

**NOMINATION OF THE SPRING HILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK**

CITY COUNCIL REPORT



SPRING HILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - HISTORIC NOMINATION STAFF REPORT

Name of Property Spring Hill Elementary School
Address of Property 1351 Damas Street
Property Owner Pittsburgh Public Schools
Nominated by: Matthew Falcone
Date Received: 13 March 2020
Parcel No.: 47-L-300
Ward: 24th
Zoning Classification: R1D-H
Neighborhood: Spring Hill
Council District: 1-Wilson

FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION:

1. Act on the Preliminary Determination of Eligibility for Historic Designation (3 June 2020)
2. Conduct a public hearing for the Historic Designation (1 July 2020)
3. Review the Report prepared by staff for the property in question, and make a recommendation to the City Council on the Historic Designation (1 July 2020)

FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE PLANNING COMMISSION:

4. Conduct a public hearing for the Historic Designation (25 Aug 2020)
5. Review the recommendations of the Historic Review Commission and make a recommendation to the City Council on the Historic Designation (25 Aug 2020)

FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE CITY COUNCIL:

6. Conduct a public hearing
7. Review the recommendations of the Historic Review Commission and the City Planning Commission and take action on the Historic Designation

1. On 13 March 2020, the staff of the Historic Review Commission received an application for the nomination of the Spring Hill Elementary School to be designated as a Historic Structure.
2. **Description of the Spring Hill Elementary School** (as *extracted from the nomination form*)

Setting and Site

Spring Hill School is a one-to-two story, brick and stone Classical Revival elementary school building in the Spring Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. It faces north onto Damas Street at its T intersection with Rockledge Street. It is surrounded by grassy lawn and trees to the north and west and paved play areas to the south and east. A brick plinth in the yard in front of the school identifies it as “Spring Hill Elementary School.” The entire site is enclosed by fencing: iron “hairpin” fencing typical of older Pittsburgh Public schools at the front (north), and chain link fencing on the sides and rear. The neighborhood surrounding the school consists of modest single-family brick and frame houses dating from ca. 1880-1920.

Exterior

The school consists of two wings. The western wing consisting of the first story of an original two-story building constructed in 1896 and renovated in 1936. The school’s eastern section is a substantial two-story addition constructed in 1908. The two wings are joined by a one-story connector which also dates to 1908. Both wings are rectangular in plan and constructed of red brick with sandstone foundations.

The older, western section of the school is nine bays wide by seven bays deep. Its northwestern corner has a rounded projection which originally supported a conical roof atop its second story (no longer present). The foundation of quarry-faced sandstone rises five courses to a smooth sandstone water table. Window openings have flat sandstone sills and lintels and contain replacement sashes. The red brick is a perceptibly different color and texture near the top of the walls, where they were rebuilt when the second story was removed in 1936. The current walls are capped by sandstone coping. The roof is flat.

Entrance to this section of the building is via an arched portal in the westernmost bay of the primary (north) facade, which projects at a depth of one bay. This projecting section was added at the time the second story was removed, in 1936. It has a stepped pediment with sandstone coping and symmetrically-placed stone medallions above and to either side of the entrance. The entrance itself is surrounded by sandstone voussoirs and contains replacement double doors.

A more elaborate stone entrance surround of Neoclassical design is found on the western side facade. Its opening has been mostly blocked in, but contains a single modern doorway accessed by a concrete ramp added in 1992.

The rear elevation of the western wing originally had nine window openings. Currently, from west to east: three openings have been bricked in, one opening (which is narrower than the rest) has been altered, one has been converted to a doorway, and four continue to function as windows.

