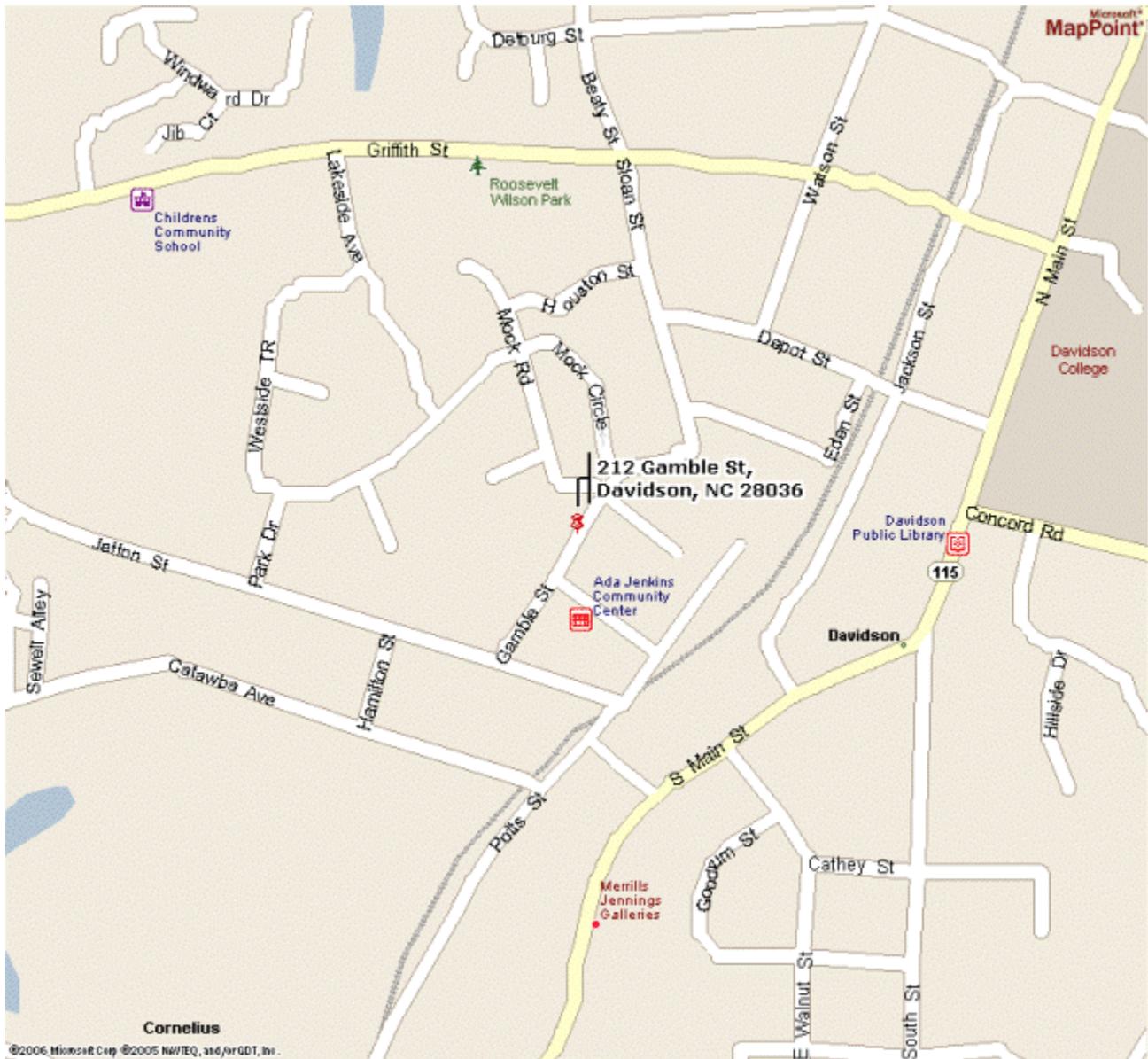


**SURVEY AND RESEARCH REPORT**  
**ON THE**  
**DAVIDSON COLORED SCHOOL/ ADA JENKINS SCHOOL**  
**(1937)**

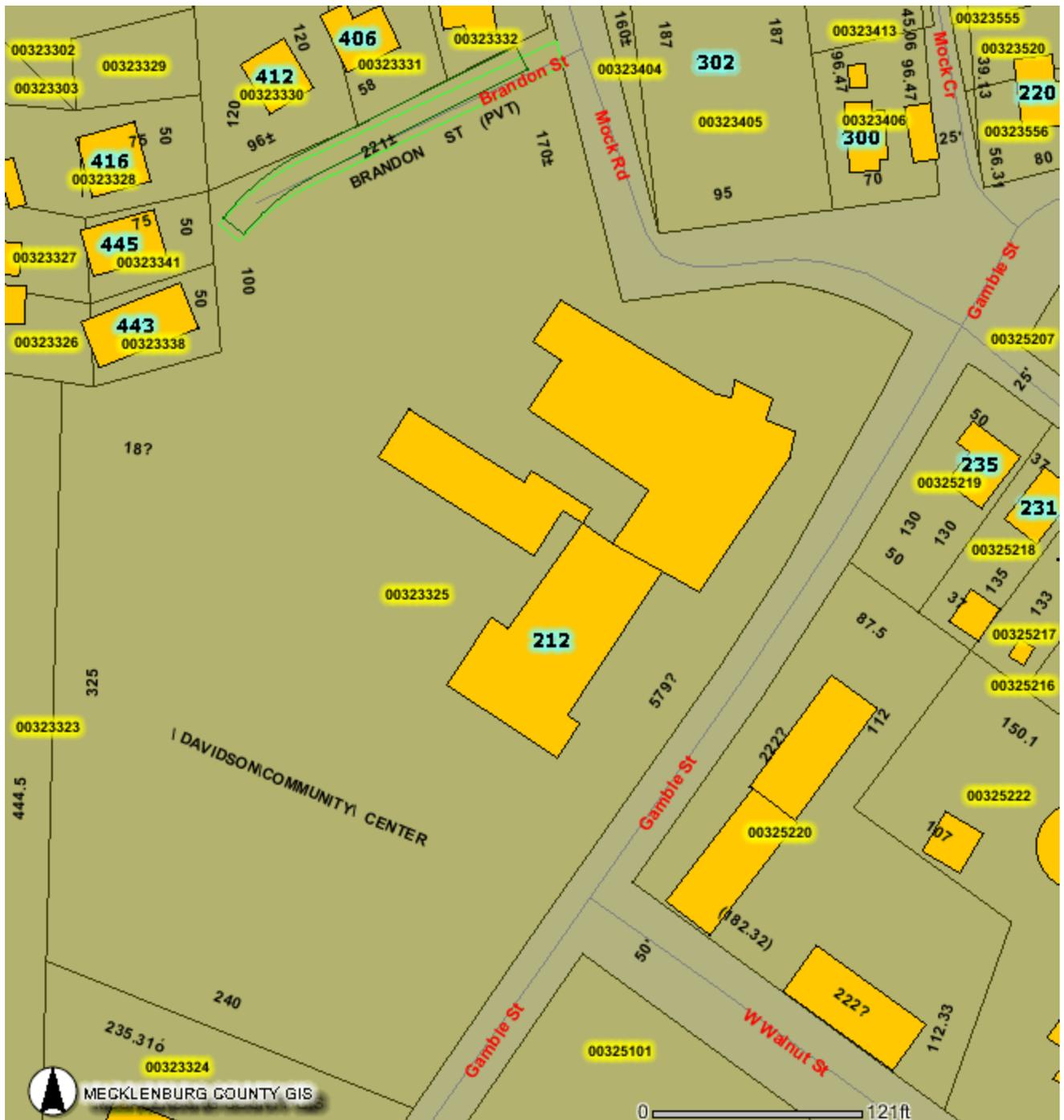


- 1. Name and location of the property:** Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School, located at 212 Gamble Street, Davidson, North Carolina
- 2. Name and address of the present owner of the property:** The present owner of the property is:  
  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education  
701 East Second Street  
Charlotte, North Carolina 28204
- 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 a map depicting the location of the property.



