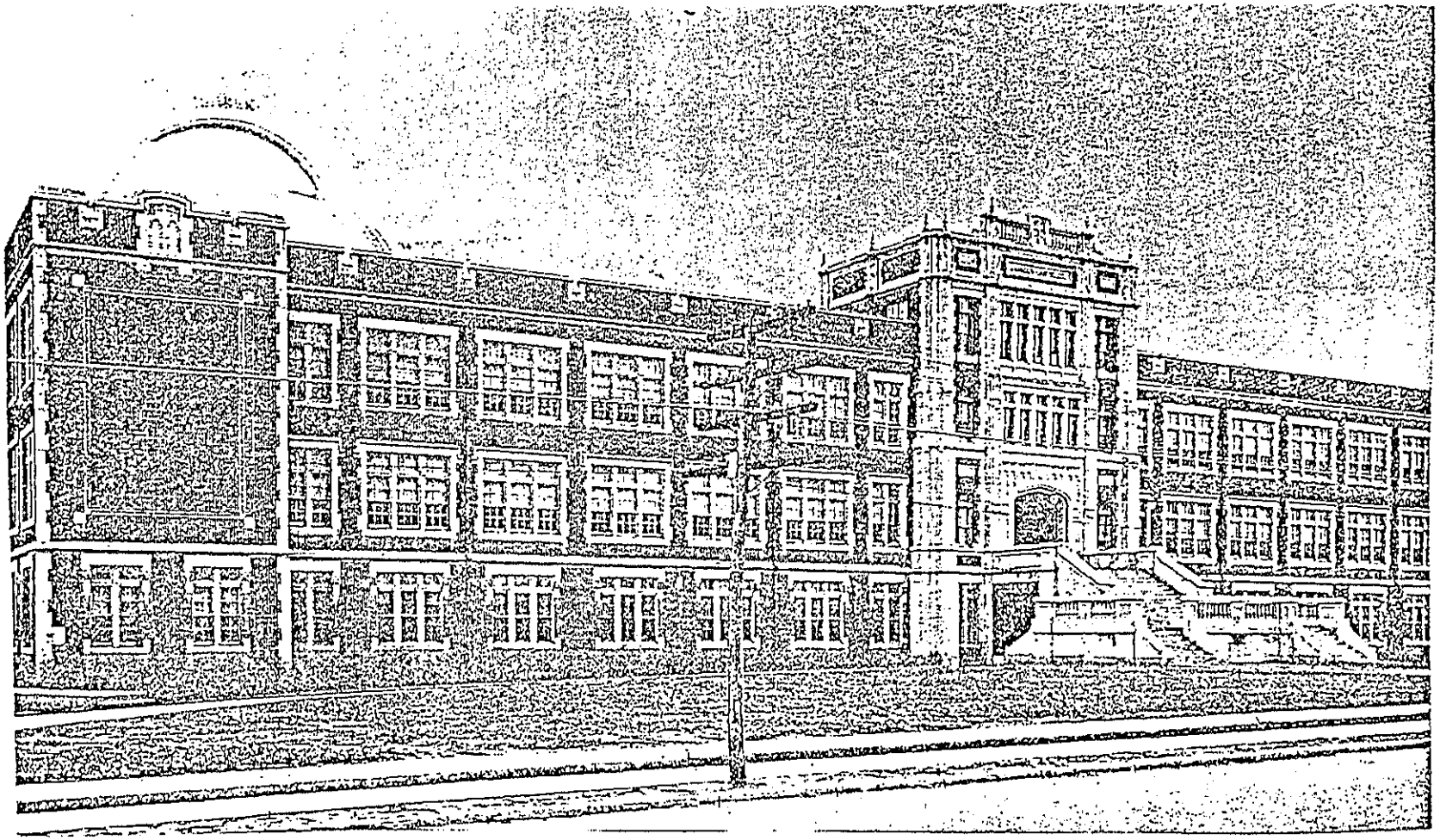
PROPOSAL OF
THE 1924 GASTONIA HIGH SCHOOL, GASTONIA, N.C.
TO THE GASTON COUNTY HISTORIC PROPERTIES REGISTER
AUGUST 18, 1981