The 1908 eastern wing is 11 bays wide and seven bays deep with facades of symmetrical design. The foundation is of dressed sandstone ashlar with a flat sandstone water table, except on the projecting five-bay central section of the primary (north) facade, where the water table is of white glazed terra cotta with a molded profile. The main entrance surround spans the central three bays of this section on the first floor and is also of white glazed terra cotta. The design of the surround encompasses a concentric arch springing from a telescoped series of squat engaged piers with Sullivan-esque capitals; a frieze containing the words “PUBLIC SCHOOLS” in relief; and two round lozenges with the year “1908” in relief. A pair of round-arched windows surmounted by glazed terra cotta voussoirs flank this main entrance on the first floor. The first through third and ninth through eleventh bays—which are set back from the building’s central block—contain window openings with flat sandstone sills and lintels on the first floor. The windows themselves are the same modern sashes found on the school’s western wing.

The second floor of the projecting central block is separated from the first floor by a glazed terra cotta string course, which also serves as the sill of the second story windows in this section. The three central windows have round arches and the first and fifth are rectangular. All have glazed terra cotta voussoirs. On the

recessed flanking bays of the second floor are round-arched windows with flat sandstone sills and brick lintels.

Beginning at the arches of the second story windows, the red brick is a perceptibly different color and texture. This marks where the original crenellated parapet was removed in 1913. The upper walls were rebuilt with a narrow, linear glazed terra cotta cornice and sandstone coping. The roof is flat.

The eastern side facade is seven bays deep. Because of the downward slope of the site toward the east, the basement level here contains full-sized window openings and a doorway in the center bay. The doorway is infilled with brick and modern double doors below the water table. Above the water table, the center bay contains a one-and-a-half story arch that has been infilled with modern aluminum windows and solid panels. A slender band of white glazed terra cotta frames the top of the arch. On either side of this arrangement are flat-topped window openings on the first floor and arched window openings on the second floor. A narrow penthouse rises above the parapet at the center of the roofline.

The rear of the building, like the front, has a projecting 5-bay central block. The basement and first story have flat-topped window openings and the second story has roundarched window openings. The only exceptions to this fenestration are the fourth and eighth bays, which contain windows of narrower dimensions which are round-arched on the first floor and flat-topped on the second.

The eastern and western wings of the school are connected by a one-story, four-bay segment constructed along with the 1908 addition. This has a bay window facing north and evidence of four original openings facing the rear. Of these, the center two are windows, but a doorway in the westernmost bay and a window in the easternmost bay have been bricked in. In the latter location, a new doorway has been added, accessible via a concrete stair. A tall chimney rises adjacent to this and the main 1908 building.

3. History of the Spring Hill Elementary School (as extracted from the nomination form)

The original two-story, brick Spring Hill Elementary School was constructed as the Seventh Ward Public School in 1896 on land purchased from Damas Lutz. The neighborhood of Spring Hill, named for natural underground springs in the area, was settled predominantly by German immigrants between about 1850 and 1920. Settlement and development of industries began along East Street and spread east during the 19th century. Lutz was a member of the Board of Directors of the German National Bank of Allegheny—then a separate city from Pittsburgh—who owned several acres of land at the intersection of Hetzell (now Homer) and what is now Damas Streets, called “Vineyard Park.”

In 1907, Allegheny was annexed to the City of Pittsburgh, resulting in changes to street names and ward numbers and boundaries. By 1925, the portion of the Lutz estate immediately adjacent to the school had been subdivided for building lots, and the school was known as the Spring Hill School after the neighborhood growing around it.

The 1896 Spring Hill/Seventh Ward Public School was designed to face west toward Noster Street. It was a typical late Victorian school house with a turret at one corner and a bell tower rising two stories above the main classroom block. The bell tower featured a clock and a weathervane befitting the school’s role as the civic centerpiece of its neighborhood. A secondary entrance on the north facade was emphasized by a gablet in the roofline above it. The architect of the original building is unknown. The earliest, undated plans in the Spring Hill School file at the Pittsburgh Public Schools Facilities Division depict a different building labeled “13th Ward Public School.”

