

CLARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Built 1930-1931

Architect: Charles J. Calrow of *Calrow, Browne, and Fitz-Gibbon Architects* (Norfolk)

Builder: The Wilson Company of Charlottesville

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SITE HISTORY

On April 4, 1929, the School Board of the City of Charlottesville led by Superintendent Dr. James G. Johnson decided to build a new elementary school for white students. The report cites the crowded conditions at existing elementary schools of McGuffey and Midway.ⁱ The site chosen for the school was Belmont because the location was convenient to residential areas and land was inexpensive.ⁱⁱ The School Board purchased a series of twenty-five lots lying between Belmont Avenue in the north and Monticello and Tufton Avenue in the south – known as blocks 14 and 15 in the Belmont Division maps.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of these lots were owned by families and had homes on them – the Ficklin-Crawford cottage, originally part of the Belmont Estate was a home located on one of these properties that was moved to Carlton Avenue (this structure has since been demolished).^{iv}

BUILDING HISTORY

Charles J. Calrow, the primary architect of the school, had been working with Superintendent Johnson for fourteen years on the Charlottesville School buildings when he was commissioned to design this new building in 1929. Calrow intended to design the building in the Georgian Style but was required to use a certain number of practical health and safety constraints by the State – such as a minimum percentage of windows, for proper light and ventilation. Calrow's stylistic influences were Thomas Jefferson and Christopher Wren. In his letters to Johnson, Calrow laments the difficulty of reconciling the "requirements of large window areas and window groups to the proportions demanded of the classic architecture and especially that used by Thomas Jefferson."^v

Calrow completed the designs for a classical school plan in 1930 with: 18 classrooms, a library room, separate boys and girls playrooms, a cafeteria, a boiler room, coal room, office, and boys and girls bathrooms. The railed terraces with staircases on the east and south of the school were made with the dirt from the excavation in the basement. Calrow found the incorporation of landscaping improvements essential to the execution of his design, including not only the terracing but also the

shrubbery surrounding the school.^{vi} Calrow looked for architectural precedents in the city, comparing Clark School to both Venable and McGuffey Schools.^{vii}

Calrow emphasized the use of local building materials and businesses in the construction of the building, with a few exceptions made for chalkboard slates, fireproof doors, ornamental iron work, and structural steel.^{viii} After reviewing bids, the construction firm chosen to build the structure was The Wilson Company who had built for the nearby Ix Mills, the Woolen Mills, and the Altamont Apartments.^{ix} Construction was completed in 1931 with a final cost of \$245,000, just \$5,000 over the original budget.^x In 1959, an additional wing was added to the building to provide six classrooms for early primary grade students as well as a gymnasium which doubles as an auditorium.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

“Clark school faces east across a playground that occupies an unopened section of Castalia Street. It consists of a two-story central pavilion with a full-height portico and flanking two-story, two-bay wings, set on an English basement. Walls and foundation are constructed of brick laid in alternating stretcher and header-stretcher courses with concrete water table and stringcourse. The roof is flat or nearly flat and has a deep concrete entablature with dentiled cornice. No chimneys are visible. In each of the side bays there is a group of four separate double-sash, 12-over-12 light windows with moulded surrounds, concrete sills, and jack arches. Those at the first level have concrete keystones. Smaller 2-over-2 light windows without archest flank the central pavilion. Basement windows are 8-over-8 light with concrete sills, two per bay. A flat-roofed full-height portico with four Corinthian-esque columns and the name “George Rogers Clark School” on the frieze covers the façade of the pilastered central pavilion. At the first level, circular-headed double-sash windows with wooden Gothic tracery and concrete arches with keystones flank a round-arched architrave. The portico floor and broad flight of steps are of concrete and wrought iron balustrade. There are three 12-over-12 light windows at the second level. Fenestration on the rear elevation of the central pavilion is like that in the side bays. The ends of the building are three bays wide with slightly projecting pilastered center bays. In the center bay of the south end, a pair of multi-light doors with a multi-light rectangular transom is set within a concrete-paneled entry recess with a concrete architrave surround and an entablature with a Greek fret band on the cornice and the name “Clark” on the frieze. The concrete steps have a brick balustrade. Above the entrance, there is a circular-headed window with wooden Gothic tracery. There are single 9-over-9 light windows