GASTON COUNTY HISTORIC PROPERTIES COMMISSION

Mrs. Richard Penegar, Chrmn.
Mr. Robert Carpenter
Mrs. W. N. Craig
Mrs. H.O. Williams
Mr. Frank Rankin
Mrs. Douglas Bell



1. Name and location of the property. The property known as the old Gastonia High School (now [illegible]ley Junior High) is located on South York Street occupying the block between Garrison Blvd. and Eighth Avenue, Gastonia, Gaston County, North Carolina.

2. Name, address, and telephone of the present owner of the property.

Gaston County School System
943 Osceola Street
Gastonia, N.C. 28052
phone 864-9971

3. Representative photographs of the property.

4. Map depicting location of the property.

5. Current deed reference of the property.

6. Historical sketch of the property. This report contains a brief historical sketch and portions of a brochure of the architect's works compiled by Lucy Penegar.

7. Architectural description of the property. This report contains a brief architectural description of the property prepared by Mary Alice Hinson, architectural historian at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property is of historical importance to the county. The Commission believes that the old Gastonia High School is significant to the history of Gaston County. Architecturally, it is a distinguished example of Tudor Revival. At the time it was built it was an innovative example of school architecture for the South with its early "intercom system",pipe organ, gym, and swimming pool.

It is not only an individually distinctive monument, but part of the larger environmental legacy that architect Hugh White left on the city of Gastonia.

The High School is a graphic reminder of the community's past, and an important urban amenity that can enrich the community's future. The school standing on a two-block site facing South York Street at the crest of a hill, anchors the surrounding neighborhood and serves as its visual focal point. It is in a very real sense a resource belonging to the entire community, for even the building's elevations belong, democratically, to every one who passes by.

Adaptive reuse of this elegant piece of architecture can make Gaston County emerge as one of the most aggressive leaders in the municipal revitalization movement sweeping the North Carolina Piedmont.

9. Reaction from the North Carolina Department of Archives and History.

HISTORICAL SKETCH * GASTONIA HIGH SCHOOL

Gastonia High School's corner stone carries the date 1922, although its first graduating class came over from Central School in May 1924 to use the auditorium in the unfinished building. The Gastonia Gazette announced the opening of the $500,000. building in an article dated May 22, 1924,[1] pointing out several innovative features such as a swimming pool, a $15,000. pipe organ, phones in the classrooms, a refrigeration plant, and an auditorium capable of seating 1650 people.

Gastonia High School was designed by a very active Gastonia Architect, Mr. Hugh White, a member of the firm White, Streeter, and Chamberlain. This is an outstanding example of his work. Hugh White died in 1939, but his stamp remains on Gastonia in the form of buildings that he designed during the 21 years that he lived here. He was reared on a South Carolina farm, first working in a wood-working plant as a foreman. A correspondence course in architecture from a New York school set his ambition.[2] White worked as foreman for a contracting firm in York, S.C., and later as a draftsman in an Atlanta architect's office. Before moving his family to Gastonia in 1918, White worked in the office of the supervising architect of the United States Treasury.[3]

In Gastonia, Hugh White established the architectural firm mentioned above which was later dissolved in 1927.[4]

Hugh White used a variety of architectural styles in his designs, using Greek Revival for the residence of textile magnate A.G. Myers on Second Avenue. The Joseph Separk mansion is among his best designs, as well as the Sam Boyce house on York and Second. The ceiling medallions of plaster acanthus leaves, long hallways, and sun porches are used in these beautiful structures.[5]

The old Gastonia library on Second Avenue and Memorial Hall next door are his designs, as well as the Citizens Bank Building (now used by the county), the Webb Theatre, and City Hall. Other residences designed include: the C.S. Thompson, Hugh Wray, Murray Mack, R.L. Todds, Ira Falls, M.H. Epps, Orlanda Hudson, and J.D. Peeples homes.[6]

The old Gastonia High School has touched many lives of Gaston County residents. Few buildings can boast of such alife as this one, yearly graduating an average of 300 students for almost 60 years! (In the year 1924 a class of 62 students,[7] and 1980's ninth grade class of 400 students.[8]) In fact, a majority of Gastonia's citizens have been influenced by this school! Such an edifice stands as a daily reminder of Gastonia's proud past and struggle for today's accomplishments.