The years around the turn of the 20th century were a boom time in new construction for the Allegheny and Pittsburgh public schools, as the school systems of both cities expanded to accommodate a rapid influx of new industrial workers and managers and their families. In 1908, the Seventh Ward Public School received a substantial, twostory addition which doubled its size. This addition faced north onto Damas Street and originally had a crenellated parapet, seen in a 1912 photograph. In 1913, this was removed and replaced with the current, flat parapet. This alteration is marked by a change in brickwork at the upper walls of the building. A one-story connector housing an office for the principal linked the 1908 addition with the original building.

In 1936, the school received substantial alterations which brought it to its present exterior form. Because the Pittsburgh School Board's building staff and program were funded by the federal government at this time, the project was known as Federal Public Works Project Docket PA 1156. Marion Steen, the Pittsburgh School Board's staff architect and Assistant Superintendent of Buildings from 1935-1954, was the architect for the 1936 renovations. The project involved the removal of the entire second story and bell tower of the school's original wing, the blocking in of the former west-facing main entrance, and the construction of a new auditorium entrance on the north facade. Stone relief lettering above the original main entrance, which read "Seventh Ward Public School," was ground away, leaving flat recessed panels. On the interior, the school received such modern new specialized spaces as play rooms, a gymnasium, a library, sewing and manual training rooms, a kindergarten (in the basement), and an auditorium with stage, dressing rooms, and a motion picture projection booth.

The architecture firm of Akers, Erwin, Thompson, and Gasparella designed extensive renovations to the school's interior in 1991. These plans also guided the current site design of the property, including the locations of walkways, hardscape and landscape features, the plinth in the school yard which serves as the school's sign, and the accessibility ramp.

4. Significance of the Spring Hill Elementary School *(as extracted from the nomination form)*

The *Pittsburgh Code of Ordinances, Title 11, Historic Preservation, Chapter 1: Historic Structures, Districts, Sites and Objects* lists ten criteria, at least one of which must be met for Historic Designation. The nominator is of the opinion that the Spring Hill Elementary School meets several of the criteria as follows.

4. Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States: *Spring Hill School meets this criterion for designation.*

Spring Hill School is associated with Marion M. Steen, who served as in-house staff architect for the Pittsburgh Board of Education from 1935 to 1954. Known primarily for his Art Deco designs, Steen faced a unique challenge in renovating the older Spring Hill School to meet the educational requirements of the modern era. Steen graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1908 and worked for Henry Hornbostel as a draftsman on campus buildings.

In 1918, he left Pittsburgh for a brief stint of working in Chicago, returning later that year to head the architectural department of the Carnegie Land Company. In 1922, he joined the family firm, James T. Steen and Sons, established in Pittsburgh in 1864. While there he began his school design career with Oliver, Prospect, and Herron Hill Schools. As the city's official school architect for almost 20 years, Steen designed a series of fireproof structures in the nationally popular Art Deco style, including Letsche, Weil, and Concord Schools. Steen was able to attain a high point in the evolution of Pittsburgh public school design by consistently meeting the new educational requirements in a succession of high-quality architectural designs. He retired from the Board of Education in 1954. Charged with renovating, not rebuilding, Spring Hill School, Steen worked with its existing architecture and spaces to bring the facility in line with modern ideas about education (see Criterion 7, below).

7. Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States: *Spring Hill School meets this criterion for designation.*

Spring Hill School is associated with the history of public school design in the cities of Allegheny and Pittsburgh. The ways in which Spring Hill School has been added to, subtracted from, and altered since its construction illuminate the three distinct historical eras of public school-building in these cities: the ward-based era, the consolidated era, and the federally-funded era. Spring Hill School illustrates the progression of ideological and architectural approaches to urban education from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, a period which coincides with Pittsburgh's peak of immigration, population gain, and industrial prominence.

