

## The Billingsville School



*This report was written on May 11, 1994*

**1. Name and location of the property:** The property known as the Billingsville School is located in the Grier Heights neighborhood of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

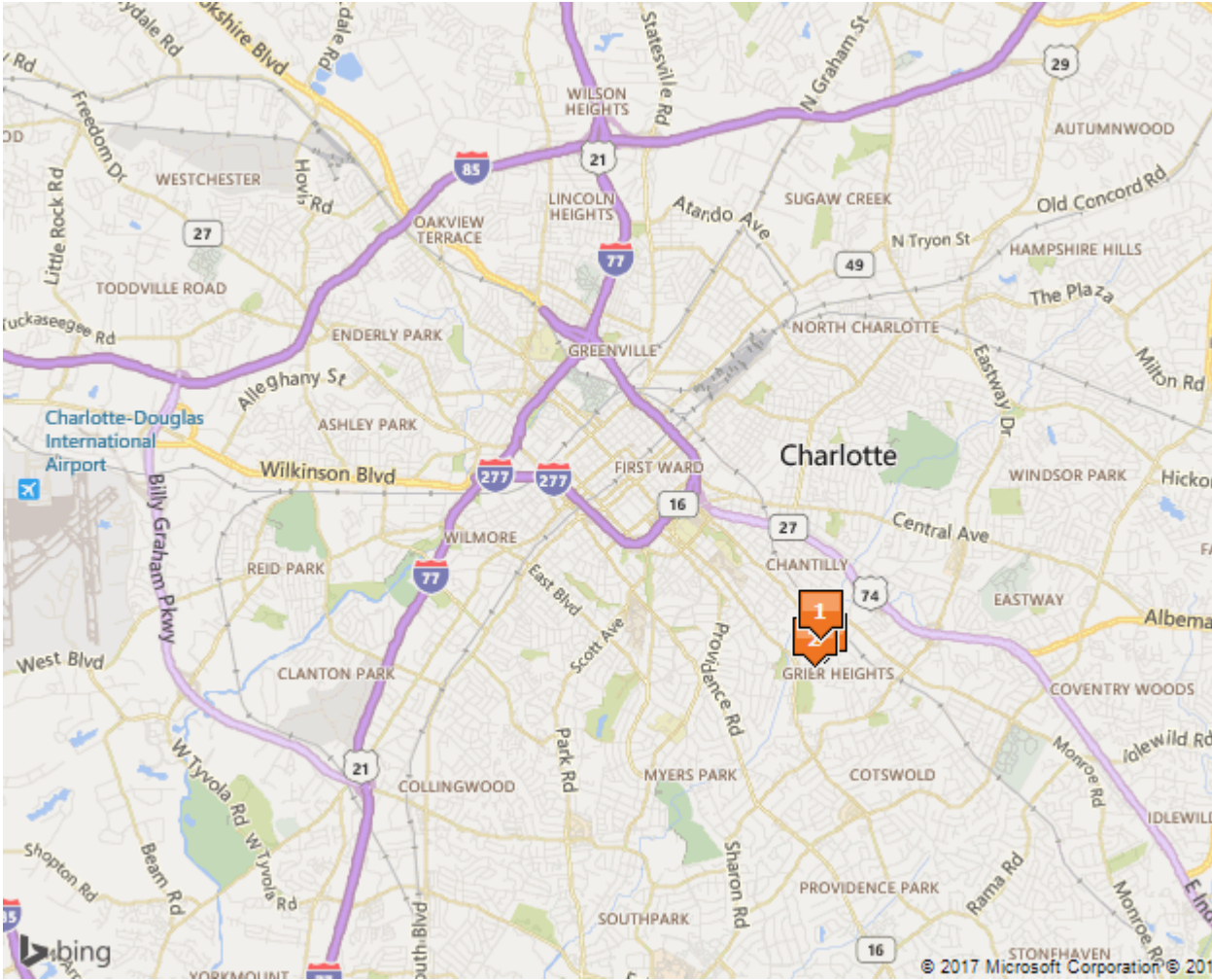
**2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property:** The owner of the property is:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education  
701 East Second Street  
Charlotte, North Carolina 28202

(704) 343-5525

**3. Representative photographs of the property:** This report contains representative photographs of the property.

**4. Maps depicting the location of the property:** This report contains maps which depict the location of the property.



**5. Current deed book references to the property:** The Billingsville School is sited on Tax Parcel Number 157-038-08 and listed in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 2044 at page 385.

