

BEFORE THE NEW CASTLE COUNTY

HISTORIC REVIEW BOARD

STATE OF DELAWARE

Department of Land Use
New Castle, DE

August 21, 2018

PRESENT

DEPARTMENT OF LAND USE

Matt Rogers
Elizabeth Caufield

HISTORIC REVIEW BOARD

Barbara Benson, Chair
John Brook
John Davis
Steve Johns

. . . (Recorder was not recording) . . .

MS. BENSON: I would like to call the New Castle County Historic Review Board public hearing to order. We will begin with roll call. I'm Barbara Benson.

MR. DAVIS: John Davis.

MR. JOHNS: Steven Johns

MR. BROOK: John Brook.

MS. BENSON: Thank you. We have Matthew Rogers from the Department of Land Use and our planner Elizabeth Caufield.

MS. CAUFIELD: I'll start by reading the Rules of Procedure for a public hearing. This is a public hearing conducted by the New Castle County Historic Review Board. The purpose of these hearings is to compile a record of relevant information regarding each application and how the proposed projects affects the County's historic resources. To make the most effective use of time at this hearing the following rules of order are established.

Following the reading of each agenda item the applicants and their representatives will make a presentation not to exceed a total of 15 minutes. Board members may ask questions of the applicant at the conclusion of their presentation. The public will be invited to speak in the following order: 1) Those who wish to speak in favor, 2) those who wish to speak in opposition and 3) those who wish to offer general comments. Speakers are encouraged to be brief and to focus their remarks on historic issues. So that everyone has an opportunity to be heard all speakers are limited to five minutes. Any speaker may ask the Board to hold the record open for submittal of written testimony if the time limit is not

sufficient for their needs. Speakers are not permitted to debate the applicant but may ask questions that the applicant may choose to answer during his rebuttal period at the close of the public comment period.

All testimony is recorded and transcribed, therefore, all speakers must come forward to the table one at a time and state their name, address, organization affiliation if any before offering comments. Random comments from the audience will not be recognized. And the public is asked to respect the applicant's right to an orderly hearing.

No recommendations or decisions will be made by the Historic Review Board at these hearings today. The Board will evaluate the information, testimony, and comments received here at the public business meeting to be held on the first Tuesday of the next month.

MS. BENSON: There is no old business. New business.

MS. CAUFIELD: It's for a National Register of Historic Places Nomination: Taylors Bridge School at 121 Flemings Landing Road, Blackbird Hundred. NC2a Zoning. Council District 6.

MS. BENSON: Are we ready?

MS. CAUFIELD: It's recording.

MS. BENSON: It's recording. You may begin.

. . . (Recorder is now recording) . . .

MR. EVANS: Okay. I'm Michael Evans from the Center for Historic Architecture & Design at the University of Delaware. And it's my pleasure to present today on the Taylor's Bridge School on the application for the National Register of Historic Places.

On April 5, 1923 a terrible thunder storm rolled through the

Delaware Valley reeking much havoc in the region. On Delaware's roads car roofs were blown off of vehicles and in Philadelphia roofs were torn from houses. Trees were uprooted. A barn was struck by lightening and caught fire and yet somehow despite the veracity of the storm no lives were lost although there were many close calls. When the storm hit Taylor's Bridge in Delaware at a small crossroads south of Odessa and east of Blackbird a young teacher named Gladys McBooker had just wrapped up her Thursday afternoon lessons and was prepared to depart the school with a few young students. She paused and huddled with the children in the schools rickety big vestibule accessing the storm when suddenly the entire building shook and lurched. Startled she quickly dashed with the children through the blustery storm into a nearby field to witness just a minute later the entire school building collapsed and crashed to the ground.

While the incident was scary and the headline shocking some of Delaware's leaders were probably not surprised at all that one of the state's school buildings would collapse in a storm. In fact the condition of Delaware's schools had been a hot topic for six or seven years by that point. Many politicians and business leaders especially in the northern part of the State had acknowledged a dire need to reform Delaware's educational system. So by the time the Taylor's Bridge School met its demise in 1923 a powerful modernization campaign for the Delaware school system and its school buildings was well underway.

