Fourteenth Street School

In 1922, school architect C. R. Faw designed the Fourteenth Street School, which was built to educate East Winston-Salem’s African-American school children from grades one to eight. Over the next year, the Greensboro-based firm of J. S. Crouse built the Classical Revival brick school building. The school was located on a forty-acre lot at the southeast corner of Fourteenth and Cameron streets. The facility originally included thirteen classrooms, a library, a medical clinic, office space, locker rooms, and an auditorium/gymnasium with space for more than 800 people.

Construction of the Fourteenth Street School was part of a city-wide school building program funded by a $1.8 million bond issue. The goal of this program was to bring modern school facilities to children in all parts of Winston-Salem, which had seen its population more than double between 1910 and 1920. African-American schools and their grounds, including Fourteenth Street School, Kimberley Park School, and Columbia Heights High, were conceived of as neighborhood recreational facilities, as well as educational institutions.

The Board of Aldermen provided such amenities in Winston-Salem’s traditionally African-American neighborhoods as a way to reinforce racial segregation. On April 25, 1922, The Twin City Daily Sentinel reported under the headline “Plan for School and Park Reservations Shows Each Section to be Supplied: Segregation Plan”, … just a few weeks ago the board of aldermen passed a resolution providing a means of relieving forever any possibility of there ever arising a race problem in Winston-Salem. … Definite plans are forming to give [the African-American] districts every public convenience …. It will be noted that the plans for the school facilities have already been tentatively arranged.

Five months later, on September 20, 1922, The Twin City Daily Sentinel’s article on Fourteenth Street School provided evidence of the plan’s implementation, noting, “The property will be considered a center for the colored people of that part of the city. Everything necessary toward making it an ideal recreational and educational center will be done.”

Shortly after the school opened, an athletic field, tennis courts, and playground equipment were added to the original lot. In the early 1930s, local residents donated $500 to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to fund construction of a swimming pool. The pool was hugely popular. The site was subsequently chosen as one of three in Winston-Salem for a second WPA project aimed at improving recreational facilities for African Americans. The WPA added picnic tables, grills, outdoor shelters, public toilets,
a skating rink, a bowling alley, and a horseshoe-pitching court.

The Fourteenth Street School quickly proved to be a vital part of the East Fourteenth Street neighborhood, and the student population grew. The first addition opened in 1925, just one year after the school was put into service. A four-story addition, housing twenty new classrooms, was constructed in 1929. The first principal, Ulyses Simpson Reynolds, served until his death in 1944. John D. Ashley led the school as principal from 1944 until its closing. Winston-Salem’s Ashley Elementary School was named in his honor.

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools began busing students to better racially integrate schools during the 1971-72 school year. Nevertheless, the Fourteenth Street School remained an important institution for East Winston’s African-American community until it closed in 1973. The school board’s instructional supervisors used the building as office space until 1976, and the school was demolished in 1977.

The Fourteenth Street School served the important purpose of educating young people and preparing them for adulthood. Many students went on to become prominent local citizens and business leaders; a few even became known nationally. Prominent graduates include professional athletes Harold “Happy” Hairston of the Los Angeles Lakers and Talmadge “Ike” Hill of the National Football League. William “Bill” Bell was elected Mayor of the City of Durham in 2001, while Isaac Howard became President of the Winston-Salem Chapter of the NAACP. Martha Flowers played Bess during the European tour of Porgy and Bess in the 1950s. Primarily, however, students were taught character. As one alumnae noted, “We learned to be on time. We learned self-control. We learned to focus through the lessons …. We learned to take care of whatever we had. We also learned there is a time to learn and a time to play. … We learned to read …. We learned to do things right the first time. Finally, we learned to be prepared.”