**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Frances P. Alexander.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Frances P. Alexander.

**8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in NCGS 160A-400.5:**

**a: Special significance in terms of history, architecture, and cultural importance:** The Commission judges that the property known as the Billingsville School property does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Billingsville School was built in 1927; 2) the Billingsville School is one of the three most intact Rosenwald schools remaining in Mecklenburg County; 3) constructed under the auspices of the Rosenwald Foundation of Chicago, the Billingsville School serves as a landmark in the history of black education, illustrating the period when schools, particularly those in rural locales, were constructed through philanthropic rather than public funding; and 4) the Billingsville School serves as an institutional landmark in the formerly rural, African-American community of Grier Heights.

**b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and association:** The Commission contends that the architectural description by Frances P. Alexander included in this report demonstrates that the Billingsville School property meet this criterion.

**9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated historic landmark. Owned by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, the Billingsville School is tax-exempt. The current appraised value of the improvements to the Billingsville School complex is \$1,553,270.00. The current appraised value of the Billingsville School complex, Tax Parcel Number 157-038-08, is \$209,060.00. The total appraised value of the Billingsville School complex is \$1,762,330.00. Tax Parcel Number 157-038-08 is zoned R5.

**Date of preparation of this report:** May 11, 1994

**Prepared by:** Frances P. Alexander, M.A.  
for  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission  
P.O. Box 35434  
Charlotte, North Carolina 28235

(704) 376-9115

## *Physical Description*

### **Location and Site Description**

The Billingsville School is located on Leroy Street in the Grier Heights neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina. Grier Heights is situated approximately three miles southeast of the central business district. Randolph Road, a major thoroughfare leading southeast from the central business district, forms the western boundary of this neighborhood while the CSX Railroad line and Monroe Road form the eastern.

The Billingsville School is sited on a multiple building campus which now comprises the modern Billingsville Elementary School. The campus occupies a large lot abutting Randolph Road to the west, Skyland Street to the north, and Leroy Street to the east. The Billingsville School faces Leroy Street and retains its surrounding school yard setting. A driveway on the north side of the original school now leads to the modern complex, and the older school building is linked to the modern school only by a covered sidewalk. Although Grier Heights is a historic African-American neighborhood, the surrounding residential development appears to date primarily to the post-World War II era.

The proposed designation includes the school building and the surrounding original school yard.

### **Architectural Description**

The Billingsville School is a simple, one story, brick veneered school building with a [hip roof](#), covered in asphalt shingles. The building has a rectangular floor plan and a symmetrical facade facing Leroy Street. A small, one story, brick veneered addition was constructed on the east elevation with a tall fire wall marking the junction of the original building and the addition.

The walls of the original building are laid in [running bond](#) with a soldier base course. The central entrance is covered by a steeply pitched, front gable porch supported by box piers. The porch [roof](#) has exposed, overhanging rafters and board and batten siding under the gable. The entrance is recessed with infilled [sidelights and transom](#) and replacement double doors. Banks of nine-over-nine light, double hung, wooden sash windows flank the entrance. The same nine-over-nine light windows are found on the rear elevation while the side elevations have either two-over-two light or six-over-one light, double hung, wooden sash windows. The addition has steel sash, awning windows.

There is a second exterior entrance on the west elevation which is connected to a covered walkway leading to other buildings on the campus. This entrance also has replacement doors. The matching entrance on the east elevation now leads to the addition. A stairwell on the west elevation leads down to the basement boiler room, and a tall, square, brick chimney is located at the northwest corner.

The Billingsville School has a T-shaped interior plan. The main entrance leads into the short hall which ends into a long corridor running the full width of the building and providing access to the later addition. The school has four rooms, three of which are classrooms, and the fourth appears

to have been divided into a small classroom and office. The hall has hardwood floors, stucco walls and ceiling, tongue-in-groove [wainscoting](#), and molded chair railing and baseboard. Most of the original horizontal paneled doors, with molded surrounds and transoms, are intact although one of the doors to the northeast office/classroom is a wood and glass replacement. The southeast classroom is unaltered and repeats the vertical wainscoting, stucco walls and ceiling, and hardwood floors found in the hall. The northwest classroom has undergone some modification with the addition of a bathroom in one corner. The office/classroom is divided by a plaster partition wall, and two doors connect the two sections. The room has the vertical wainscoting and stucco walls and ceiling found throughout the building, but with linoleum floors. The south end of the long hall terminates at a short staircase leading to the addition.

