

PHILLIS WHEATLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, CAFETERIA  
BUILDING  
2300 Dumaine Street  
New Orleans  
Orleans Parish  
Louisiana

HABS LA-1453-A  
*HABS LA-1453-A*

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
PHILLIS WHEATLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL,  
CAFETERIA BUILDING

HABS No. LA-1453-A

Location: 2300 Dumaine Street, New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana

Present Owner: Orleans Parish School Board

Present Use: Vacated elementary school

Significance: The Phillis Wheatley Elementary School located at 2300 Dumaine Street, New Orleans, exemplified International Style educational buildings in the state of Louisiana. Built between 1953 and 1955, the campus consisted of a cantilevered classroom building and a one-story cafeteria. Architect Charles Colbert's innovative design provided access to natural light and ventilation as well as providing a sheltered playspace below. In addition, the school was part of the 1950s building campaign undertaken by the Orleans Parish School Board to modernize area schools.

Phillis Wheatley Elementary School's classroom building hovered above the surrounding buildings of the historic Faubourg Tremé. The cantilevered design and window walls of the classroom building allowed natural light to flood the building's twenty-two classrooms. Single-loaded corridors also permitted natural ventilation on the breezeways. Steel Pratt trusses atop concrete piers comprised the support system of the classroom building. The design received a 1955 *Progressive Architecture* award and was exhibited by the US State Department in both Berlin and Moscow during the Cold War.

The Orleans Parish School Board's 1950s building campaign worked to alleviate overcrowding in densely populated neighborhoods, provide schools in growing areas, and update the existing schools. By 1960, the School Board had built thirty modern schools and renovated eighteen. The schools of this generation differ sharply in design and appearance from earlier generations. The new designs featured International Style elements and materials such as glass and steel. Architects also favored breezeways rather than double loaded corridors to increase natural light and ventilation.

Project Information: Following Hurricane Katrina, the Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District, an agency within the State of Louisiana Department of Education, requested funding from the Federal Emergency

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Management Agency to demolish the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has determined that demolition will constitute an adverse effect to the school, a property determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has agreed to mitigate these effects by documenting the campus in accordance with the *Memorandum of Agreement Among the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Officer, the Louisiana Governor's Office on Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Louisiana Department of Education through its Recovery School District Regarding Phillis Wheatley Elementary School executed February 18, 2011.*

Researched and written by the staff of R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. on behalf of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

## PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History

#### 1. Date of Construction and Demolition

The Orleans Parish School Board began acquiring lots in the historic Faubourg Tremé in 1953 in order to construct an elementary school for the children of the nearby Lafitte Housing Development, a segregation-era government-funded complex for African Americans. On June 19, 1953, the Orleans Parish School Board accepted Charles R. Colbert's design for Lafitte Elementary Project No. 11.<sup>1</sup> The Orleans Parish School Board rechristened the project Phillis Wheatley Elementary School later that year in honor of the colonial-era African American poet.<sup>2</sup> Keller Construction Company began constructing the school in late 1954 and finished in 1955.<sup>3</sup> Phillis Wheatley Elementary School opened its doors to students on January 30, 1956.<sup>4</sup>

Following development of the Orleans Master Plan in 2008 and a building site and feasibility study in 2010, the Recovery School District decided to demolish the existing school and to build a new facility on the existing site.<sup>5</sup> Conservative estimates placed the cost of Adaptive Reuse at nearly \$1 million more than new construction.<sup>6</sup> In addition, neighborhood residents strongly advocated for a new school on-site. The Recovery School District concluded new construction was a more viable alternative than Adaptive Reuse and demolished Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in June 2011.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Orleans Parish School Board, Minutes of the June 19, 1953, Orleans Parish School Board meeting. Book 34, 585. Available in the records of the Orleans Parish School Board in the Louisiana & Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>2</sup> Orleans Parish School Board, Minutes of the September 28, 1953, Orleans Parish School Board meeting. Book 35, 145. Available in the records of the Orleans Parish School Board in the Louisiana & Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>3</sup> "\$112,500 to Buy Books Approved," *Times-Picayune*, November 9, 1954, 23, accessed May 24, 2011, [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

<sup>4</sup> "Two Additional Schools Opened," *Times-Picayune*, January 31, 1956, 18, accessed May 24, 2011, [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

