

Watterson School

Listing Reference Number: 92001354

Listing Date: October 08,1992

Address, City, County: 1422 W. 74th Street, Cleveland, Cuyahoga

Listing Criteria: This property is listed in the National Register under ***Criterion C*** for its distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, because it represents the work of a master, possesses high artistic values, or because it represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction (e.g. a historic district).

Area of Significance: ARCHITECTURE

Resource Type: BUILDING

Watterson School

Built in 1906-7 Watterson School is significant in the area of architecture under Criterion C. It is a good example of turn-of-the-century Cleveland public school architecture by virtue of its Second Renaissance Revival architectural detailing, its unusual L-shaped plan, which provides for monumental siting on a prominent street corner, and its role in the transition of Cleveland public school architecture from late nineteenth century mill construction to fireproof school buildings.

Architectural detailing: The school forms a classic five-part facade with an orientation toward the corner of Detroit Avenue and West 74th Street. The entrance section is given unusual prominence through its form and architectural detailing. First, there is a broad terrace in front of the building executed in red brick with buff glazed terra cotta trim. There are three sets of doors instead of one and the centermost entrance is recessed in a treatment reminiscent of a Romanesque cathedral, with tympanum and a series of staggered recessed arches. A bracketed pediment above the main entrance recalls the Italianate styling of earlier Cleveland schools, except that the detailing here is terra cotta, not wood. The second floor areas above the main entrance and on each of the end pavilions are given an enriched treatment through the use of blind arcading, formed by a series of terra cotta arches the windows.

The typical Cleveland school of this era was a blocky rectangular mass with a brick exterior accented by a minimum of stone trim. Watterson, Doan, and Memorial are the only three Cleveland elementary schools from this turn-of-the-century era to use classically-inspired detailing to such an extent. Watterson is the only one of these three that uses contrasting dark red brick with buff glazed terra cotta. The other two have similar buff-colored brick for a monochromatic effect.

Unusual Plan: While many Cleveland schools from this period share similar or identical floor plans even though their exterior treatments may vary, Watterson has a plan that is unique among Cleveland school buildings. Its L-shaped plan emphasizes the building's placement on a busy street corner, Detroit Avenue being one of the major arteries from Cleveland's downtown. Most Cleveland public schools were situated on residential streets for reasons of cost and safety. The shape of the building results in the main entrance being placed at a 45-degree angle to the street corner, embracing a park-like front lawn filled with shrubbery and shade trees. This shape also results in a grand entrance vestibule with a series of arched openings leading to a highly unusual octagonal two-story auditorium space set in the crux of the "L". The auditorium features its main entrance opposite the front doorway with a stage at its opposing end. The auditorium also features a central skylight.

The L-shaped floor plan also results in unusual triangular stairways formed from the angled spaces where the auditorium meets the classroom wings. No other Cleveland public school has this type of stairway, which was feasible only because of the small size of Watterson School; larger schools would have needed larger and more conventional stairways. Another striking interior feature is the curved hallway on the second floor. Instead of angling

around the ell, the hallway sweeps from one end of the building to the other in a single unbroken gently curve.

Transition to fireproof construction: Doan School, dating from 1904, was Cleveland's first architecturally significant fireproof elementary school building. Like all elementary schools from this era, it was designed by Frank S. Barnum, Cleveland school architect from 1895-1917. Barnum's earlier mill construction buildings were broad rectangular buildings that featured overhanging eaves and massive hipped roofs punctuated by elaborate gables. Often these third or fourth floor spaces contained large auditorium rooms. Concern for fire safety led to the abandonment of this plan by 1904. Two other Barnum elementary schools from this era, Fruitland and Hodge, both erected in 1904, resemble the earlier mill buildings except that they are missing the larger hipped roofs because of their avoidance of the wood framing necessary to economically create such features. In Doan, Barnum first developed the formula of a classically-inspired five-part facade and the abundant use of terra cotta details to create a sense of monumentality lacking in schools such as Hodge and Fruitland. Watterson, dating from 1907, was a refinement of the Doan concept, using contrasting brick and stone and further developing the classical five-part elevation to have the main entrance placed at a 45-degree angle.

Watterson is also significant in the transition to fireproof construction because of its treatment of the auditorium space. Mill construction elementary schools placed these large assembly spaces in the attic formed by the hipped roofs as trusses could be employed to create vast open spaces and there was not the requirement for large windows, which classrooms demanded. However, auditoriums on the third floor were a fire safety hazard due to accessibility. Doan School placed this facility in the basement, not an attractive location due to height constraints and the need for frequent column supports for the upper floors. Watterson was Barnum's first and only use of an octagonal auditorium placed on the first floor in the center of the building. Barnum's Memorial School, erected in 1910, has a large first floor auditorium of a more conventional rectangular shape.

The Architect: Frank Barnum (1851-1927) had a successful practice with the firm of Coburn & Barnum from 1878-1897, and he continued to design commercial blocks such as the Caston Building during his tenure as Cleveland school architect from 1895-1917. Barnum designed 75 schools from Cleveland, only 31 of which still stand. Of his elementary schools, only Doan and Memorial School approach Watterson in monumentality. Watterson Elementary School was illustrated in the 1911 issue of Ohio Architect and Builder, presumably because of its

Education on June 19, 1900, Superintendent Lewis Jones spoke of the "grave necessity for a larger building on the Watterson Street property." He stated that "the Board now owns a 6-room frame building on this lot. It should be replaced by an 8-12 room building of substantial character."

The school site was part of an undeveloped 10-acre tract on the south side of Detroit Road in 1881, which was owned by Jane E. Jones. At this time, Detroit was lined by a series of widely spaced residences and small farms. By 1898 the site had been subdivided, but only one house had been erected near the school. Watterson School is contemporary with the houses and commercial buildings along Detroit Avenue. In 1969 houses south of the school were demolished to make way for a massive addition, known as Watterson-Lake Elementary School. This addition took the place of Lake Elementary School, a nearby small frame school. This older frame school was also designed by Barnum and has since been demolished.

When the new addition opened, both portions of Watterson-Lake were used for school purposes. The second floor of the 1907 portion was closed in the early 1980's, and a few years later, the entire older portion of the school was abandoned. Since that time, only the 1969 section has functioned as a school. The addition and the 1906-07 original section count as a single contributing building (National Register Bulletin 16-A, p. 17).

Period of Significance: The period of significance of the nominated property does not extend beyond the date of construction of the original Barnum-designed school in 1906-07.

NOTE:

1. Memorial School was erected in 1910 on the site of the Collingwood Elementary School, which was destroyed by fire on March 4, 1908. 174 lives were lost in that fire, evoking national attention to the issue of fireproof school design.