The building was erected from proceeds of a bond voted upon when Col. C.B. Armstrong was Chairman of the School Board. At its completion, the members of the School Board were: Chrmn. A.G. Myers, Ira R. Hayes, J.M. Gilliam, R.C. Patrick, C.J. Huss, T.J. Rankin, and Dr. L.N. Glenn. The

Superintendent was W.P. Grier. Mr. A.G. Myers gave the presentation speech and Mr. C.N. Boyce the receiving speech for the public.[9]

In the opening notice, the Gastonia Gazette gave this account: "The building represents the last word in architect's skill and contractor's ingenuity. It is generally conceded to be one of the finest specimens of school architecture in the state, and one of the most complete school plants in the South. Visitors from large cities commenting on it declare that it is as fine as in any part of the country."[10]

In a history of Gaston County's educational system written by the unit of N.C.E.A. in 1957, the following statement was written: "When completed, this building was one of the most beautiful and best equipped high schools in the South. It was the only one that had a pipe organ and a swimming pool."[11]

The swimming pool and gymnasium under the auditorium provided for a full program of physical education and competitive sports. Just back of the school a stadium, 500 feet by 450 feet, was adequately equipped with bleachers and a grandstand that would seat over 5,000 people. Tennis courts were built on the north end of the field. All students, boys and girls, were enrolled in the physical education classes.

Gastonia High School moved into the present building for its first session in September, 1924. Mr. J. Eris Cassell

from Concord, North Carolina, was principal and he had 13 A grade teachers. The student body numbered 400.[12]

The first graduating class in 1924 had 62 graduates. Class officers were: Pres. - Martha Moore, V.P. -John R. Falls, Sec. - Mary Kate Poole, and Treas. - S.O. Davis. A list of the entire class follows:[13]

Virginia May Love, John Burke Long, Elizabeth Marshall, Martha Moore, Carroll Moore, Madeline Moore, Josephine Moore, Helen Moser, Ray Marley, Marian McGraw, Dan McConnell, Sarah McMillian, Chinara Nichols, Mary Owen, Edith Parker, Burke Parker, Sarah Patrick, Elsie Pearson, Mary Kate Poole, Mabel Rankin, J.Lee.Robinson, Miles Rhyne, Edith Smith, Hazel Smith, Wesley Smith, Clarence Underwood, Margaret Warren, W.Y. Warren, Jennie Craig Watson, Lucielle Welch, Robert Whitesides, Myrtle Anderson, Edwin Armstrong, Isabel Babington, Jack Baird, Isaac Bigger, French Brumley, Leon Cash, Clay Cox, Jeanette Currence, Elizabeth Crawford, Pearle Craig, Peter Colletta, Eva Cloninger, Helen Chandler, Eugenia Davis, S.O. Davis, Brady Dixon, John R. Falls, Virginia Fayssoux, Lilie Ferguson, Morris Garmise, Sarah Glenn, Ralph Glenn, Martha Sue Glenn, Nell Gilliam, Thelma Harbin, Frances Hardin, Genevieve Hovis, Amy Sue Jacobs, Wilma Kirby, Paul Kincaid.

In September, 1929, Mr. Frank L. Ashley from Red Springs, North Carolina, became the school principal. At his retirement in June, 1955, the high school enrollment had grown to 1255 and the faculty numbered forty four. The school had twice been studied by a committee from the Southern Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges, and each time had been placed on the list of accredited high schools.[14]

In June of 1955, Gastonia High School was renamed Frank L. Ashley Senior High School.