<sup>5</sup> FEMA et al., *Memorandum of Agreement Among the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Louisiana Department of Education Through Its Recovery School District Regarding the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School 2300 Dumaine St., New Orleans, Orleans Parish, LA* (2011), 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

## 2. Original & Subsequent Owners

The Orleans Parish School Board opened Phillis Wheatley Elementary School to students in 1956.<sup>8</sup> Following Hurricane Katrina, the Recovery School District of Louisiana, a state school district within the Louisiana Department of Education, assumed management of Phillis Wheatley Elementary School as well as others in the city. Since that time, the Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District have worked together to administer the property. The School Board owns the school buildings and continues to own the site.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Architect

Charles Ralph Colbert designed Phillis Wheatley Elementary School and supervised the overall engineering. Mark Lowrey and Salvatore Moschella served as associated architects for the design. In addition to his architectural staff, Charles Colbert also had assistance in designing Phillis Wheatley Elementary School from several local engineers. Edward Carlton Guillot, Jr., and R.Y. Cheatham were electrical and structural engineers, respectively. B.M. Dornblatt & Associates consulted regarding structural engineering.

## 4. Builder & Suppliers

On April 26, 1954, the Orleans Parish School Board awarded the contract to demolish the buildings on Square 295 to Crescent City Demolishing & Lumber Company, in order to clear the site for Phillis Wheatley Elementary School. On November 8, 1954, the Orleans Parish School Board accepted Keller Construction Company's bid to construct Phillis Wheatley Elementary School, beating out eight other construction firms who bid on the project. Loubatt Glassware & Cork Company of New Orleans provided most of the kitchen and cafeteria utensils and dishes for the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School and Moton Elementary School cafeterias.<sup>10</sup> Bourgeois Ruhlman and J.S. Waterman & Company provided additional kitchen/cafeteria utensils.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. As-Built Description

The cafeteria building housed administrative offices, a clinic, a teacher's lounge, and a lobby. A large cafeteria with kitchen occupied the majority of the structure; the room doubled as an auditorium. Colbert included an outdoor eating space off the southeastern wall of the building.

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<sup>8</sup> "Two Additional Schools Opened," January 31, 1956, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Recovery School District, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed May 25, 2011, <http://www.rsdl.net/InfoGlance/FAQs.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Moton Elementary School was constructed in 1955 to educate the children of the Desire Housing Project.

<sup>11</sup> Orleans Parish School Board, Minutes of the November 14, 1955, Orleans Parish School Board meeting, Book 37, 39. Orleans Parish School Board, Minutes of the December 19, 1955, Orleans Parish School Board meeting, Book 37, 88. Available in the records of the Orleans Parish School Board in the Louisiana & Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Breezeways connected the campus buildings. A small playground was adjacent to the breezeways along the southeastern campus perimeter.

#### 6. Alterations

Although designed as an elementary school, Phillis Wheatley Elementary School did not contain a library when opened. In 1953, the OPC prepared an architectural program for the proposed Phillis Wheatley Elementary School and recommended using libraries and multi-purpose rooms as classrooms to reduce costs.<sup>12</sup> Opening day and dedication descriptions of the school do not describe a library. Between 1956 and 1969, the Orleans Parish School Board expanded the cafeteria building and absorbed the clinic space into the library.<sup>13</sup> It is possible the Orleans Parish School Board added a library at Phillis Wheatley Elementary School when the downtown Orleans Parish School Board library was demolished to make way for the Mississippi River Bridge (now the Crescent City Connection) which was completed in 1958.<sup>14</sup>

Repairs to update the school occurred as funds became available. In 1981, the Orleans Parish School Board began removing asbestos from its schools per an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandate. In the 1950s and 1960s, builders used asbestos extensively in schools as climate and noise insulation. Asbestos was also used as a fireproofing agent. The Orleans Parish School Board began removing asbestos from Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in the summer of 1983. Workers sealed off inaccessible areas of asbestos with a rubber-based paint.<sup>15</sup>

## PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. Description of the Cafeteria Building Exterior

The cafeteria building was situated at the corner of Dumaine and North Miro Streets. The building rested on a concrete slab and measured 130'-04" x 92'-04" with small projections to the northeast and northwest. Covered breezeways extended 44'-03" from the corners of the cafeteria building (HABS No. LA-1453-A) to the classroom building. The exterior walls were comprised of panel-covered concrete and were painted blue. A concrete walk surrounded the building.

