

Strong John Thomson Elementary School
1024 Twelfth Street, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-414

HABS
DC,
WASH,
525-

WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

STRONG JOHN THOMSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HABS No. DC-414

Location: 1024 Twelfth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. or
Twelfth Street between K and L Streets, N.W.,
Washington, D.C.

Present Owner: District of Columbia

Present Occupant: District of Columbia

Present Use: Elementary School

Significance: The Strong John Thomson Elementary School is a
typical neighborhood school which has served the
community of the District of Columbia
continuously from 1869 until the present.

PART I HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1910 (Original 1869 structure razed 1910.)
2. Architect: Snowden Ashford, Municipal Architect.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

Thomas A. Mitchell sold the Lot #24 Square #284 to Strong John Thomson. Deed recorded January 20, 1869. Liber D # 6, 1869, p. 158. It was sold for \$4,360.00.

Strong John Thomson and Maria Louisa sold the Lot #24, Square #284, and a brick schoolhouse on it to the District of Columbia. Deed recorded in December 23, 1875. Liber 805, 1875, p. 250. It was sold for \$8,000.00.

(The District of Columbia owned the property from 1875 until the present.)

4. Builder: Unknown.
5. Alterations and Additions: Four schoolrooms were added to the original building in 1877. The original building and its addition were razed in 1910. No plans, pictures or print of the original structure were found during the research.

A third floor was added in 1924. Six classrooms and secondary areas. Architect: Albert Harris, Municipal Architect.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the School:

Strong John Thomson after whom the school was named was born in Washington, D.C. on December 13, 1813, of Scottish descent. He

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was educated locally at the Jefferson and Columbia College called today the George Washington University. He taught school in Maryland and began teaching in D.C. in 1852. He occupied several positions in Washington's Public Schools. From 1854 to 1855, he was the Principal of the Male Primary School of the 4th District, and from 1855 to 1869 he was the Principal of the Male Grammar School of the 1st District.

On October 12, 1869, he bought the lot on 12th Street between K and L Streets, N.W. and built a brick, two story, two room school, the Thomson Private Academy for Boys. He taught there from 1869-1875.

In December of 1875, Strong John Thomson sold the property and the school building to the Public School System of the District of Columbia, and was reappointed to the Public Schools in September, 1876. Although the reason for selling his property and private Academy is not known, it appears to have been the result of financial hardship. The property was mortgaged three times: in November, 1870; February, 1872; and August, 1869. (See Supplemental Material in field records.)

Strong John Thomson served with the D.C. Public schools from his reappointment in 1876 until his death on January 10, 1897. On April 1897, the Board of School Trustees granted permission to the Strong John Thomson Memorial Association to place a suitable tablet or other memorial on the Berret School, where he taught from 1861-69. The tablet was later placed at the original Thomson School but was not salvaged for the present building built in 1910.

A small reference to Thomson is also recorded in the Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Vol. I, p. 133 and reads as follows: "Mr. Strong John Thomson who commended his service as a teacher in the public schools in 1852 and was promoted to be Mr. Kelly's successor in 1874, is now actively and efficiently performing his duties as the principal of the Abbot School, the senior of the corps, and without a rival in the number of Washington boys who have acquired under his tuition a sound and thorough education in the Elementary Studies."

In the Report of the Board of Education of D.C. (1910-11, p. 24) he is referred to as "Strong John Thomson the strenuous Scotsman."

Strong John Thomson was also a 32 Mason, the Scottish Rite and a member of Federal Lodge No. 1, Eureka Chapter, Columbia Commandery, no. 2.

In 1869, Strong John Thomson bought a lot on 12th Street between K and L Streets, N.W. and built a private school. It was a brick, two story, two room school building. The dimensions of the physical structure were 36' x 28'. It was known as the Thomson Private Academy for Boys and remained a private school under Mr. Thomson until 1875. He was the only instructor of his school except for the year 1873-74 when the records show a

female instructor joining him. The number of pupils ranged from 35 to 60, their age from 8 to 18.

