

Survey and Research Report
On The Midwood Elementary School
(Formerly Known as the Lawyers Road School)



Charlotte Observer Staff Photo by Jeep Hunter ca. 7/16/87

This report was written December 10, 2001.

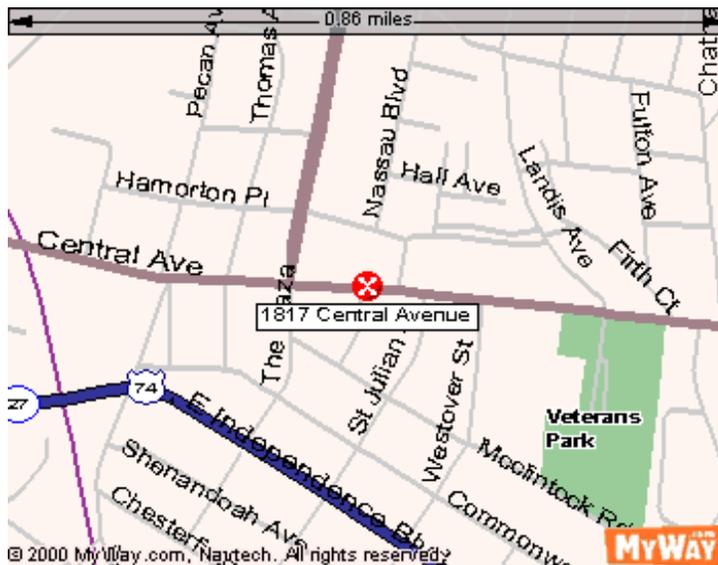
- 1. Name and location of the property: The property known as Midwood School is located at 1817 Central Avenue in Charlotte, NC.**
- 2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner and occupant of the property: The present owner of the property is:**

Charlotte Mecklenburg Board of Education
701 East Second Street
Charlotte, NC 28202
Telephone: (704) 343-6011

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

[Click here for photo gallery](#)

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map that depicts the location of the property. The UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) is 17 517357E 3892290N.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: Not Listed. Tax Parcel Number 09507803
6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a historical sketch of the property prepared by Tracy A. Martin.
7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description of the property prepared by Tracy A. Martin.
8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5.
 - a. Special significance in terms of its historical, pre-historical, architectural, or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as Midwood School does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The

Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) The building was built during a time of consolidation among area schools. 2) The school was built to serve the neighborhood around Midwood and Plaza which was built as a streetcar suburb of the early twentieth century and; 3) Midwood School is a surviving example of architect M.R. Marsh and of a non elaborate traditional style of architecture used so frequently in institutions during and after the Depression.

- b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the physical description by Tracy A. Martin, which is included in this report, demonstrates Midwood School meets 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 “historic property.” The current appraised value of the 2.54 acres of land is \$624,210. The current appraised value of the improvements is \$1,776,740. The total current appraised value is \$2,405,450. The property is zoned B2.

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Updated on November 3, 2009, by:
Ms. Mary Dominick

Historical Background Statement

Midwood School, originally known as Lawyer’s Road School, grew out of the need for a new school building to be built in the fashionable new streetcar suburb of Plaza/Midwood. Most subdivisions were built near the city but Plaza/Midwood was one of the first to be situated farther from the city with the hopes that the new streetcar system would encourage its growth.¹ Sitting farther away from the city was not its only problem though. Early in the history of this neighborhood, a railroad line divided it. It also had to make do with an inadequate trolley system. These things hindered its growth and may have helped to start it on a cycle of decline. Today the neighborhood is experiencing major revitalization. New shops are in the area and the neighborhood takes pride in keeping its historic structures. Midwood School

started out as an elementary school and is now an important alternative high school in the city.

Brief Historical Description

Lawyers Road/Midwood Elementary School, built circa 1934 and added to over the years, was built in the Traditional style so common at the time for institutional buildings.² Due to the economy of Charlotte and its tremendous population growth in the early twentieth century, Midwood School was built to educate the children of the families of the streetcar suburb, which became known as Plaza/Midwood.