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<sup>12</sup> Orleans Parish School Board, Minutes of the September 13, 1954, Orleans Parish School Board meeting. Book 36, 45. Available in the records of the Orleans Parish School Board in the Louisiana & Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>13</sup> "Modern School Dedicated," *Times-Picayune*, April 16, 1956.; *DIXIE*, August 17, 1969, 11, accessed August 8, 2011, [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

<sup>14</sup> Orleans Parish School Board, Minutes of the October 25, 1954, Orleans Parish School Board meeting, Book 36, 103. Available in the records of the Orleans Parish School Board in the Louisiana & Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>15</sup> McKendall, Rhonda, "Jefferson, Orleans lead race to clean up school asbestos," *Times-Picayune States-Item*, July 22, 1983, 13, accessed August 8, 2011, [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

The cafeteria building contained administrative offices and served as the campus's primary entrance. Colbert's design for the Dumaine Street side of the building, the primary façade, mimicked the harlequin pattern on the corresponding elevation of the elevated classroom building. In recent years, Dumaine Street façade was painted light blue with dark blue signage on the small northwest projection.

#### B. Description of the Cafeteria Building Interior

The cafeteria building served as a cafeteria and auditorium while also containing administrative offices, a reception area, and storage rooms. Clerestories opened the large cafeteria to natural light. Measuring 66'0" x 80'-4", the room also served as the school's auditorium. School assemblies were held in the room but overcrowding often required platooned sessions.<sup>16</sup>

A kitchen, pantry, and storage comprised the southwest portion of the cafeteria building. Administrative offices were across the cafeteria and closest to the classroom building. This area included small bathrooms and storage as well as a reception area.

### PART III: SOURCES

#### A. Primary and/or Unpublished Sources

Colbert, Charles. Presentation Drawings, Phillis Wheatley Elementary School. 1954. Available in the Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Louisiana Department of Education. *Memorandum of Agreement Among the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Louisiana Department of Education Through Its Recovery School District Regarding the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School 2300 Dumaine St., New Orleans, Orleans Parish, LA.* 2011.

Holly and Smith Architects. *Feasibility Study Phillis Wheatley Elementary New Orleans, LA.* 2010.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Stella Reese, Faubourg Tremé community member and former teacher at Phillis Wheatley Elementary School (1972-1974), by Kelly Sellers Wittie, R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., June 22, 2011.

Orleans Parish School Board, *Meeting Minutes*, 1953-1956. Louisiana & Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Orleans Parish School Board Office of Planning & Construction. *A Planning & Building Program for New Orleans' Schools*. 1952.

#### B. Secondary and/or Published Sources

“\$112,500 to Buy Books Approved,” *Times-Picayune*, 9 November 1954. Accessed May 24, 2011. [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

Byrd, Victoria D. “Determination of Eligibility- Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School,” 2008.

McKendall, Rhonda. “Jefferson, Orleans lead race to clean up school asbestos.” *Times-Picayune States-Item*, 22 July 1983. Accessed August 8, 2011. [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

“Modern School Dedicated in N.O.” *Times-Picayune*, 16 April 1956. Accessed July 21, 2011. [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

Recovery School District of Louisiana. “Frequently Asked Questions.” Accessed May 25, 2011. <http://www.rsdla.net/InfoGlance/FAQs.aspx>.

“Two Additional Schools Opened.” *Times-Picayune*, 31 January 1956. Accessed May 24, 2011. [www.nola.com/t-p/](http://www.nola.com/t-p/).

#### C. Sources for Additional Research

A June 2, 2011, search of the Louisiana Division/City Archives and Special Collections of the New Orleans Public Library revealed that the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School vertical file and the 1952 Office of Planning & Construction *Building Plan* were missing. The vertical files of the New Orleans Public Library contain mailings, news clippings, invitations, and letters related to the individual subjects. If located, the file may contain additional resources. The archives of *The Times-Picayune*, which are now available through an online subscription service, substituted for the missing materials. Microfilm copies of *The Times-Picayune* are available at both the New Orleans Public Library and the East Bank Regional Jefferson Parish Public Library.

Federal Emergency Management Agency personnel copied the OPC *Building Program* while conducting their own research. A digital copy was provided to R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. for use in this narrative.

