

PALMER FIRE SCHOOL



This report was written on July 3, 1989

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Palmer Fire School is located at 2601 East Seventh Street, Charlotte, NC.

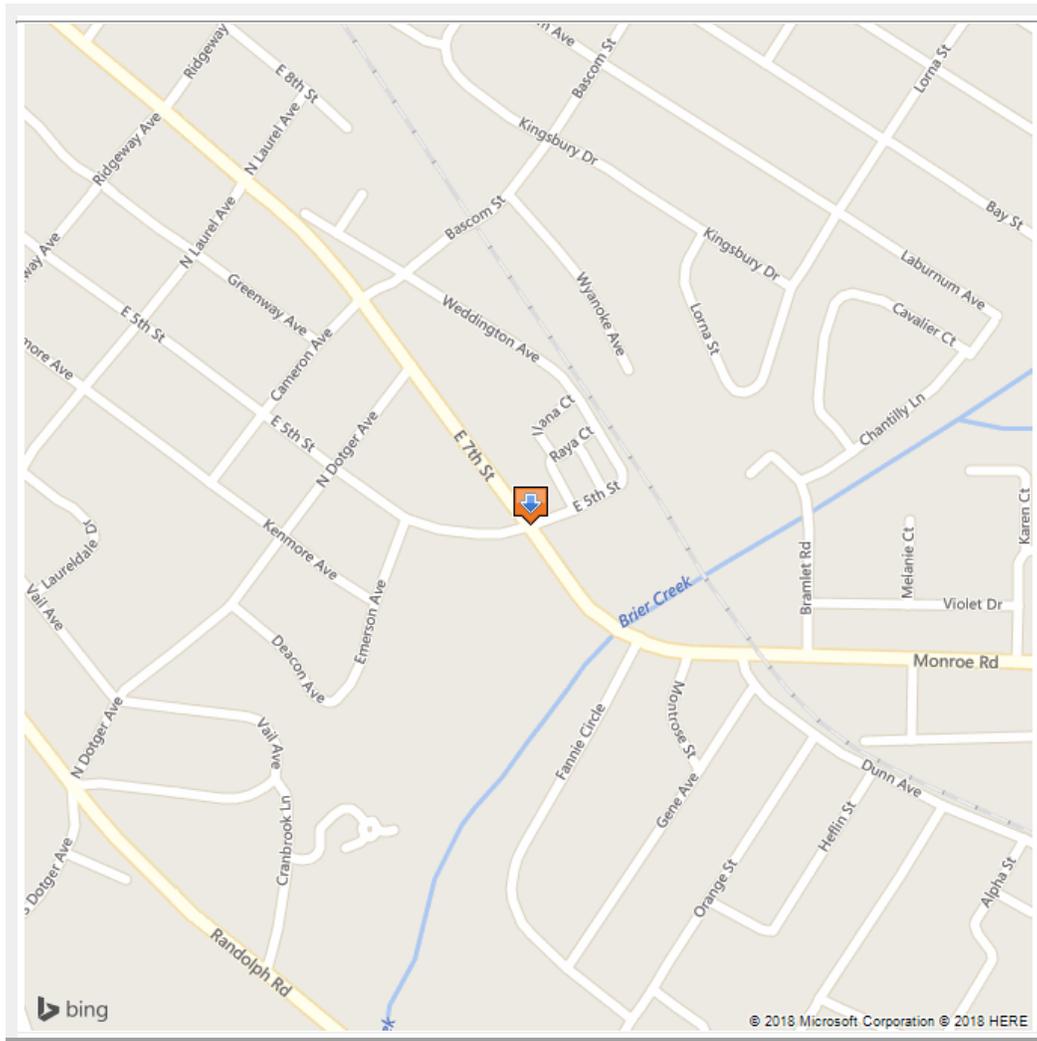
2. Name, address, and telephone number of the present owner of the property: The owner of the property is:

City of Charlotte
c/o O. Wendell White
City Manager
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center
600 East Fourth St.
Charlotte, N.C. 28202

Telephone: (704) 336-2241

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

4 A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: There is no record in the Mecklenburg County Tax Office of the listing of the most recent deed to this property. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is: 127-091-01.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property: This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. William H. Huffman, Ph.D.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Mary Beth Gatza.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Palmer Fire School does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) the Palmer Fire School, a WPA project which opened on May 13, 1940, served as a training center and social center for the Charlotte Fire Department until 1976; 2) the Palmer Fire School, named for Charlotte Fire Chief Hendrix Palmer, was at the time of its opening one of the finest facilities of its type in the United States; and 3) the Palmer Fire School, especially the rubble stone education building, possesses architectural significance.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling, and/or association: The Commission contends that the architectural description by Mary Beth Gatza which is included in this report demonstrates that the Palmer Fire 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 improvements is \$270,080. The current appraised value of the 5.250 acres of land is \$288,130. The total appraised value of the property is \$558,210. The property is zoned 06.