During Mr. Ashley's administration there were three different building programs to take care of increasing

number of students. The first was the addition of the north wing to the original building. The county helped to finance this change in order that the high school could take care of the students from approximately six county elementary schools.

In 1941-42 the twelfth grade was added. Previously, ten grades for an eight-months school term was organized by Mr. Joe S. Wray, superintendant. The eleventh grade was added in 1911.[15]

Enrollment increased until 1947-49 when the school was forced to teach a double daily schedule. An extensive remodeling program was done to take care of the student body of over 1000 pupils. The gymnasium and swimming pool were removed to provide space for a new cafeteria and library. All vocational laboratories were done away with and classrooms took their places.[16]

Temporary relief upon the building was made in 1949 when Gastonia High School was re-organized into a senior high with only the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades.[17]

In 1955 work was begun on a new vocational building on the corner of York and Seventh Streets, and the new south wing to the original building wsa started. Following the new addition, vocational subjects were again added to the curriculum.[18]

In September, 1955, Mr. Randolph E. Carrothers, from Gaffney, S.C., assumed the position of principal. He start-

ed his administration with a faculty of 50 members and a student enrollment of 1385.[19] In 1968 Mr. Jim Martin became the principal until the student body completely outgrew the facilities and moved into a new school combining Holbrook and Ashley to become Ashbrook Senior High School.

Old Gastonia High School took on a new life as Ashley Junior High School in 1970, with Principal E.J. Phillips. It continues under this name and direction at the time of this writing in 1981, but its future is uncertain with a new junior high school building planned to take its students.

The Gastonia High School's prominence in the York-Chester area is paramount in neighborhood revitalization efforts. As old homes are recycled and once unstable land values again become lucrative investments, the importance of this superb piece of architecture becomes most apparent. Much of Gastonia's good architectural ties to the past have been lost. This building's usefullness, in a time when waste of resources is prevalent in the minds of all citizens, is the stimulus for its presentation as an historic structure.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Gastonia Opens New $500,000. High School Building Today", Gastonia Gazette, May 22, 1924, Vol. XLV, No. 123, p. 1, 2.

2. "Interview of Mrs. W. Lewis Cathey (daughter of Hugh E. White) by Mrs. Lucy R. Penegar, Historic Properties Commission, May 18, 1981."

3. "Architect Hugh White's Stamp Left on Gastonia", Gastonia Gazette, May 18, 1980, Section B, p. 1, 10.

4. Ibid. p. 1, 10.

5. Ibid. p. 1, 10.

6. "From the Files of Hugh E. White Architect, Gastonia, N. C., August 1936," (Rowan Printing Company, Salisbury, N. C.)

7. "High School Grads Meet With Rotary", Gastonia Gazette, May 17, 1924. List of Class officers and all graduates.

8. "Interview of Gaston County Public School Secretary at Ashley Junior High by Mrs. Lucy R. Penegar, May 18, 1981.

9. "High School to Open Thursday", Gastonia Gazette, May 19, 1924, p. 3.

10. "Gastonia Opens New $500,000. High School Building Today", Gastonia Gazette, May 22, 1924, Vol. XLV, No. 123, p. 1, 2.

11. Gaston County Unit of N.C.E.A., Gaston County's Educational Heritage, 1957, p. 12, 13.

12. Ibid., p. 13.

13. "High School Grads Meet with Rotary", Gastonia Gazette, May 17, 1924.