Before Charlotte was the banking giant that it is today it was a cotton and textile hub. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw tremendous growth in Charlotte as new jobs were created and people moved in. Mills were being built all around Charlotte and it was clear that there was money to be made here.

The history of real estate in the Plaza/Midwood area starts as far back as 1903 when the first tracts of land started to be sold.³ Most of the streets and neighborhoods of Charlotte were within a two-mile radius of the Square at the center of the city. This was because of the way the trolley system was set up. Track for trolleys was quite expensive to build and the city needed a high population density in the outlying neighborhoods in order to justify expanding the trolley line or make it practical and profitable. The first developments of Charlotte grew up around the city. These were the earliest streetcar suburbs. Starting with Dilworth in 1891, they later completely surrounded the city. These were the places with the shortest commutes into town. Later a second tier of development was implemented which would include the Plaza/Midwood neighborhood in 1903 and Myers Park, which wasn't to come until 1911. It was hoped that this new tier of development would also surround the city eventually.⁴

Though it was never as elite or grand as the neighborhoods of Dilworth, Myers Park, or Eastover, Plaza/Midwood overcame the obstacle of being far from town and continued to grow due to the trolley and availability of land. The land is among highest and well drained in the region. Being close to the fashionable part of Elizabeth was also helpful. Along the Seaboard Railroad a significant factory district grew.⁵ Many of the wealthier Charlotteans started to relocate here and by 1910 the area was home to the Charlotte Golf Club. Central Avenue, originally known as Lawyers Road, was a main thoroughfare through town.⁶ Around The Plaza, a wide boulevard with

landscaped medians, many nice houses started to be built. The trolley ran down Central Avenue to The Plaza and down Mecklenburg Avenue to the country club.⁷

Chatham Estates, the original name for the Plaza/Midwood development, was at first a major subdivision. It was the idea of local real estate developer Paul Chatham. Chatham was born in 1869 in Elkin North Carolina to a wealthy family that operated the Chatham Woolen Mills in his hometown. He received his education at Trinity College, now Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He made his first real money in the textile industry and moved to Charlotte in 1907. Chatham Estates was his first real development and he hired professional designer Leigh Colyer to plan the new suburb. His plan was to have the larger homes for the wealthy built along The Plaza and the more modest homes were to be built along the secondary streets in the neighborhood.⁸

Aside from being on the outskirts of town, another problem that seems to have hindered the growth of Plaza/Midwood was the railroad lines, which ran all over town. Since Charlotte was such a booming mill town trains were frequently coming into town for cargo and passengers. In the early part of the twentieth century up to thirty passenger trains would come through town. The early Plaza/Midwood neighborhood was cut in half by major railroad lines, which ran right through town. Commuters to and from Plaza/Midwood had to cross the Seaboard Airline track at Central Avenue everyday. This was a very busy line, which carried freight from local mill towns to the coast for shipment. This frequent train traffic deterred many people from buying land in the new suburb.⁹

Unfortunately there was another major problem which set back the growth of the new suburb, one for which the developers could not have foreseen. In 1910 Edward Dilworth Latta, owner of the streetcar system in Charlotte, refused to extend his trolley line out to Plaza/Midwood and the new Charlotte County Club. He wouldn't do it because that would have meant extending the Central line for another two miles and he was unsure about whether development in the area would be big enough to offset the cost of construction and the operating costs. So Paul Chatham decided to put his own trolley line in the new neighborhood. When Chatham went before the Board of Aldermen to request a franchise to build it, Latta opposed him because he knew it would end his monopoly on the transit system. Latta feared that Chatham would sell his rights to James B. Duke and his Southern Power Company, which would definitely force Latta out of business. Tactics

such as these were commonly used in the early days of trolleys in many cities. Eventually a deal was made and Chatham received his franchise but under the condition that it could not be sold or transferred. A month later Southern Power received a franchise from the Board of Aldermen and brought in their own Piedmont and Northern electric interurban. After this Latta eventually had to sell out to Duke and the newly formed Southern Public Utilities Company. Unfortunately The Plaza/Midwood neighborhood was stuck with Chatham's inadequate trolley lines. Because of this commuters had to get off the Southern Public Utilities Company trolley from downtown near Hawthorne and Central and transfer to the battery-powered car owned by Chatham's company for the rest of the trip out Central Avenue and The Plaza. This transfer drastically slowed the trip for most commuters and can be seen as a hindrance of growth in the area. Trolley service ended in Charlotte in 1938.¹⁰