matching those on the façade in the side bays. The north end of the building is covered at the basement and first story levels by the L-shaped 1959 addition. It is two stories tall and extends west along Belmont Avenue. The brickwork matches that in the original building, and it has a flat roof with simple parapet.”^{xi}

SOCIAL HISTORY

Clark School is named after George Rogers Clark, the explorer in the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who was a native of Albemarle County. The school opened in 1931 with a staff of 18 classroom teachers, an office teacher, a secretary, and a principal for a group of 656 students grades 1st through 7th from the Belmont neighborhood.^{xii} The first principal was Miss Florence de Launey Buford, for whom Buford School is named. Principal Buford was known for her progressive institutional improvements and for civic engagement. Buford remained at Clark School until her retirement in 1964. The first librarian of the school was Mrs. Jo Wright, originally a classroom teacher who informally kept the library. Mrs. Wright became a full time librarian until her retirement in 1962.^{xiii}

From the beginning, Principal Buford and Mrs. Suzie Johnson, a school maid, arranged for school lunches to be available for needy children. There was also a lunch stand selling soup, sandwiches, pies, and cakes to students from the 1930s until the formal cafeteria program was established in 1946. In 1946, the Sacajawea Tea Room opened as the cafeteria in the school, selling sandwiches, hot dogs, fruit, and milk to students for 15¢ per meal. The cafeteria was named in honor of George Rogers Clark’s Native American guide and companion on Lewis and Clark expedition to the west.^{xiv}

Clark School was the first school in Charlottesville and the second in Virginia to have a class for special needs students, which began with a partnership between Principal Buford and the American Association for University Women in 1953. As an early pioneer in this field, Clark School developed programming that was replicated in other schools across the city and state. Another innovation of Clark School was non-graded primary education, beginning in 1954 and later replicated throughout the city elementary schools.^{xv}

Early curriculum included cooking and sewing classes and music instruction. In part due to Principal Buford’s love of sports, Clark School athletics have a strong history and the school won awards in sports as early as 1932 when the school received the Achievement Trophy Cup. The local competition awarded points for a range of activities including basketball, track, baseball, marbles,

cooking, reading, and public speaking.^{xvi} In 1965, the seventh grade moved to local middle schools. The following year, in 1966, sixth grade also moved to middle schools, leaving grades kindergarten through fifth grade at Clark School.^{xvii}

The school has been used by the community of Belmont and the larger Charlottesville area as a gathering place. The school was originally designed for longevity, with flexible use of space in mind, particularly the shared spaces like playrooms and assembly spaces. In writing to architect Calrow, Superintendent Johnson noted “Neither you nor I nor any other one can tell what demands may be put upon a school building in the future.” Afterschool programs, voting, PTA fairs and festivals, meetings, and other community events and services continue to take advantage of this neighborhood resource.^{xviii}

ⁱ Collection of City of Charlottesville School Board (Box 12, Folder 4-7), UVA Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deed Book 96, Page 72, City of Charlottesville Clerk’s Office.

^{iv} Clark School City Survey, Eugenia Bibbs (?), 1970s.

^v Collection of City of Charlottesville School Board (Box 12, Folder 4-7), UVA Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Self-Study Report of Clark School by Principal William Chapman, 1972, UVA Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

^{xi} Charlottesville Architectural and Historic Survey for 1000 Belmont Avenue (George Rogers Clark School), 1976.

^{xii} Self-Study Report of Clark School by Principal William Chapman, 1972, UVA Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid.

^{xviii} Ibid.