14. Gaston County Unit of N.C.E.A., Gaston County's Educational Heritage, 1957, p. 14.

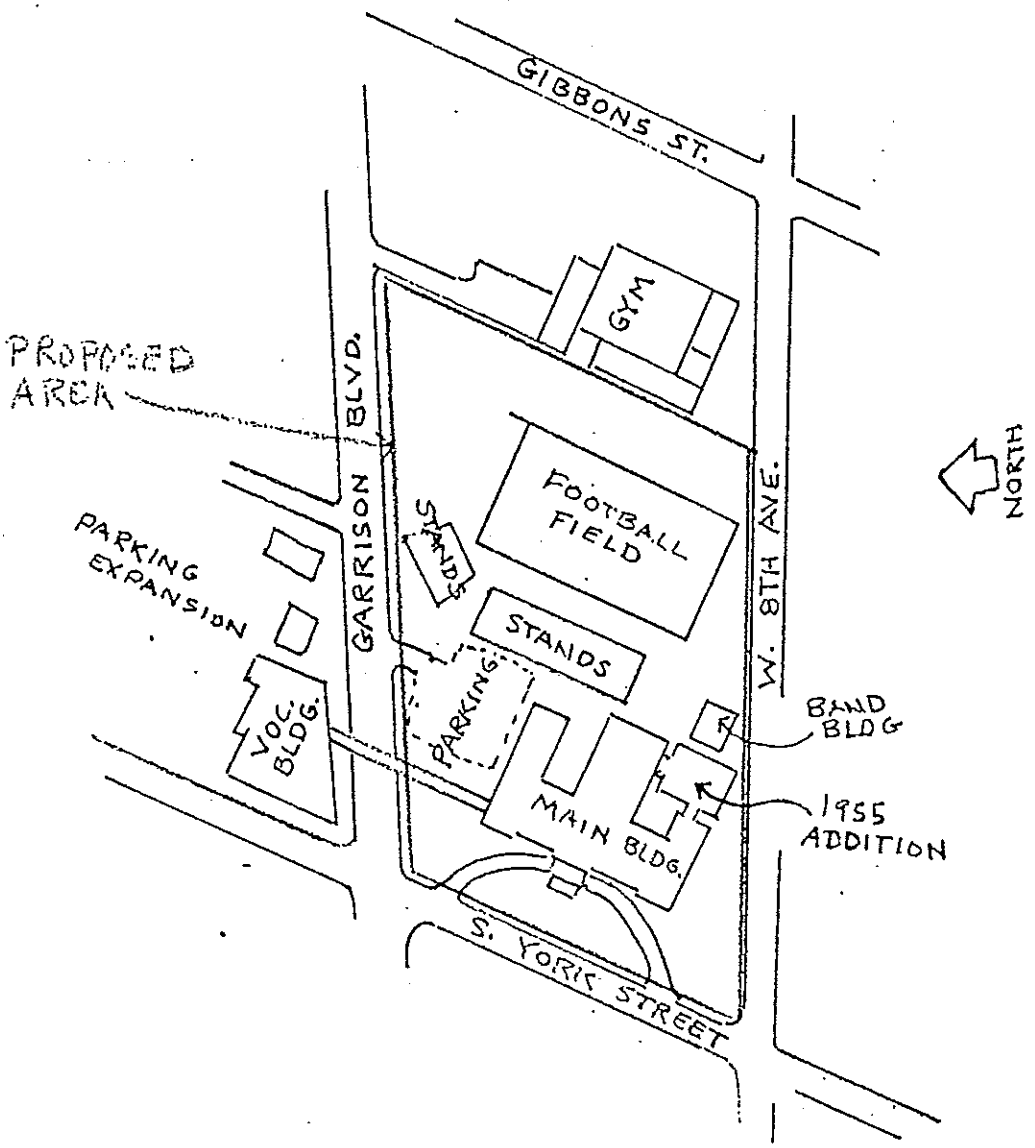
15. Ibid., p. 12.

16. Ibid., p. 14.

17. Ibid., p. 14.

18. Gaston County Unit of N.C.E.A., Gaston County's Educational Heritage, 1957, p. 15.

19. Ibid., p. 15.



PROPOSED AREA DOES NOT INCLUDE VOCATIONAL BLDG. + GYM

5. Chain of Title of old Gastonia High School

This tract for the Gastonia High School was a combination of two major tracts sold to the Gaston County Board of Commissioners of the Gastonia Graded School District by Mr. & Mrs. L.E. Dixon and Mr. & Mrs. W.N. Davis.