The expansion of the neighborhood and its growing population in the early 1930s necessitated the need for a new school in the area. Consolidations Schools, which brought together all the small country schools into one graded school building, were the way of the future for the North Carolina educational system.¹¹ Midwood Elementary School's beginning started in September of 1933, when the School Board took the first steps at getting a building program started. The Board of Finance Committee took the necessary steps to get funds through the Public Works Administration of the Federal Government. The Finance Committee estimated the cost of these new school buildings to be \$690,000.00. The price was high in order to provide students with fire resistive structures. It was figured that the schools in the city were at a greater risk for fire than those in the country so they were to be given better construction. The County Superintendent ordered the cheaper style be built for all the schools at a cost of \$400,000.00. The County Boards approved this amount.¹²

Lawyers Road School, Midwood's original name, was commissioned to be built by architect M.R. Marsh.¹³ Born in Jacksonville Florida in 1901, he studied architecture through correspondence courses and through work with his brother's architecture firm. Marsh practiced in Charlotte his entire career except for a brief period in the early 1940s when he was stationed in New York and Washington with the War Production Board. Between 1922 and 1964 he designed several well-known Charlotte buildings, several residences, and many institutional structures. The most visible surviving structure of his is the main office of Mutual Savings and Loan at 330 South Tryon Street, which was completed in 1962. Marsh died September 4, 1977.¹⁴

The original building Marsh designed is very similar to [Eastover School](#), which was built around the same time and also was a design of his.¹⁵ It was to have eight classrooms and was built in a very traditional style. When the schoolhouse opened in 1935, eighty students had to be turned away to another school because the demand for the new neighborhood school was so high.¹⁶

Through the years other additions were added. In November of 1936, the citizens of Charlotte authorized a bond of \$584,000.00 to be used in the Building Program of 1937. Out of this money Midwood School got \$18,000.00 for addition to the building and \$1,780.00 for extra equipment.¹⁷ Fire damaged classrooms in the north wing of the building on August 1, 1941 and the Building Program of 1941 remedied this by building a new auditorium, additional classrooms, and repairing the classrooms that were damaged by the fire.¹⁸ That same year an open house was planned to show off the new additions.¹⁹ Midwood School continued to grow and by the 1940s they had enough students on campus to merit having an orchestra and drum and bugle corp.²⁰

The Building Program of 1946-1949 was carried out with funds made available by the Bond Election on April 23, 1946. Dr. N.L. Engelhardt of New York was hired as the architect and Building Consultant while Howard Duval was hired as the Supervisory Construction Engineer. Midwood School got three additional classrooms, a visual education room, and improvements in the heating system.²¹ Midwood closed in June of 1983 due to declining enrollment. At its prime of having 1000 students in the 1950s, it only had 272 during the school year of 1982-1983.²² While it was closed the building began to deteriorate. The plaster on the walls peeled and broke and vandals broke many of the windows.²³ But in February of 1985 the school was reborn once again. One night an arsonist set fire to Albemarle Elementary School and 300 second and third graders needed a new school. The abandoned Midwood building was only five miles away and it was the only option.²⁴

Midwood Grammar School, 2nd Grade Class Photo ca. 1950s, (Teacher Mrs. Minogue).

Picture supplied by Mickey Connell.