Date of Preparation of this Report: July 3, 1989

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission
1225 S. Caldwell St.
Charlotte, NC 28203

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Historical Overview



Dr. William H. Huffman

Although it may not be well-known among the general public, the Palmer Fire School, often known also as Fireman's Hall, nonetheless enjoyed state-wide and national prominence for many years. Located on East Seventh and Fifth Streets, it was designed by the City Engineering Department and built in 1938-40 at the edge of the city limits of the day. In addition to being the best fire training facility in the state, it was also one of the finest in the country.

It was named for the man most responsible for its construction, William Hendrix Palmer (1884-1955), who was a forty-four-year member of the city fire department and its chief from 1927 to 1948. Chief Palmer began his fire service with the city on October 1, 1904, and through the years held nearly every job in the department. Recognized internationally as a progressive innovator in fire fighting, the York County, SC native had, among other distinctions, credit for "designing and promoting the manufacture of the first enclosed fire truck in America,"¹ which went on to become standard equipment throughout the country. Its design was prompted by the death of a firefighter from riding on the side of a fire truck, and the City of Charlotte was the first in the country to adopt the new equipment. Twice elected president of the North Carolina Firemen's Association, Palmer also helped organize the NC Fire Chiefs Association and became its first president. The highlight of his career came in 1940, when he was elected president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the most prestigious post of his profession.²

Over the years, Hendrix Palmer saw many changes take place in the business of putting out and preventing fires. In 1906, he fired the horse-drawn engine operated by his father, J. P. Palmer, when they fought a stable fire at the time of the county fair in Dilworth, and in 1912, he saw Charlotte's first motor fire truck take its place alongside the horse-drawn ones.³ Continued subsequent modernization of equipment and techniques, and the enlargement of the department as the city grew necessitated more and better training for the crews. The records dealing with training in the department begin in 1930, three years after Hendrix Palmer became chief, when forty-eight men of a 190-member department received Red Cross instruction. Regular training drills lasted 30 days, and included all aspects of equipment handling. Hose layout and pump operation were taught by Assistant Chief C. M. Griswold at Seigle and Orr Streets. That same year, 1930, the chief submitted a request to the city for a drill school and practice tower.⁴

In 1932, the request was again sent forward, and two years later the project was approved for construction by the Public Works Department, but due to a legal technicality, it was nullified by the North Carolina Supreme Court before it could be built.⁵ In addition to the necessity of requesting a change in the laws by the city council to remove the legal barriers, Chief Palmer had to begin all over again fighting for the funds to build the project in the face of an ever-deepening economic depression. Finally, in 1938, success came. To combat unemployment in the nation's longest and worst depression, the Roosevelt administration had set up the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 to put people to work on a wide variety of federal, state and local public works projects, all funded by the government. The fire training school was approved as a WPA project, with an estimated cost of \$54,000, and plans were drawn by the City Engineering Department.⁶

In order to build the kind of facility he wanted, Chief Palmer involved the firefighters themselves in helping out. Some of the building materials for the school and tower came from an old incinerator on the site, but most of the stone for the hall came from an old tannery on Burton Street, which used to be operated by the father of former Charlotte Mayor Victor Shawl. Stone by stone, the firefighters hauled the material from the abandoned tannery to the school site according to predetermined work schedules. They were carried on a two-wheel pole trailer that was pulled by a maintenance truck.

The efforts of the department personnel did not end there, however. Two captains, J. R. Jamison and R. T. Barnes landscaped the five-acre grounds with trees, shrubs, posts, and other improvements, and later, when they needed more room, the firefighters dug out and finished the remaining two-thirds of the basement. Since in those days the department maintained its own shops, many of the interior improvements came from there, including the old wood benches with the department

insignia at the ends. The woodworking shop was under the direction of Captain Glen Beckham, who formerly worked for H. M. Wade, manufacturer of office and bank furnishings.⁷

Years of effort finally bore fruit on May 13, 1940, when the Palmer Fire School was dedicated. Preceding the dedication was a luncheon at the Hotel Charlotte, hosted by Mayor Douglas and Chief Palmer, where, in speech to the gathering, Samuel J. Pope, Chief of the Boston, Massachusetts Fire Department and president of the New England Fire Chiefs Association called Hendrix Palmer "one of the outstanding fire chiefs in America." Other guests of honor were D. W. Brosnan, Chief of the Albany, Georgia Fire Department and ex-president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, and Sherwood Brockwell, the North Carolina state fire marshal.⁸

At the 3 P.M. dedication, Mayor Ben Douglas was master of ceremonies, where T. P. Richardson, Charlotte area supervisor of the WPA, handed the keys to the new school and drill tower to C. C. McGinnis, state WPA administrator, who gave them to Charlotte City Manager J. B. Marshall. He in turn presented them to the beaming Hendrix Palmer. Addressing a large audience at the ceremony, State Fire Marshal Brockwell praised both Chief Palmer for his tireless efforts, and the work of the department personnel, who helped bring the finished project in for about \$50,000, some \$4,000 under the estimate. He went on to say that "Charlotte now has the finest training center for firemen in the United States," and announced that starting immediately, the annual three-day North Carolina Fire College and Drill School, which had traveled around the state, would be held at the Charlotte facility.⁹ Ten years later, when he was retired, Chief Palmer was as proud as ever of the five-acre school: "That's a unique setup out there. Nothing like it in the country, except at Brookline, Massachusetts."¹⁰