Tract 1

1. On Dec. 18, 1895, R. N. Holland deeded to L.E. Dixon some land adjoining lands of O.W. Davis on the East side of York Street for the price of $375. Deed bk. 33 p. 210.
2. Feb. 25, 1920, L.E. Dixon and wife Ella Dixon deeded a certain tract or parcel of land in the city of Gastonia adjoining the lands of W.N. Davis to the Board of Commissioners of the Gastonia Graded School District, for the price of $11,500. Deed bk. 142, p. 116.

Tract 2

1. On Feb. 2, 1861, I.N. Davis deeded to Oliver W. Davis 21 acres by a "Big Road". This may or may not be a correct reference. We could not ascertain if O.W. Davis was the son of I.N. Davis because birth records were not kept until Oct. 1913.
2. On April 30, 1902, Oliver W. Davis willed to Wm.Neil Davis all that parcel or lot of land known as the slaughter pen lot which begins at Dixon's S.E. corner and runs 200 ft. to York Street, and lies East of York Street and West of the C.&N. Railroad. Will bk. 3, p. 107.
3. On Feb. 25, 1920, W.N. Davis and wife M.E. Davis deeded a certain tract or parcel of land adjoining the lands of L.E. Dixon and others lying between 7th and 8th Avenues and between York and Lee Streets to the Board of Commissioners of the Gastonia Graded School District, for the price of $9,000. Deed bk. 142, p. 115.
4. On April 4, 1922, W.N. Davis and wife M.E. Davis deeded land to Board of Commissioners of the Gastonia Graded School District. Deed bk 155, p. 265.
5. In 1926, an agreement was signed between W.N. Davis and the Board of Commissioners of Gastonia Graded School District over the subject of covering the culvert between 7th and 8th Avenues. Deed bk. 204, p.322.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

GASTONIA HIGH SCHOOL
(FRANK L. ASHLEY JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL)
SOUTH YORK STREET
GASTONIA, NORTH CAROLINA

Gastonia High School, designed in 1922-24 by locally prominent architect Hugh White, is a distinguished example of the Tudor Revival. The picturesque vocabulary White employed in the design relates the school to the Collegiate Gothic deemed appropriate in the design of university buildings during the early decades of the 20th century. Through these stylistic associations the High School suggests, in elevation; its educational function.

The High School is not only a graphic reminder of the community's past but also an important urban amenity that can enrich the community's future. The school stands on a two-block site facing South York Street at the crest of a hill. By virtue of site and size the building anchors the surrounding neighborhood and serves as its visual focal point. The building stands three stories high beneath a flat roof enclosed by a parapet. The main (west) facade is dramatized by a four-story frontispiece projecting from the three central bays. The tripartite facade is twenty-one bays long. The two outermost bays project from either end of the facade, dividing the main elevation in three. The tripartite division reflects in elevation the horizontal organization of the E-shaped plan, ten bays deep at its widest.

The school is built of red brick laid in running bond and accented by fine grain grey Indiana limestone trim. The rough vertically-tooled faces of the bricks are in contrast to the smooth carborundum finish of the limestone. This textural animation enlivens the elevations and complements their divisions. The molded stone string course, which runs around the entire perimeter, signifies

the functional division of the building into piano nobile above raised basement. A molded cornice divides the third story from the roof parapet. These horizontal divisions, like the tripartite vertical divisions, give coherence to the massive facade while lending human scale to the heavily traveled intersection which the school borders.

The symmetrical facade is heavily ornamented. The projecting outer bays of the facade above the basement level have blind faces decorated with two-story rectangular panels. The panels are built of flush laid bricks in English cross bond. A border of rowlocks and soldiers frames the panel. A square stone plaque bearing a patera punctuates each corner of the flush panels. The building is extensively quoined. It carries, in addition to the stone string course and cornice molding, utilitarian parapet spouts treated as stone-set crenellations.

