairne Fisher, architect, advises a contrasting brick be used if a matching brick cannot be secured.²³

In the end, the matching exterior brick was chosen. When construction costs ran over budget, the city successfully applied for \$57,233 in additional PWA funds. In the end, the school cost \$391,000 with the PWA contributing \$176,333.²⁴

Some classes moved into Backus School in February. The local newspaper observed:

Although the new school will not be completed for another month, seventh grade classes in home economics and industrial arts must be held in the new building. This action is mandatory on local school officials by the state department of education if the school is to retain its present ranking and receive the same departmental grants. Meanwhile work is being rushed. The majority of the class rooms have been completed, except for finishing the floors and installing electrical fixtures. The gym has been finished, the auditorium has been decorated and lighting fixtures have been installed but the auditorium chairs will not be shipped for some time. Workmen are expected to begin installing the students' lockers tomorrow morning.²⁵

The public received its first glimpse in May, when the Baker School presented its annual operetta in the auditorium. A full house applauded "The Land of Dreams Come True."²⁶

Formal dedication ceremonies waited until the next school year. A local reporter praised its design, stating,

The attractive auditorium, in which Architect Nairne Fisher dared to use pastel colors and achieved a thing of beauty, was comfortably filled . . . Besides the auditorium, the school contains several other rooms which make it one of the most practical in the state. The home economics and industrial arts departments and cafeteria are all smartly finished.²⁷

The two schools held a central place in the educational and social life of the community. Numerous school concerts, theatrical productions, and sporting competitions graced the stage of the auditorium, which had the largest seating capacity within a one hundred mile radius.

²³ *IF Press*, 23 April 1936.

²⁴ *IF Press*, 10 September 1936.

²⁵ *IF Press*, 25 February 1937.

²⁶ *IF Press*, 20 May, 1936.

²⁷ *IF Daily Journal*, 14 October 1937.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 8 Page 11

The well-equipped home economics and industrial arts departments were especially important to the curriculum. Taking advantage of these excellent facilities, the auditorium, and the public address system, a local newspaper held a cooking school in Backus School for the next decade, drawing more than a thousand people every year. In the late 1930s, the WPA used the basement storage area to store food for countywide distribution through various relief projects, including a school hot lunch program.²⁸

While the explosive growth of its first decades abated, the population of International Falls continued to climb steadily. In 1948, the two local independent school districts, representing International Falls (#4) and South International Falls (#7) consolidated. In that same year, the district built the Forestland Grade School on Block 97 to the west of the Baker/Backus Schools. The buildings continued to be used for school classes until the 1980s. Between 1988 and 1995, Independent School District No. 361 used the facilities as offices, with some rooms used by the Early Childhood and Family Education Center.²⁹

Conclusion

The two schools played a significant role in the educational and social life of the community and region. Due largely to the business ventures of lumberman E.W. Backus, the city of International Falls developed from an isolated wilderness village into a city of 13,520 within a decade. To meet the needs of its growing population, the city built the Alexander Baker School in 1912. Following its opening, the school quickly became an important community center, educating not only the town's youth, but providing space for adult education, agricultural extension classes, and teacher training.

Fourteen years later, during an economic collapse in the paper industry, the community built another school in 1935-36. The Backus School is an important example of Federal Relief Construction and meets the registration requirements for Educational Facilities as established in the Multiple Property Documentation Form entitled, "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941". Backus School, completed in 1936, was the largest single Public Works Administration funded project in Koochiching County. As an educational facility, it provided a new and modern building for instruction and other services to the community.³⁰

²⁸ *IF Daily Journal*, 4-6 October 1938. The large walk-in freezer is still located in the basement.

²⁹ Hiram Drache, *Taming the Wilderness: The Northern Border Country, 1910-1939* (Danville, IL: Interstate Publishers, Inc., 1992), 194-196. Also, History Book Committee, *History of Koochiching County*, 60.

³⁰ Rolf T. Anderson, "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Nomination Form, 30 October 1995.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 9 Page 1

Major Bibliographic References

Anderson, Rolf T. "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941." National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Nomination Form. 30 October 1995.

Drache, Hiram. *Taming the Wilderness: The Northern Border Country, 1910-1939*. Danville, IL: Interstate Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Guthrie, James A. *The Newsprint Paper Industry*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941.

History Book Committee. *History of Koochiching County: Where Trees Make the Difference*. Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1983.

International Falls (MN) Daily Journal.

International Falls (MN) Press.

Isakoff, Jack F. *The Public Works Administration*. Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1938.

Olson, James E. *Historical Dictionary of the New Deal*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Our Story: One Hundred Years in the Life of Borderland. Special Supplement, *International Falls Daily Journal*, 15 March 2000.

Searles, R. Newell. *Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart*. Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977.

Williams, J. Kerwin. *Grants-in-Aid under the Public Works Administration*. New York: 1939.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Alexander Baker School and E.W. Backus Junior High School

Name of property

Koochiching County, MN

County and State

Section 10 Page 1

Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description.

Blocks 43 and 44, International Falls, Koochiching County, Minnesota.

Boundary Justification.