For thirty-six years, the Palmer Fire School and drill tower not only provided training for local firefighters and those from throughout the state (some also came from Rock Hill, South Carolina) in one of the best facilities in the nation, but it also served as a clubhouse and social center for the fire personnel as well. For many years, the Benefit Fund held square dances in the hall, and annual barbecues were festive affairs looked forward to by the department members. The hall was also rented out to civic groups, and the proceeds allowed the hall to be self-sufficient in maintenance.

In 1976, the training division moved out to a newly constructed fire/police training facility, and shortly thereafter it was transferred to the City Parks and Recreation department. The hall and drill tower have since been used by various civic groups for such things as wilderness training and rehearsal space for the Charlotte Shakespeare Company. Indeed, the Palmer Fire School and drill tower not only have the historical distinction of being perhaps the best of their kind in the country when first put into

use, but also could have a long and useful life of service to the community in the years ahead.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ *Charlotte News*, August 26, 1955, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*; *Charlotte Observer*, August 9, 1940.

³ *Charlotte Observer*, February 28, 1950, p. 7J.

⁴ T. E. Gardner, "History of Training in the Charlotte Fire Department," unpublished typescript, March 9, 1976.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Charlotte News*, May 13, 1940, p. 11; plans on file at City of Charlotte Engineering Department.

⁷ *Ibid.*; Interview with Chief R. L. Blackwelder, Charlotte, North Carolina, 16 August 1984; Interview with Joe Morris, retired-Fire Marshal, 9 October 1984.

⁸ *Charlotte News*, May 13, 1940, p. 11.

⁹ *Charlotte Observer*, May 13, 1940, p. 11

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, February 28, 1940, p. 7J.

¹¹ Interview with Chief Blackwelder.

Architectural Description

M. B. Gatza

Two structures stand at the Palmer Fire School site, both erected around 1938-40. The first is the school building and the second is a six-story all-brick tower, presumably used for drills. The most salient feature of the school building is the crenellated parapet at the roofline, which is slightly reminiscent of a medieval castle. Laid up in uncoursed rubble stone with wide mortar joints, the building is rectangular in shape. The facade (the narrow side of the rectangle) is five bays wide. The two end bays project from the plane of the facade and are pierced only by tall, narrow windows. This treatment suggests a fortified tower. The inner two bays each hold an 18-pane industrial steel sash window. The central entrance is composed of a double door with a half-round overlight. An aluminum marquis (not original) has been installed which conceals the overlight and shields the stoop. A set of stone and concrete steps extend down to a concrete sidewalk, and another set reaches down to the paved drive.

The north and south elevations are-not identical. The north side of the building faces the practice tower, and is therefore an important elevation. It is nine bays wide, including a functioning exterior fireplace (located in bay #5). As on the facade, the end bays project from the wall surface and are pierced only by tall, narrow fixed-sash windows. Bays #2, #4, #6 and #8 (counting from the east) hold 24-pane industrial steel sash windows. Bays #3 and #7 contain single entry doors, both reached by a small set of stone and concrete steps. A modern wheelchair ramp has been built over the steps on bay #3, but it is compatible in materials and construction. There is a sunken basement entry located under bay #8, which consists of a single door, and is reached also by a stone and concrete ramp. Black pipe railing shields the entry. There is an aluminum marquis (not original) over the entry in bay #3, but the one over bay #7 is missing. The fireplace and its chimney project slightly and are also laid up in uncoursed rubble stone. The top of the chimney, though, is stuccoed from the level of the parapet upwards.

The south elevation, like the north side, is symmetrical. Nine bays wide, it features a central entrance. The entry has a double door with an aluminum marquis, and stone and concrete steps. The two end bays project and have the same narrow windows as on the other elevations. The remaining six bays all hold 24-pane industrial steel sash windows. Two basement entries are located beneath bays #4 and 8, and feature curved decorative curved concrete hoods. The entries are reached by concrete steps, which are shielded by iron pipe railings.

The 'tower' treatment is repeated on the rear of the building in the two end bays, but it is otherwise unfenestrated. A modern gable-roofed addition and chimney have been constructed out of a gray-colored brick. The tower stands six stories high and is laid up in five-course common bond brick. There are window openings on all four sides and on all six stories, but only those on the ground-floor level are glazed. They are fitted with 12-pane industrial steel sash windows, and wooden shutters. Openings on the upper stories are simply left open. All of the openings have concrete sills. The original glazed door and transom are in place. On the interior, the six levels are divided by concrete slab floors, and a metal stair risers all the way to the top in the southeast corner.