The architecture of the new Taylor's Bridge School opened in 1925 reflects in a bodies that moved in several ways. The title of

my talk letting in the light has a dual meaning. First it represents the social and cultural intent of the reformers who saw Delaware's schools as critical nodes for social enlightenment which they felt was urgently needed in the face of real conservatism and high immigration. But secondly letting in proper light was a quite literal goal espoused by architects and educational experts who advanced forward looking design principles to revolutionize the learning environment in the new school buildings.

It might not be an overstatement to call the school reform movement in Delaware an educational revolution. Contemporary certainly saw it as such. In 1920 James Patel, the lead architect in designing the new schools for Delaware opened his article in a national publication by declaring that the school building program now in progress throughout the State of Delaware is one of the most interesting and probably the most important has ever been undertaken by any state.

Many saw Delaware with its small size as a perfect laboratory to set an example for the rest of the country. And feeling as though the world was watching reformers here made an enormous effort to succeed. Yet much of this story has been largely ignored or forgotten. Perhaps the most devoted was Pierre duPont historic work to rebuild all the African American schools in the state and rightfully so. Pierre duPont personally paid almost two million dollars to construct at least 82 black schools in a flurry of building over just four years. Prompting hundreds of thank you letters and even a song that was written to celebrate. Yet duPont's remarkable philanthropy was only a part of a much larger effort to

revolutionize all of Delaware's schools and even Delaware's society itself.

At the beginning of the 20th century most northern states were taking at least some steps to modernize their school systems. Even in the south by 1915 Julius Rosenthal had partnered with Booker T. Washington to begin rebuilding hundreds of African American schools. Yet as World War I raged on Delaware's system remained largely neglected. This delayed modernization was mostly the result of rural citizens especially in the southern counties aggressively protecting the centralized local controlled schools in a wide spread desire the schools be unobtrusive and inexpensive as possible.

Progressive leaders viewed this decaying education system highly detrimental to the educational advancements of Delaware's children and to the State's future more generally. The system of public schools if it could be called that was a hodge podge of poorly funded local school districts within each county. To put things in perspective many Delawareans today feel that the current number of school districts 19 is excessive leading to waste and duplication of effort and expense. This was in the news again a few months ago in fact.

But for comparison in the early 1900's there were 424 school districts in Delaware. Most were small and runned by a three member neighborhood school board without a strong oversight or financial support from the state government. The schools commonly lacked credentialed teachers, proper equipment, or standardized curriculum. In rural districts the school attendance was highly

inconsistent since the number of school days was typically determined around the needs of child labor on the farm. Any attempts to reduce local control and to centralize and upgrade Delaware's schools was met with fierce opposition.

We can't explore too much tonight the long and intense political battle to centralize and modernize the Delaware school system. But the major turning point was the Educational Commission of 1917. In order to properly assess the education system the Commission initiated a statewide study hiring two prominent and progressive experts in educational surveys, Abraham Flexner and Frank Bockman. Flexner and Brockman's assessment of the Delaware school system was grim. They concluded that "on the whole public education of Delaware set a low ebb. The state organization was ill joined and ineffective as they said. Professional standards were non-existent and perhaps worst of all public opinion was unaroused".

In their opinion local control of education in Delaware was excessive and this created a culture of apathy, low standards, and lack of coordination. Only a traumatic and comprehensive revision of the state code could remedy these problems by centralizing control and administration under state and county authority. With only minor changes the Flexner study was adapted as the official report for the General Assembly in 1919 leading to a transformative school code that began radical changes and centralization.

The reform movement in Delaware found its strongest champion in Pierre duPont who had already donated substantial sums to a few educational institutions including the University of Delaware. In

1918 duPont formed the Service Citizens of Delaware, probably the most influential agency in the history of Delaware's education. As World War I concluded the Service Citizen would carry forward an ambitious progressive social program much of what they believed would benefit national security and social cohesion.

While the Service Citizen had other social reform goals such as the americanization programs and public health initiatives the organization and Pierre duPont especially primarily wished to rebuild Delaware's schools. To this end over the next 15 years Pierre duPont would personally donate at least five million dollars to construct over 120 schools in the State. However, wide apathy in Delaware and powerful political forces protecting the status quo would ensure that a monumental effort would be required to affect serious change.