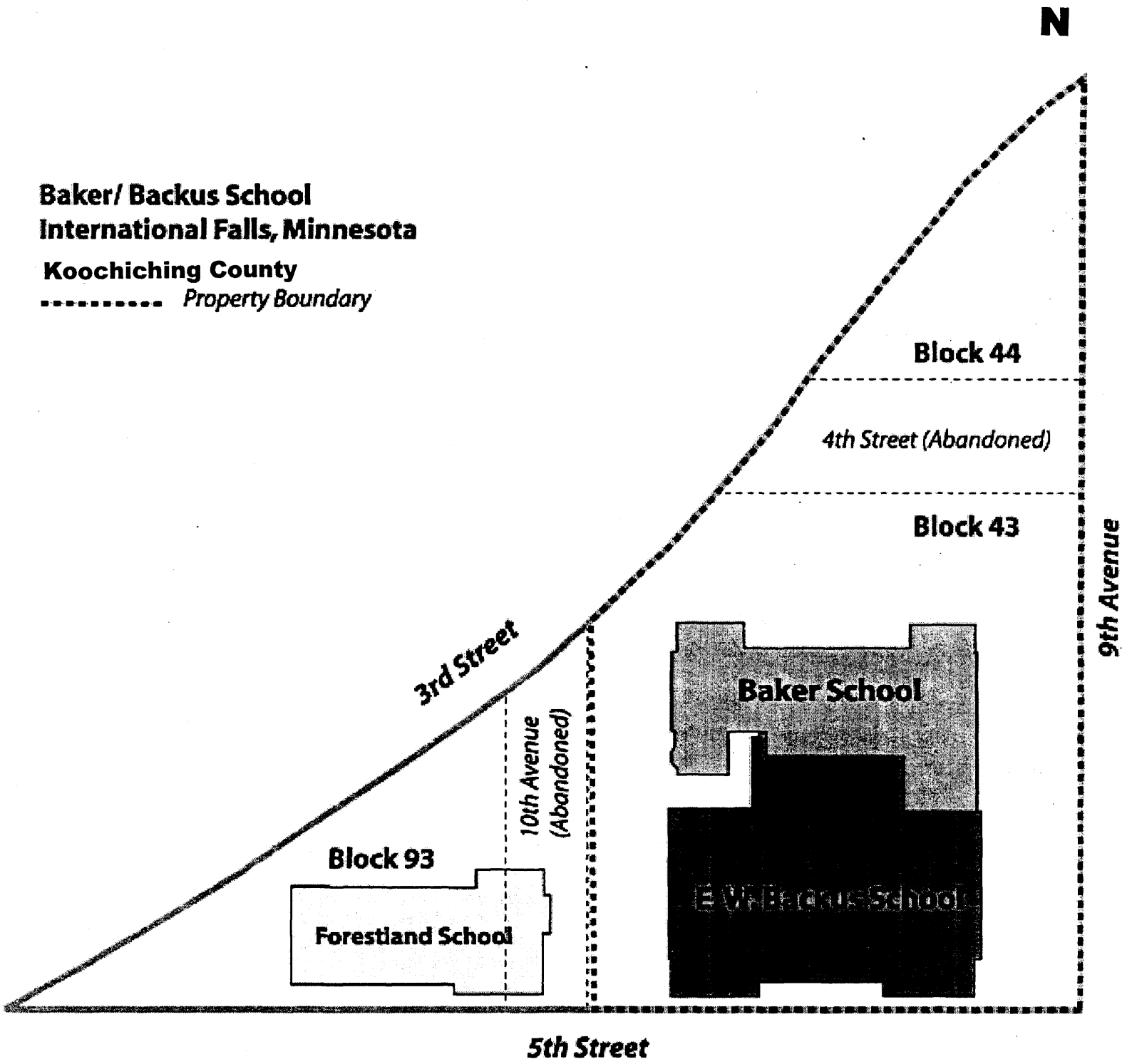
The boundary includes the historic boundaries of the Alexander Baker School and the E. W. Backus Junior High School property during the period of significance. When constructed, the Baker School property included all of Block 43. The school district acquired Block 44 in 1921, prior to construction of the Backus School in 1936.

Forestland Grade School is not included in this nomination because it represents a later period of school development and expansion. Additional research is needed to determine if it meets National Register Criteria.

**Baker/ Backus School
International Falls, Minnesota**

Koochiching County

..... *Property Boundary*



Block 44

4th Street (Abandoned)

Block 43

3rd Street

*10th Avenue
(Abandoned)*

Block 93

Forestland School

Baker School

E.V. Backus School

9th Avenue

5th Street

N

**Baker/ Backus School
International Falls, Minnesota**

Koochiching County

..... *Property Boundary*

Block 44

4th Street (Abandoned)

Block 43

9th Avenue

3rd Street

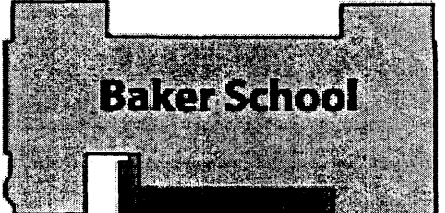
5

3

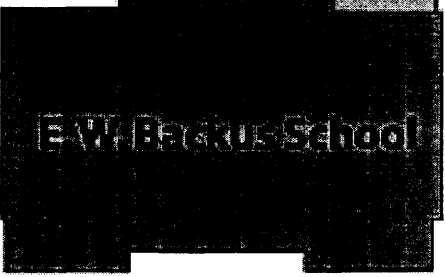
✓

*10th Avenue
(Abandoned)*

9



Baker School



E.W. Backus School

Block 93



Forestland School

5th Street

2

1

4

Photo Key