Getting the old building ready was a massive undertaking. The school had been left in decay for several years. After an initial inspection of the building work started almost immediately the following Saturday afternoon. Over seventy workers had until Monday night to have the building prepared for students on Tuesday morning. Four plumbers went through and checked out all the pipes and fixed all the leaks. Five heating and air conditioning specialists went through and checked the boiler and thermostats. Five roofing and sheet metal workers were needed to repair the roof and check the kitchen equipment. Nine electricians had to check all the wiring, bulbs, and power supply over the whole building. Nine warehouse workers moved desks, chairs, file cabinets and other pieces of equipment from the School Systems Warehouse to Midwood School. Fourteen groundskeepers were needed to clean the trash and trim the shrubbery from the neglected yard. Fifteen carpenters went through and replaced the seventy-nine broken windows. Eighteen painters went over the exterior and twenty-four painted over the inside walls. Twenty custodians were working until midnight on the last night to get the floors scrubbed, waxed, and buffed. It was estimated that the cost to get Midwood School up and running in those three short days cost \$10,000 in overtime pay to workers and \$6,000.00 for material.²⁵

Today Midwood School is an alternative school designed to help students who drop out of traditional school settings for emotional, social, or academic reasons. Classes are held in two shifts and offered from eight in the morning to eight at night.²⁶ Enrollment at the school now reaches about 900 students per year. Three graduations are held every year at Queen's College. It is also home to a hot lunch program for the elderly, which is housed downstairs in the older of the cafeterias. The newly renovated school also became the home for TAPS: Teen Age Parents Services.²⁷ This organization tries to keep pregnant teens from leaving school.

Architectural Description

Midwood School is an important example of Traditional Revival architecture that was used for many institutional buildings during the 1930s and 1940s.²⁸ Designed by architect M.R. Marsh, the school still retains its original architectural integrity despite the additions that were added throughout the 1940s. Even more changes are in store for this school as new safety updates and renovations are currently being planned for 2002.²⁹

The original eight-room building of Midwood School is still intact and several additions have been added over the years. The school is located near the corner of The Plaza and Central Avenue, a major thoroughfare through the city, in the Plaza/Midwood neighborhood. The building sits in the mixed residential and commercial district of Plaza/Midwood. When built, this neighborhood was considered the outskirts of town, and was important as an early streetcar suburb of Charlotte. Many changes have occurred over the last sixty-five years. Today it is no longer a trolley neighborhood and it is no longer on the outskirts of the city. The area has experienced major decline but in the last couple of decades an attempt has been made at revitalizing the area and businesses are once again locating here.

The 2.54-acre lot sits on essentially level ground.³⁰ Parking is in the rear of the lot and in order to make more room for the parking in the back, the building sits fairly close to Central Avenue. The yard of campus is covered in grass and a sidewalk completely encircles the campus. Decorative shrubs and trees grow around the school.

Like its sister school [Eastover](#), Midwood was designed by architect M.R. Marsh. It represents the Traditional Revival style that was so prevalent among institutional buildings during the 1930s and 1940s. It retains plenty of integrity and is a good example of the smaller, less elaborate architecture that became popular for schools during and after the Depression.³¹ The earliest structure is the long, one story rectangular building constructed in 1934. Additions were made in 1937, 1941, and 1946.³² These additions give it a vaguely L shape for a footprint on the Sanborn Map of 1953.³³ The front of the building has a projecting portico with four columns. Inside the gable end of the portico is an octagon shaped attic window. Under the portico are two large twelve over twelve windows and above them are two flat concrete slabs that flank the double leaf entryway.



The majority of the roof is gabled except the classroom addition, which is flat roofed. The roofing material is asphalt shingles. The outside of the building is red brick, which is laid with four rows of common bond and one row of flemished bond brickwork. This pattern repeats all the way up except where there is a row of verticals near the top. Around the corners of the gym are quoins. The majority of the building is one story except the classroom additions, which are two stories. The windows used in the two-story addition are ten over ten. There is one external brick chimney on the original structure and two porches.