So duPont initiated a large scale information campaign which was quite successful in catching public attention. Building on the unflattering conclusions of the Flexner report duPont hired an educational consultant George Strayer from Columbia University to conduct a statewide survey specifically on the school building. Strayer used a point system for the survey with 1,000 being a perfect score. His team found that outside of Wilmington an astounding 392 schools out of 400 so 98 percent scored below the 500 mark which was the standard for recommending demolition or abandonment.

Strayer's survey team reported that the one room schools were mostly one story framed buildings with little ventilation, poor lighting, and sufficient heating, and little upkeep. They were

often situated on small awkward plots of land with no ground for safe outdoor play. The schools were generally found to be dark and depressing places for learning. The report graphically described the daily grind of being a student at these schools. They found desks facing windows and children looking at the glare while sitting with their backs to the teacher. In winter to keep warm the students huddled together around a coal stove in the middle of the room. Many of the schools had a single outhouse and no fresh water for hygiene purposes. In a summary of one school the reports declared a crime against innocent children to enforce compulsory attendance laws where such accommodations were all that the community had to offer.

The consultants seemingly went out of their way to highlight the shameful conditions through photos including one with a cat standing in the doorway of the school and another revealing huge piles of apparent manure the students had to walk by and look at near their school. In the case of the cat a farmer was apparently using the building as a feed room in the off season. And the Commission's report broadly concluded that the building was indeed "better adapted for cats than children".

Yet in the face of their realities the Service Citizens still encountered angry opposition to almost any change and especially suggestions that local money should be spent to help build new schools. It was this resistant among whites at least that led to duPont's gigantic effort to fund the reconstruction of all African American schools. As one historian argues duPont built the schools for blacks in order to stimulate whites to construct their own

schools. His ultimate goal was to convince whites to at least match his gifts with increased school taxes and bonding. When whites resisted duPont decided to as he put it try another tact. He rebuilt all black schools so the whites "not wanting their children to attend poor schools then then negroes immediately became interested in education". Furthermore by constructing all black schools himself duPont believed he had instilled one of the most persuasive arguments that whites had using public monies for schools that white money would be used for black children.

By early 1923 around the time Taylor's Bridge School blew down the Delaware School Auxiliary, the school building arm of the Service Citizens had rebuilt almost all of the black schools in the State 80 of them with seven more planned. Yet the white schools would prove to be a longer, more painful process since duPont was determined to involve white citizens and their money as much as possible. As it turned out his organization constructed more black schools in its first three years than white schools in the first eight. It was not until 1927 after duPont had served as, even served as State Tax Commissioner would help generate surplus monies for school construction that the State actually began to regularly fund large portions of the new schools while still typically relying on some duPont money and the Services Citizens architectural program for executing the projects.

As you can see in these images the Service Citizens had established a strong building program to work from consisting of a range of plans and experimental models with clear architectural patterns. Nationwide there was an abundance of description

literature about modern school design born of the rising class of college trained architects and the many professional journals in the fields of architecture and education. Clearly school architecture was seen as a critical subject at this time. One architect explained that the school houses of any community are gages of its enlightenment. Another in 1915 declared that recent movements in education had emphasized the physical plan as the basis of successful school practice. School architecture including all the problems of safety, sanitization, heating, lighting, ventilation, and other having the physical well being of the pupil in mind has been the earnest study of many of the leading architects in the country.

Conveniently for our research the lead architect of the Service Citizens James Patel himself laid out the background and principles of the Delaware program in a couple of architectural journals around 1920. In one article he urged the importance of architectural styles for schools. Careful consideration should be given to style he said so as to properly influence the future buildings of the town and to make the school a model of good taste. Still he warned to give a building architectural style does not necessarily mean to make it more expensive or to have unnecessary and excessive ornament. All of the different styles have a distinctive general outline of the mass of the building. The size. The shape. The spacing of window and door opening. So that a building may be extremely simple yet be a good expression of a definite architectural style.

In Delaware the style was almost predetermined. He noted that