Glass and wood double doors separate the older and newer sections. Housing restrooms and a storage room, the addition has brick walls and linoleum floors.

The Billingsville School retains a high degree of architectural integrity in form and materials. The small addition to the south end does not obscure the form or plan of the original school. Otherwise, the most notable changes have been the replacement exterior doors, a modification required by modern building codes.

### *Historical Overview*

The Billingsville School was constructed in the predominantly African-American neighborhood of Grier Heights in 1927. Located then outside the city limits of Charlotte to the southeast, the community occupies the area between Briar Creek and Monroe Road, south of the [streetcar](#) suburb of Elizabeth. This once rural community, included a number of landowners, contractors and skilled laborers, and businessmen. Perhaps because of its proximity, to the city, the farm population within Grier Heights was lower than in the more remote rural communities of the county (Interview with George A. Wallace).

In the mid-1920s, Grier Heights petitioned the Mecklenburg County School Board for assistance in establishing a neighborhood school. The school board advised the neighborhood to wait until the land for a school site could be acquired. Subsequently, local residents purchased two acres from local landowner and businessman, Sam Billings (1848-1933), who was also the first African-American to own land in the neighborhood. Billings donated an additional acre of land, and the school was named in his honor for his contribution (Billingsville Elementary School History: 2).

With the acquisition of a school site, the Mecklenburg County School Board, in conjunction with the Rosenwald Foundation of Chicago, constructed a one story, frame building in 1927. Billingsville School was constructed according to Rosenwald specifications and designs as a Type 4 school (accommodating four teachers), but almost immediately, after construction was completed, the Grier Heights community raised the funds to have a brick veneer added. A. S. Grier, owner of Grier Funeral Home and a Monroe Road store, donated \$500.00 to the project (Billingsville Elementary, School History: 2-3; Interview with George A. Wallace). (Grier had also donated the land for the Grier Heights Presbyterian Church.) Edward Wallace, Sr., also a

Grier Heights resident and a concrete contractor, laid the foundation for the school (George A. Wallace interview).

Like many rural Southern schools for blacks, the Billingsville School was built under the auspices of the Rosenwald Foundation. The foundation, established by Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, was a philanthropic organization which promoted education for Southern blacks between World War I and circa 1930. The focus of the Rosenwald program was elementary school design and construction, and as a result, the most visible legacy of the foundation are its rural school buildings (Hanchett 1987: 5).

The deplorable state of education for blacks, particularly in rural areas, was well publicized by the end of the nineteenth century. Although the Freedmens Bureau had established schools throughout the South after the Civil War, the absence of funding and the demands of farm life meant that generally educational opportunities were often few and short in duration. A system of graded schools was not established in the city of Charlotte until 1882, and rural communities were left to support their own schools. By 1900, local support for public education, at least for whites, and philanthropic support for black education began to increase. Throughout the South, states, including North Carolina, passed legislation requiring a literacy test in order to vote. This political move, intended to disenfranchise poor whites and blacks, gave impetus to the public school movement, in part by correlating education with political power (Hanchett 1987: 3).

As momentum grew for establishing public school systems for whites, charitable organizations, such as the George Peabody Fund, John F. Slater Fund, and the Anna T. Jeanes Fund, took on the cause of black education. Most of these philanthropies focused on teacher training through grants to black colleges and universities. However, after 1900, efforts shifted from teaching to all aspects and levels of education for African-Americans, embracing the belief that educational parity would soon end racism (Hanchett 1987: 3).

Incorporated in 1917, the Rosenwald Foundation turned attention to the problems of poor elementary school facilities, and from 1917 to 1927, rural school construction was the thrust of their mission. Julius Rosenwald was influenced by Booker T. Washington, and their collaboration spurred the school building program, beginning at Washington's Tuskegee Institute and then spreading to Tennessee and North Carolina (Hendricks 1986: 1). Between 1917 and 1932, the Rosenwald foundation constructed 5,300 schools for rural African-Americans in the South (Hanchett 1987: 1). The foundation provided not only the funding and architectural designs for the schools, but in an unusual scheme to encourage racial cooperation, required contributions from both local blacks and whites. In addition, the local public school system had to contribute to construction and agree to later maintain the school as part of the system. The Rosenwald schools had to meet certain architectural criteria as well. Each school was to be white, frame construction with one to four classrooms. Emphasis was given to light and ventilation both in paint colors and the number, size, and placement of windows. Schools were to include industrial rooms for teaching the practical arts, a feature directly attributed to the writings of Booker T. Washington. In rural areas, two acres were to be set aside for gardens. Even though most Rosenwald schools were only middle sized, with two to four teachers, schools

were to include an auditorium, or meeting room, which could serve as a community center. Movable partitions were often used to convert classrooms to auditoriums (Hanchett 1987: 9).