In 1874, one of the two rooms was rented to the D.C. Public Schools for \$480.00 per annum. In 1875, the Public Schools bought the property for \$8,000.00 from Mr. Thomson who returned to the public school system. According to reports by the Board of Education (1874-75) the building was in excellent condition, heated with stoves, had little yard room and could seat 60 students. The total value of the improved property was appraised at only \$8,500.00 in contrast to the Franklin School nearby (HABS No. DC-289) which was valued at \$227,000.00.

In 1877, Superintendent J. Ormond Wilson recommended the enlargement and remodeling of the school so that it could include the Normal School (a teaching academy of the time) and a School for Observation and Practice. It is difficult to determine whether the original two room building was razed before the enlarged brick, 91' x 28', three story school was completed in 1877. It seems probable that the School Board took the recommendation of the Superintendent and enlarged the small private Academy. A new furnace was installed to replace the old stoves. The cost of the construction amounted to \$6,451.00. (Report, D.C. Board of Trustees of Public Schools, 1876-77.)

The original school building served the community as an elementary school and Normal School until 1910 when it was leveled to the ground. Unfortunatey research found no photographs or prints of this original building.

A new building was erected in 1910 with an appropriation from Congress of \$256,000.00. Snowden Ashford, Municipal Architect drew the plans and W. L. Webster, supervised the construction. The new school was of brick, 136' x 83', two stories and basement (40,950 floor area), 12 classrooms and a capacity for 540 students. (Card file from the Buildings and Grounds Office of Washington, D.C.)

In 1924, a third floor with six rooms was added to the building, under Albert L. Harris, Municipal Architect. The capacity of the school reached 648.

The building is in good condition. It started as a school for boys; girls were accepted in later years and the school was desegregated in 1954. It has served the community of the District of Columbia continuously since 1869.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Public School Buildings, Past and Present. Prepared by the Department of General Research, Budget and Legislation, Office of the Statistician, May 24, 1965.

Data Concerning Public School Buildings. Prepared by the Office of the Statistician, July 30, 1948.

Both above sources and the Reports of the School Board were made available by Mrs. Erika Robinson, Research Information Center, Division of Public Schools of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C.

File on Strong John Thomson School.
Blue prints of the 1910 school building.

Both available at Public Schools of the District of Columbia, Office of Assistant Superintendent in charge of the Building Grounds, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Directory of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia. Prepared by the Board of Education 1953.
Washingtoniana Collection.

Deeds. The Office of Recorder of Deeds, Washington, D.C.

B. Secondary and published sources:

Annual Report of the Trustees of Public Schools of the City of Washington. (1872-73), (1876-77), (1885-90), (1909-10).

Report of the Board of Education to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia. (1868-69), (1869-70), (1873-74), (1874-75), (1875-76), (1910-11).

Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Volume I.
Washington, D.C., 1906.

C. Supplemental Material:

Deeds showing the mortgaged school property of Strong John Thomson. (see p. 2). All three deeds were recorded in Liber 805, 1875, pp. 247-48, on December 23, 1875.

1. William R. Woodward et al to Strong John Thomson.
August 20, 1869.
2. A. L. Heylman to Strong John Thomson, February 17, 1872.
3. Wm. A. Meloy to Strong John Thomson, November 19, 1870.

Interview with Mrs. Estelle Petrulakis, teacher at Strong John Thomson for nearly thirty years.

Mrs. Petrulakis has taught several grades and kindergarden at the Thomson School. She remembers it as a lovely neighborhood school when the students used to walk from the surrounding rowhouses. No particular individual who graduated from the school has been of local or national fame as far as she knows. The school educated a large number of Greek children when an

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area near the school was called the "small Greece". She took us on a tour of the school which is in very good condition with very tall ceilings and some lovely details. She was asked about the tablet commemorating Strong John Thomson which was placed on the original school building. She has never seen it in the present school. She has some snapshots of the school taken by herself about twenty years ago.

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