Fenestration, in general, consists of double-hung sash set between molded mullions and surmounted by multi-light transoms. All windows are framed by stone arranged in variations of the Gibbs surround with Tudor moldings. The windows are organized in groups of twos and threes tied together by either molded hoods or by flat arch lintels. Five bays in the main facade, on both north and south flanks of the frontispiece, contain triple window groups of three-light transoms above six-over-six sash. A molded hood with flush crosettes and lower lugs outlines each of the five sash along the main floor (piano nobile). A flat arch flush with the surrounding brick crowns the sash along the upper floor. Each flat arch ends in crossettes above symmetrical lower lugs. These give bays are flanked along the main and upper stories by pairs of two-light transoms above four-over-four sash. Surrounds repeat the patterns of the triple groups.

At the storey lines the walls are pierced by small rectangular metal vents. The vents have horizontal louvers. These act as exhausts for the classroom radiators which originally served the building's convection heating system.

Fenestration along the basement level is treated in a manner consistent with the upper levels. Triple and double groups of windows, each containing two-light transoms above four-over-four sash, complement the more elaborate upper windows. Surrounds at the basement level are simplified versions of the third floor surrounds. The side and rear elevation continue this program, except where later 20th century additions abut the original structure. Slender brick buttresses strengthen the walls between the window bays along sections of the rear.

The central entrance is approached from a huge two-tiered stone staircase preceded by a sidewalk leading from street to school. The sidewalk is lined by flat-paneled cast iron posts, formerly linked by heavy chains inscribed with the names of graduates. The posts stand on flat-paneled plinths and taper to gargoyle-like caps, cast in the shape of lions' heads. The lower level of the entrance staircase consists of a double flight, rising in straight runs west-to-east up to a rectangular-in-plan terrace landing. A molded stone balustrade with flat-paneled plinths encloses the terrace. A single run rises west-to-east from the terrace to the main entrance. The entrance is recessed within an enclosed entrance porch located within the piano nobile of the frontispiece. Both levels of stairs have closed strings beneath handrails that ramp and ease. Cast iron lamp posts stand on the railing of the upper level, lighting the principal entrance.

The upper level of the entrance stair shelters a recessed basement entrance located directly beneath the principal entrance. Soffit and fascia of the stone stairs frame the sheltered basement entry. A border of rowlocks and soldier bricks trims the stone soffit and fascia.

The stone frontispiece is divided into a major central entrance bay and two narrower side bays. Flat-paneled pilasters, lesenes, and angle buttresses highlight these divisions which repeat, at a tighter scale, the tripartite division of the entire facade. At the center bay of the principal level a bold Tudor arch gives access to the recessed entrance porch. Large torus moldings outline the arch. Its spandrels contain eight flat panels with molded Tudor arches, mullions, and paterae. The crown of the entrance arch is surmounted by a cartouche bearing a fleur-de-lis and framed by acanthus leaves.

The spandrels of the arch are linked to the upper story by twin flat-paneled pilasters. The pilasters rise from foliate bases to terminate in gabled aediculae. Each aedicule is decorated with a small trefoil arch. The center bay of the third and fourth stories of the frontispiece each carry five vertical strips of windows. Each consists of a two-light transom above a four-light double casement. Between the buttresses and pilasters the two narrower side bays have three-light transoms above six-over-six sash. The transoms carry flat arches built of single soldier courses.

Between the third and fourth stories of the center bay of the frontispiece runs a bas-relief band of Gothic letters spelling out the names of esteemed pedagogic models: Emerson, Webster, Calhoun, and so on. At the attic level a flat-paneled plaque carries the school name, also in bas-relief Gothic letters. Finial cresting caps the attic parapet. A center arched shield has replaced the original attic cartouche with its supporting balustrade above the parapet.