**5. Current deed book reference to the property:** The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 1514 on page 74 and Deed Book 930 on page 43. The tax parcel number of the property is 00323325.



**6. A brief historical sketch of the property:** This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property.

**7. A brief architectural description of the property:** This report contains a brief architectural description of the property.

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

**Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance:** The property known as the Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School does possess special significance in terms of the Town of Davidson and Mecklenburg County. Judgment is based in the following considerations:

- 1) The Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School is a rare and well preserved example of a substantial African-American school building that dates from the era of Jim Crow in Mecklenburg County.
- 2) In terms of Mecklenburg County, the Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School is a rare early 20<sup>th</sup> century school building which is in good condition, and has retained a high degree of integrity.
- 3) The Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School is the oldest public school building in Davidson.
- 4) The Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School is an important landmark in Davidson, representing the strength and resourcefulness of the town's African American community during the era of racial segregation.
- 5) Built during the Great Depression, the Davidson Colored School is an important artifact representing the work of the Public Works Administration in Mecklenburg County.

**9. Ad Valorem tax appraisal:** The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark." The current appraised value of the lot, which is 4.35 acres, is \$125,200. The appraised value of the buildings and other improvements is \$1,512,100. The current total tax value is \$1,639,000.

**10. Portions of property recommended for designation:** The exterior and interior of the 1937 Davidson Colored School/Ada Jenkins School building and acreage to assure the protection of its setting.

**Date of preparation of this report:** December 2006

**Prepared by:** Stewart Gray

### **Statement of Historical Significance**

The Davidson Colored School, later the Ada Jenkins School, is the largest and most prominent historic element of the built environment of Davidson's traditionally African-American Westside neighborhood. The building, which originally served as a segregated school, helps document segregation and the Jim Crow era in Davidson and in Mecklenburg County. It is a reflection of the black community's commitment to improving the education of its young people. It is also an artifact of an unusual time, a time when Mecklenburg County was facing huge economic challenges and yet found the resources to greatly improve the infrastructure for public education.

In the 1890s frame public schools buildings begin to appear in rural Mecklenburg County. Surviving examples include the Croft Schoolhouse, which was built for white students, and the Bethesda School, which was built for blacks.



Croft Schoolhouse, 1890

Croft Community,  
Mecklenburg County



Bethesda Schoolhouse , ca.  
1899

Croft Community,  
Mecklenburg County

With the advent of the graded-school movement in the early years of the 20th Century, more substantial brick school buildings were built for the county's rural white students, including the brick 1915 Cornelius High School (demolished). However, no substantial brick school buildings were built for the county's rural black children. Instead the African-American community relied on outside help in the form of the Rosenwald Schools program. In Mecklenburg County there were twenty-six Rosenwald Schools built. [\[1\]](#)



Newell Rosenwald School, Torrence  
Grove Church Road, Charlotte

In Davidson, an effort to educate the town's white children began in 1892, and in 1893 a substantial two-story brick school building was completed. The graded school was supported by local taxes, and by 1911 had an enrollment of nearly two hundred students, all white. [\[2\]](#)



1923 Davidson Academy

No such effort was made to educate the rest of the town's children. Black children were educated in small frame buildings located in the African-American Westside neighborhood. By the 1930s, two frame school buildings were needed in the neighborhood to hold all the children. One building was described as a "one teacher school," and the other as a "three-teacher school." [3] In the memories of the alumni, these frame buildings were not adequate. Talmadge Connor, who attended the schools, recalls "it wasn't nothing but a straight three-room school. It had a big long front porch on it, and it was heated by coal or wood. So everybody was glad to see it go...this other old shack (the one-teacher school) you didn't even want to be seen with it." [4] In 1937 a new brick six-classroom school, Davidson Colored School, opened to serve the black community. Alumni recall that it was a vast improvement. "Everything was better" remembers Connor [5]. Staff included three teachers from the earlier schools in Davidson. One of these was Mrs. Ada Jenkins.