By World War I, many states began including offices of Negro education as part of the public school administration, and in 1921, North Carolina created a Division of Negro Education within the State Department of Public Instruction. This division directed the Rosenwald program, supervised state-funded black colleges, high schools, and elementary schools. North Carolina had one of the largest Negro Education staffs and consequently the largest Rosenwald program. By 1932, rural communities in North Carolina had participated in the building of 813 schools. Mississippi was second with 633 schools and Texas third with 527 (Hanchett 1987: 11).

In North Carolina, all but seven of the 100 counties constructed schools through the Rosenwald program. Most were built in the tobacco counties of the northern Coastal Plain or in the cotton belt of the southern Piedmont (Mecklenburg and Anson counties) where African-American populations were the highest. From 1918 to 1927, 26 Rosenwald schools were built in Mecklenburg County, all of which were designed as simple frame buildings with one to four classrooms. Many of the local Rosenwald schools served eight grades in four rooms, with the teacher instructing one grade while the other studied (Interviews with former McClintock School students). As one of the leading agricultural producers in the state, Mecklenburg had a large rural population, which in the 1920s and 1930s, included 12,000 blacks, or 30% of the rural population (Hanchett 1987, 15). Of the 26 Rosenwald schools built in Mecklenburg County, the oldest survivor is Rockwell in the [Newell](#) community and the largest is [McClintock School](#) in Steele Creek. Only Billingsville and the Matthews School had brick exteriors.

After 1920, the Rosenwald Foundation began shifting priorities to broaden programmatic concerns rather than focusing primarily on construction. At the same time, the state had begun a school consolidation program, although the process was slow and only completed in the 1950s. School consolidation was delayed by the economic depression of the 1930s, but in Mecklenburg County, 14 districts were created, composed of a union school served by smaller feeder schools. Four black union schools were built in 1937, and by the post-World War II period, most rural schools were closed as better transportation allowed combining schools into few, larger campuses. The early casualties were the smaller one and two teacher schools, but five Rosenwald schools remained in operation in the 1950s: Rockwell, Matthews, Paw Creek-Hoskins, Woodland, and Billingsville, which was absorbed into the city system (Hanchett 1987: 21). Once located in a rural setting, Grier Heights, by the late 1940s, was sited directly in the path of southeastern suburban expansion, and the community was annexed in the 1950s. Many of the closed schools were sold and converted to other uses.

Ten Rosenwald schools are extant at the present, but the Billingsville School is one of the three most intact Rosenwald Schools remaining in the county. In 1949, the only addition to the original building was made on the south end, when Billingsville School became the first county school incorporated into the city school system. Later construction expanded the Billingsville campus but did not alter the 1927 building or its immediate setting. In 1952 and 1957, while Billingsville operated as a combined elementary and junior high school, other separate buildings were added, creating a campus which in addition to the original school included classroom buildings, office, cafeteria, and library. Further expansion occurred in the 1970s and 1980s

which enlarged the cafeteria as well as creating additional classrooms and an auditorium. Currently, the campus includes seven buildings.

## Conclusion

The Billingsville School remains as one of the three most intact examples of the Rosenwald Schools in Mecklenburg County. With systematic school consolidation beginning in the 1920s, early twentieth century, rural schools have become increasingly rare, and the small, frame Rosenwald schools have been particularly vulnerable to demolition and heavy alteration. In addition to their rarity, the Rosenwald schools serve as landmarks in the history of education for blacks, constructed through philanthropic rather than public support. The school exemplifies Rosenwald design and construction in its form, materials, and floor plan. The addition of the brick veneer, soon after construction, illustrates the support and largess of the Grier Heights community for the school, and the school remains as an important institutional landmark in this once rural community of Mecklenburg County.

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