The school's principal entrance, signaled by the Tudor arch of the frontispiece, is through flat-paneled double doors flanked by flat-paneled single leaf doors. A wainscot connects the doors along the inner wall of the entrance porch. The entrance hall is trimmed with molded plaster and includes chairail, picture molding, and cornice. The walls carry flat panels outlined by torus molding enriched by garlanded reeding. One panel contains a plaque commemorating the founding of the school. The ceiling features a plaster bas-relief medallion from which a circular chandelier is suspended by metal chains. The medallion has radiating lines of bellflowers alternating with radiating spokes. The spokes are linked along the circumference by festoons. The floor of the entrance hall is covered with grey and cream-colored tiles, square tiles from a Greek fret border along the perimeters of the hall. The remaining tiles are hexagonal and regularly laid.

A bold Tudor arch, echoing the frontispiece entrance arch, divides the entrance hall from the long hall running the length of the building. The arch springs from chairail level and is enlived by a flat-paneled soffit. The molding of the chairail caps thick posts which support the arch.

In plan the building is E-shaped with the central circulation spine running parallel to the main facade along each level. Classrooms, offices, restrooms, and storage spaces open off the hall at regularly spaced intervals. The central eastern wing contains a two-storey auditorium. The auditorium is entered, at the principal level, through a triple set of flat paneled double doors located on the interior wall opposite the main entrance hall. The double doors are joined by a molded chairail. Two pilasters rise to frame the doors with a three-bay entablature with a heavy cornice and blind frieze.

The auditorium has a seating capacity estimated at 1650. It is two stories high and six bays deep. At the main level there are three sections of wooden and cast iron seats leading in thirty-one gradated rows to the elevated stage along the eastern wall of the building. The broad proscenium arch is trimmed with acanthus, bead-and-reel, and garland reed moldings. The walls flanking the stage have flat rectangular panels outlined with Greek fret moldings. Rectilinear grilles with elaborate plaster ornamentation screen the organ pipes to either side of the stage. The lowest register of grilles is composed of a decorative lattice while the upper registers have beaded colonettes. The wings contain spiral cast iron stairs. A balcony overlooks the main level of the auditorium. The balcony fascia is flat-paneled with Greek fret borders. The center of the fascia is decorated with a victory wreath superimposed across a double swag anchored by garlanded torches.

North and south of the auditorium are enclosed dog-leg staircases. Translucent glass blocks fill large windows, originally unglazed, at the eastern landings of the stairs. A cafeteria and a library are housed below the auditorium in a space originally occupied by a gymnasium and an indoor swimming pool.

Many classrooms have retained the built-in glazed bookcases, paneled walls, chairail molding, and framed black chalk boards that characterized the classrooms at the building's opening. While most of the classrooms are similar there is a single exceptionally well-lit and airy room occuping the entire attic level of the frontispiece. Remnants of an innovative telephone system remain in several classrooms. These small wired boxes are forerunners of the intercom system standardized much later in the century.

At the lowest level a cast iron spiral staircase, just north of the main entrance to the basement, winds down into a below-grade boiler room. A coal cellar is adjacent.

Hugh White, principal of the firm of White, Streeter, and Chamberlain, had an extensive local practice in the 1920's and 1930's. The High School, acclaimed at its opening as "one of the finest specimens of school architecture in the State," is not only an individually distinctive monument but part of the larger architectural fabric that White's oeuvre comprises. The designs of a single accomplished architect like White form an environmental legacy; to subtract one element is to diminish the whole. The High School is in a very real sense a resource belonging to the entire community. Even the building's elevations belong, democractically, to every one who passes by them.

The Gastonia High School building itself represents an investment of time, money and energy. To recycle the structure is the only prudunt response to the transfer of the student body. Gaston County is fortunate to have this opportunity to set a precedent in the expanding field of large-scale adaptive re-use. Through intelligent and farsighted recycling of the High School, Gastonia can emerge as one of the most aggressive leaders in the municipal revitalization movement sweeping the North Carolina Piedmont.

Mary Alice Dixon Hinson
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at Charlotte

10 July 1981