The Davidson Colored School is a physical reminder of a counter-intuitive phenomenon that happened in Mecklenburg County in the 1930s. During the Great Depression, when the number of building permits in the county plummeted, when factory workers in nearby Gaston County were nearly starving, and when farm families faced the triple threat of cotton dependency, low cotton prices, and the boll weevil, the infrastructure for rural Mecklenburg County education improved greatly. The Davidson Colored School was not the only school building erected for blacks in these otherwise desperate years. In nearby Huntersville, the Torrence-Lytle High School opened in 1937, as did the Sterling School (now demolished) in Pineville in the south of the county. [6] It was not only black students who benefited. The

Huntersville and Long Creek high schools, both segregated white schools, received rectilinear agricultural buildings in 1938. Long Creek and the (white) Davidson School received new gymnasiums in 1936, [7] and Cornelius High School received a new auditorium (demolished). It was the confluence of two major trends that led to such building activity during the 1930s: The first was a continuing drive to improve education during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the second was the unprecedented involvement of the Federal government through the New Deal programs.



Torrence-Lytle School 1937

In 1935 the Mecklenburg County Board of Education submitted a request to the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works Administration (P.W.A.). The Board requested funds for “school improvements of a permanent nature.” Part of the funding was for \$18,000 for one “negro school.” [8]

At the School Board’s June 25, 1937 meeting, building contracts for the Davidson Colored School were approved, and by the October 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, the school was under construction. Meeting minutes indicate that the original plans for the school included an auditorium/gymnasium. However, approval was only given to build a six-classroom building. Minutes also indicate that the existing “one teacher” schoolhouse was no longer needed and was sold. [9]

County Board of Education minutes do not tell the story of the community’s involvement in bringing the school into existence nor the vital support the community played once the six-classroom brick building was completed. According to community members, Teacher Ada Jenkins and

P.T.A. President Logan Houston led the effort to build the school, and the black community raised money for the construction of the school. According to Mrs. Frances Beale, Houston organized fundraisers, selling locally made ice cream. [\[10\]](#) Even after the school building was completed, community support remained critical. “Common ground” meetings and other fundraisers were held to help buy supplies such as firewood.

It is not clear what day the school opened, but reports indicate that it began serving the community during the 1937-1938 school year. When the school opened, Talmadge Connor entered the school as an eighth grader. The old schools had educated students through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade; so in 1937, when the new brick school opened, it expanded the educational opportunities of Connor and all the black children in Davidson. Each year thereafter, the school added an additional grade until the 1939-40 school year when an 11<sup>th</sup> grade was added. The 11<sup>th</sup> grade was the final grade for high school students in Mecklenburg County before WWII.

In 1937 there were 25 students in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, levels considered by the State to be “high school” grades at that time. A report filed with the State in 1938 on the “high school” tells us very little about the primary school. It does however indicate that the school featured six classrooms, only one of which was used for the high school. In 1937-1938 the school had no lunchroom or auditorium but did have an office for the principal and a teachers’ restroom. The school day began at 8:40. Both the high school teachers were men. Mr. Lorezo Poe, who was also the principal, made \$689.90 a year, and a Mr. Gorden made \$522. Mr. Poe taught General Science, Biology, English, Arithmetic, Algebra, Literature, and Civics. According to the report, Mr. Gorden only taught History. Perhaps he had other responsibilities with the other grades.