Aside from the front portico there is an uncovered gabled porch that connects to the gabled end of the gym addition. This portico, repeating the octagon window on the front, has an octagon shaped attic vent above the door. Above the door is a neatly carved cornice. Incorporated into the gable end of the gym above the porch gable is a large wide octagonal attic vent. The predominant window type of the whole structure is double hung nine over nine and they are both single and

paired. The large arched windows of the gym have been bricked in and metal vents have been installed in their place.



portico



*View of chimney
View of quoins*



View of side

The interior of the original building remains much like it was when it was built. With the additions today there are twenty-four classrooms. Many of the doors to the classrooms remain original, still having the large eight-pane window above the doors that swing open to allow ventilation. There are two kitchens that I saw located in the school along with two cafeterias. One cafeteria is for students and the other is home to a hot lunch program for local senior citizens. There are several large testing rooms, an auditorium, a multipurpose room with a stage, seven restrooms and sixteen other additional rooms used for office and administrative purposes. All of the rooms are still heated with an old boiler with radiators located in each room. Walking the hallways one can see how the architectural integrity of the building has remained intact. Little or no change has been made to the high ceilings, tiled floors, the original doors, windows, stairwells, and walls. As former Principal Eulada Watt said, “Midwood is like an old-fashioned school, with its wide halls and high ceilings.”³⁴

Currently there are plans to do even more renovations to Midwood School. In 2002 it will be closed down for two years while changes are made

to improve energy efficiency and safety. All of the windows are going to be replaced and new wiring will be installed for fire prevention. Also for fire prevention, a sprinkler system is going to be installed. The original radiators, which are still in use, are going to be taken out and a new heating system will be installed. Fortunately the front façade of the building is going to be left intact in order to keep some deal of historical integrity.³⁵

[Click here to see a photo gallery on Midwood Elementary School](#)

Notes:

¹ Hanchett, Tom, *Plaza-Midwood Neighborhood Guide*

² *Building Permit number 902 July 25, 1934*

³ *Charlotte News, "Mecklenburg Neighbors Section" (November 15, 1986)*

⁴ Hanchett, Tom, *Plaza-Midwood Neighborhood Guide*

⁵ *Charlotte News, "Mecklenburg Neighbors Section" (November 15, 1986)*

⁶ Hanchett, Tom, *Plaza-Midwood Neighborhood Guide*

⁷ McCachern, Debbie, *Notes From the Past, The Plaza-Midwood Neighborhood*

⁸ Hanchett, Tom, *Plaza-Midwood Neighborhood Guide*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Industry, Transportation and Education, the New South Development of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County*, by Sarah A. Woodard, Sherry Joines Wyatt and David E. Gall, September 2001, Page 20.

¹² *The Charlotte City Schools*, by Harry P. Harding, Page 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Charlotte Observer*, (September 5, 1977).

¹⁵ *Industry, Transportation and Education, the New South Development of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County*, Page 24.

¹⁶ *Charlotte Observer*, (February 16, 1984). Page 1C

¹⁷ *The Charlotte City Schools*, by Harry P. Harding, Page 132-133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Page 143.

¹⁹ *Charlotte Observer*, (February 26, 1942).

²⁰ *Charlotte Observer*, (February 16, 1984). Page 1C

²¹ *The Charlotte City Schools*, by Harry P. Harding, Page 146.

²² *Charlotte Observer*, (February 16, 1984). Page 1C

²³ *Charlotte News*, (February 19, 1985). Pages 1-3A

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Midwood School website*, www.cms.k12.nc.us/k12/schools/jump/midwood.htm

²⁷ *Interview with Assistant Principal Gary Sweet*, November 19, 2001.

²⁸ *Class notes*

²⁹ *Interview with Assistant Principal Gary Sweet*, November 19, 2001.

³⁰ *County GIS website*

³¹ *Industry, Transportation and Education, the New South Development of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County*, Page 24

³² *Charlotte Mecklenburg County Schools, Public Facilities Report 1978-1979.*

³³ *Map of Sanborn Fire Insurance Company*, Charlotte, 1953.

³⁴ *Charlotte Observer*, September 1, 1985, Page 10.

³⁵ *Interview with Assistant Principal Gary Sweet*, November 19, 2001. Room counts came from a Xerox copy of fire plans for the school he gave me.