Both the 1896 and 1908 Spring Hill School buildings were constructed under the first of these eras. Prior to 1911, each ward of both Allegheny and Pittsburgh had its own separate School Board elected by constituents and charged with the complete operation and maintenance of the schools. Only two other major cities in the United States, Boston and Philadelphia, followed the ward-based school board system. By 1907, when Pittsburgh and Allegheny united, there were 61 subdistricts (46 in Pittsburgh, 15 in Allegheny), and 366 citizens supervised the city's elementary schools. This multiplicity of authority provided the city with a chaotic school system and a diverse array of school buildings.

Spring Hill School's first building was constructed by the City of Allegheny and its second by the City of Pittsburgh under the ward-based system. The original Spring Hill School was a typical Victorian schoolhouse of the era, with an elaborate exterior designed to serve as a civic landmark, but a fairly simple interior plan of classrooms. Its lack of specialized spaces such as a gymnasium or auditorium were consistent with the straightforward pedagogical practices of the 19th century.

In 1911, a centralized, consolidated school board was formed and hired a Superintendent of Buildings to oversee building construction and maintenance. This era was dominated by a Scottish-born artist and mechanical engineer named James Bonar, who held the position of Superintendent of Buildings from 1919 to 1934. During this period, the school district contracted with independent architectural firms for new school designs, but appears to have undertaken minor renovations to Spring Hill School (such as the reconstruction of its parapet and improvement of its heating system) itself in 1913.

This system lasted until 1934 when, in the depths of the Depression, the City sought help from the federal government to maintain and improve its schools. From 1935 to 1954, the centralized School Board employed an in-house architectural staff funded by the federal Public Works Administration. Marion Steen, the Pittsburgh School Board's staff architect and Assistant Superintendent of Buildings during this era, was the architect for the 1936 renovations which modernized the interior program of Spring Hill School and brought the exterior to its present state.

In the early twentieth century, Pittsburgh's educational policy was greatly influenced by the theories of John Dewey and the practical dictums of William Wirt, who in 1908 was named Superintendent of Schools in Gary, Indiana, a community not unlike Pittsburgh for its industrial base and large immigrant population. Wirt believed that the school should be an idealized microcosm of the real world, in which trained personnel provided as many activities for students within the school as past generations had experienced through apprenticeships and household industry. In order to accomplish this, Wirt advocated the design and construction of schools with specialized spaces: a full auditorium capable of handling dramatic performances, a large gymnasium for sports activities, home economics rooms, and shop spaces. Hallways lined with art work would act as local museums, and libraries would serve as each community's branch library.

By 1913, former classrooms in the 1896 building had been designated as a sewing room, kitchen bench room, and drafting room in support of vocational education for students. Steen's design for the renovations of Spring Hill School in 1936 removed the Victorian second floor, roofline, and bell tower from the original building, streamlined its first floor, and reoriented its interior around a modern auditorium complete with a stage, dressing rooms, lantern screen, and motion picture projecting booth. The auditorium was located on the first floor for ease of public access. Steen also added such specialized spaces as a kindergarten classroom, library, gymnasium, and manual training room, in accord with best educational practices of the time.

8. Integrity

The Spring Hill School building has moderate integrity on its exterior. The loss of the second floor of the 1896 building has drastically altered the character of the original wing of the school. However, this is mitigated by the relatively intact nature of the 1908 wing and the fact that the date of the alterations to the original building—1936—reflects a significant period in the history of the Pittsburgh Public Schools in general and Spring Hill School in particular. Other than minor alterations to fenestration and the installation of new windows and doors, the only notable alteration to the 1908 building is the reconstruction of the

parapet to eliminate the original crenellations. The eastern wing of the school retains sufficient integrity to convey its architectural purpose as a turn-of-the-20th century public school.