The blueprints and as-builts of Phillis Wheatley Elementary School have not been located. Charles Colbert's house in Metairie, Louisiana, flooded in late August 2005. The records of Mark P. Lowery, Colbert's former partner, are available in the collection of the Southeastern Architectural Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

#### **PART IV: PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Following the unprecedented damage caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Recovery School District proposed to demolish Phillis Wheatley Elementary School addressed 2300 Dumaine Street, New Orleans, Louisiana, utilizing funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This project falls within the larger Master Plan implemented by the Recovery School District in 2008 to repair and/or replace damaged schools to accommodate the modern educational needs of Orleans Parish. In order to comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (36 CFR Part 800) for the modernization of the school system, the Federal Emergency Management Agency executed the *Secondary Programmatic Agreement Among Federal Emergency Management Agency, State of Louisiana Division of Administration Office of Community Development, Louisiana State Historic Preservation Officer, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Louisiana Department of Education, Through Its Recovery School District, and Orleans Parish School Board Regarding Implementation of School Facilities Master Plan for Orleans Parish New Orleans, Louisiana* (2PA). As part of the 2PA, historic properties that will be significantly renovated or replaced will be documented by digital and/or large format photography and an accompanying narrative history.

In June 2008, the Federal Emergency Management Agency determined the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for the school's association with the mid-twentieth century building campaign of the Orleans Parish School Board. The Federal Emergency Management Agency also determined the school to be eligible for listing under Criterion C as a preeminent example of International Style architecture in New Orleans.<sup>17</sup> SHPO concurred with this assessment on July 21, 2008.<sup>18</sup> In 2009, SHPO agreed that demolition of the school constituted an adverse effect to historic properties.<sup>19</sup> In consultation with SHPO, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and numerous consulting parties, the Federal Emergency Management Agency developed a memorandum of agreement to avoid, minimize, and mitigate adverse effects caused by the demolition of Phillis Wheatley Elementary School.

Parties interested in the Section 106 process recommended the Recovery School District evaluate alternatives to demolition of the school. In 2010, the Recovery School District retained Holly and Smith Architects of Hammond, Louisiana, to complete a building and site feasibility

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<sup>17</sup> Victoria D. Byrd, "Determination of Eligibility- Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School," June 5, 2008, 2. Determination conducted for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

<sup>18</sup> FEMA, *Wheatley MOA*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

study on the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School campus to determine if portions of the existing classroom building could be renovated and used as a modern education facility.<sup>20</sup> The renovated portions and any new design would have to meet the Recovery School District Education Specifications as well as state and federal guidelines. The Recovery School District also directed Holly and Smith Architects to conduct a massing study to determine if the current Educational Specifications could be met with a new school on the campus. Following this study, the Recovery School District decided it was more cost efficient to build a new facility on the existing site stating “the Adaptive Reuse concept draws resources away from the pool of funds available to support other projects...as a result of projected increased costs compared with new construction.”<sup>21</sup> Conservative estimates placed the cost of Adaptive Reuse at nearly \$1 million more than new construction.<sup>22</sup> In addition, neighborhood residents strongly advocated for a new school on-site. The Recovery School District concluded new construction was a more viable alternative than Adaptive Reuse.<sup>23</sup> The Recovery School District demolished Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in June 2011.

In April 2011, R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. commenced Historic American Building Survey Level I documentation of the Phillis Wheatley Elementary School campus on behalf of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This recordation conformed to the Scope of Work provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and was performed under the supervision of RCG&A, Inc. personnel who meet and exceed the Secretary of the Interior’s *Professional Qualification Standards for History and Architectural History* (48FR44716).

The full recordation package consists of large format photographs and negatives, measured drawings, and a historical narrative. This narrative presents a general overview of the development of the Faubourg Tremé, the school’s place within the larger school building campaign of the Orleans Parish School Board, and the architectural significance of the campus.

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<sup>20</sup> Holly and Smith Architects, *Feasibility Study Phillis Wheatley Elementary New Orleans, LA,* 2010, 1. Study conducted by Holly and Smith Architects for the Recovery School District of Louisiana to determine the feasibility of retain a portion of the campus for renovation and the ability of the historic campus buildings to meet current education building standards.

<sup>21</sup> FEMA, *Wheatley MOA*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 24.