The 1938-1939 annual state report describes a library that measured 36’ x 22’. In the high school grades, girls outnumbered boys 25 to 8. By the fall of 1939, sixty-two high school students were enrolled. By 1941 the library contained 262 books and subscribed to five magazines and one daily newspaper. No state reports appear to have survived from the war years; however, by the 1945-1946 school year, the report indicates that the school had expanded to eight classrooms.

Ken Norton experienced the Davidson Colored School as both a primary and a high school student. He began attending the school the year it opened as a fourth grader. He remembers that even with a substantial new building, the school still lacked some resources. The Davidson Colored School had a

place for a boiler, but no boiler had been installed. The school was instead heated with coal-burning pot-bellied stoves. Norton attended the school until he graduated. The only sports team he recalls was a basketball team that played other black high schools. The list includes many institutions that are no longer in existence: Dunbar, Torrence-Lytle, Sterling, Clear Creek, Plato Price, Second Ward, West Charlotte, and Kannapolis High Schools. With no gym, the Davidson Colored School team practiced on a sand lot. Norton recalls that the community was very active in the school. “We had nothing else other than churches and schools.”

In addition to helping bring about the 1937 Davidson Colored School, Ms. Ada Jenkins was a strong presence in the running of the school and in the lives of the students. Very interested in music, she taught and played the piano and organ, and led the glee club. Talmadge Connor recalls that Jenkins was also very strict, saying “she used real hickories.” While the school’s principals were men, Ken Norton believes that Jenkins was actually in charge of the school. Jenkins died in 1944. [\[11\]](#) The school’s name was changed to the Ada Jenkins School in 1955. [\[12\]](#)

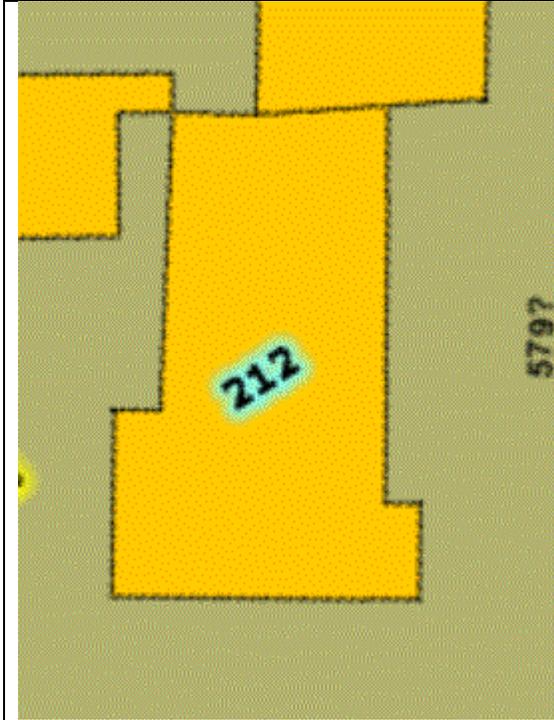
The school became exclusively an elementary school in the 1946-7 school year, educating students in the first through eighth grades. Brenda Tapia attended the Ada Jenkins School from 1956 to 1963. She remembers May Poles were a big event and that the girls’ dresses matched the colors in the pole. She also remembers sock hops and Halloween parties held in the gym that was added to the school in 1958. Extracurricular activities were robust, with the school offering 4-H, band, glee club, and piano lessons. Tapia remembers a portrait of Ada Jenkins in the building and recalls that kids were afraid of her ghost. [\[13\]](#) In addition to the gymnasium, a classroom wing and a freestanding cafeteria were added around 1958. [\[14\]](#) In 1966 the school closed when the Mecklenburg County schools became racially integrated. [\[15\]](#)



### **Architectural Description**

The Davidson Colored School is a one-story brick school building built in 1937. The building features a “T” plan, with the front of the building facing south. The school property slopes down toward the northwest, allowing for a windowless basement level under the rear wing. The lower level houses the furnace and other mechanicals. The walls are laid in a modified common bond. Five rows of stretchers were laid between bonding layers that were composed of two stretchers alternating with a single header. The foundation/basement level is delineated by a belt course of soldier brick that stops short of the building’s corners. The façade is seven bays wide, with a front-gabled central entrance bay that projects approximately 1’. The center bay contains replacement double doors that open onto brick and concrete steps that have been altered to accommodate a ramp. Above the doors is a half-round brick arch with stone springers and keystone. An original fanlight has been covered with panel signage.