9. Photos





11. Recommendation of the Historic Review Commission

The Historic Review Commission held a public hearing regarding the designation of the Spring Hill Elementary School. On 1 July 2020 the Commission voted to recommend to City Council that it designate the Spring Hill Elementary School as historic

12. Recommendation of the City Planning Commission

The City Planning Commission held a public hearing regarding the designation the Spring Hill Elementary School. On 25 August 2020 the Commission voted to recommend to City Council that it designate the Spring Hill Elementary School as historic.

13. Meeting Minutes

HRC MINUTES – 3 JUNE 2020 – PRELIMINARY DETERMINATION HEARING

Spring Hill School
1351 Damas Street

Historic Nomination

Owner:

Mr. Anthony Hamlet
Superintendent of Schools
341 S. Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, Pa 15213

Ward: 24th

Lot and Block: 47-L-300

Inspector:

Nominator:

Matthew Falcone

Council District:

Nomination Received: 3/13//20

National Register Status: Listed: Eligible:

Proposed Changes: Nomination for historic designation.

Discussion:

1. Ms. Quinn makes a short presentation on the property. She states that the nominator found that the property is significant under **Criterion 4**, work of an architect, engineer, designer, or builder, and **Criterion 7**, association with important aspects or events in cultural or social history, and that the property does retain integrity.
2. Ms. Aguirre asks for public comment; there is none.
3. The Commission discusses the nomination.

Motion:

1. Mr. Green moves to recommend the property for consideration of historic nomination based on the listed criteria.
 2. Mr. Hill seconds.
 3. Ms. Aguirre asks for a vote; all are in favor and motion carries.
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HRC MINUTES – 1 JULY 2020 RECOMMENDATION

Spring Hill School
1351 Damas Street

Historic Nomination

Owner:

Mr. Anthony Hamlet
Superintendent of Schools
341 S. Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, Pa 15213

Ward: 24th

Lot and Block: 47-L-300

Inspector:

Nominator:

Matthew Falcone

Council District:

Nomination Received: 3/13/20

National Register Status: **Listed:** **Eligible:**

Proposed Changes: Nomination for historic designation.

Discussion:

4. Ms. Quinn makes a short presentation on the property. She states that the nominator found that the property is significant under **Criterion 4**, work of an architect, engineer, designer, or builder, and **Criterion 7**, association with important aspects or events in cultural or social history, and that the property does retain integrity.
5. Ms. Aguirre asks for public comment; there is none.
6. The Commission discusses the nomination.

Motion:

4. Mr. Green moves to positively recommend the property to City Council for consideration of historic nomination based on the listed criteria.
5. Mr. Hill seconds.
6. Ms. Aguirre asks for a vote; all are in favor and motion carries.

PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES –25 AUGUST 2020

C. Development Reviews (See Attachment C for staff reports)

1. Hearing and Action

DCP-HN-2020-00240 Spring Hill Elementary School, Historic Nomination

Ms. Quinn made presentation in accordance with the attached staff report.

Ms. Quinn informed history of construction, renovation and current conditions and use of building. The school consists of two wings. The western wing constructed in 1896 and renovated in 1936.

Ms. Quinn explained the criteria for designation and integrity standards. Planning staff recommends that the Planning Commission support the positive recommendation for historic nomination of subject building.

Chairwoman called for questions and comments from the public.

Mr. Matthew Falcone from Preservation Pittsburgh supported the nomination of structure and asked PC commissioners to approve a positive recommendation. Mr. Falcone stated that subject building is exceptional historic structure located in the unique neighborhood.

There being no comments from the Commissioners, the Chairwoman called for the motion.

MOTION:

That the Planning Commission of the City of Pittsburgh provides a positive recommendation to City Council for the nomination of Spring Hill Elementary School building DCP-HN-2020-00240 for listing as a City –designated historic site.

MOVED BY: Ms. Dick SECONDED BY: Ms. Deitrick

IN FAVOR: Mondor, Burton-Faulk, Mingo, Deitrick, Dick, O'Neill

RECUSED:

OPPOSED

MOTION CARRIED