The façade is symmetrical and the remaining six bays contain paired double-hung replacement windows. All the window openings in the building run to the roofline. The bricks between the windows act as piers and support either lintels or a continuous beam that supports the roof structure. The window sills are brick, and the frieze and shallow soffit are wrapped in metal.



Outline of the 1937 Davidson Colored School. The building faces south.

The front section of the building is oddly shaped: It could be described as two shallow wings projecting from the principal central-hallway section of the building, which runs north and south. The eastern part of the front section is shallow, only one room deep. The east elevation is blank and this portion of the building is topped by a hip roof.



## West Elevation

The western portion of the front section is deeper. The west elevation is a wide expanse of brick wall pierced by a single door opening. It is possible that the west elevation was designed to accept an addition. Poured concrete steps give access to the doorway, which contains double metal doors. The doorway is framed by a brick border featuring mitered brick at the corners. In contrast to the east elevation the west elevation is gambrelled.

The rear wing features a center hallway with classrooms on each side. The east elevation of the rear wing features eight bays containing tall double- and triple-ganged double-hung windows. On the west side, there are seven bays. The north elevation of the rear wing is blank except for double metal doors that open into a raised breezeway connecting to the second floor of a circa 1960 classroom building and gymnasium. The north elevation features a hipped roof. The hipped roof transitions into the low pitched upper sections of the gambrel roof that covers most of the building.



The interior of the building has retained much of the original woodwork, including interior doors and transoms, baseboards, and window trim. The original chalk and bulletin boards are also in place. Dropped ceilings have been added.



A gymnasium, a classroom wing and a freestanding cafeteria were added to around 1958. The flat roofed gymnasium is attached to the rear of the 1937 building with a two-story breezeway. A two-story classroom wing extends west from the gymnasium. The one-story cafeteria building is unattached to the other buildings and sits adjacent to the west elevation of the 1937 building.

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[1] Dan Morrill “Dr. George E. Davis House” <http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rgeorgedavis.htm>

[2] Jennifer Payne “The Evolution of the Built Environment of Davidson, North Carolina” [http://www.cmhpf.org/surveydavidsonpayne.htm#\\_ednref62](http://www.cmhpf.org/surveydavidsonpayne.htm#_ednref62)

[3] Ken Norton interview, Brian Campbell, March 23, 1999. Available in the archives of Davidson College.

[4] Talmadge Connor interview, Brian Campbell, March 26, 1999. Available in the archives of Davidson College.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hope L. Murphy and Stewart Gray “Survey and Research Report on the Torrence-Lytle School,” December, 2005.

[7] Kristin Stakel and Dr. Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Davidson IB Middle School,” December, 2005.

[8] Minutes, The Country Board of Education of Mecklenburg County 1934-1936 (Volume 8), May 30, 1935.

[9] Minutes, The Country Board of Education of Mecklenburg County 1934-1936 (Volume 8), June 25 and October 5, 1937.

[10] Paula Stathakis and Stewart Gray "Survey of African American Buildings and Sites in Mecklenburg County: The African American Presence in the Mecklenburg County Built Environment, 1850-1950" Thematic survey of Mecklenburg County, 2002. On file in the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office.

[11] Connor

[12] Educational Directory Charlotte and Mecklenburg County Schools 1954-1955.

[13] Brenda Tapia interview, Laura Hajar, April 28, 1999. Available in the archives of Davidson College.

[14] Mecklenburg County tax records

[15] Educational Directory Charlotte and Mecklenburg County Schools, 1965-1967.