

National Register of Historic Places

John T. West School
Norfolk, Virginia

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They have two wood panels under six lights and are surmounted by transoms.

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Abstract:

John T. West School, built in 1906, is an early 20th century African-American school, originally constructed in the Huntersville neighborhood in Norfolk County. Upon the 1911 annexation of the Huntersville neighborhood by the city of Norfolk, John T. West School became a combined elementary and high school, holding the first public African-American high school classes in the city of Norfolk.¹ A subsequent addition in 1913 doubled the size of the school and allowed for additional space for the new high school classes. In 1916, the city of Norfolk purchased the Norfolk Mission College, a private high school, and moved the John T. West high school to the Norfolk Mission College. John T. West continued holding elementary school classes until its closure in 1980. The building is presently used as school storage.

History:

The John T. West School, located in the Huntersville neighborhood in Norfolk, Virginia, is an historically significant African-American school dating from the early twentieth century. It is rich in African-American history and reflects the progress made in the education of African-American school children in the early twentieth century. It is the first public African-American school in the City of Norfolk to hold high school classes for African-American school children.

John T. West School was constructed in 1906 in the predominantly African-American Barboursville neighborhood located east of the Huntersville neighborhood, both of which have been combined presently into the Olde Huntersville neighborhood. Originally, these two neighborhoods were located in Norfolk County, just north of the city of Norfolk. The school served the county elementary African-American school children in this vicinity. There was another Norfolk county school constructed the same year for Caucasian children in the Lafayette Residence Park neighborhood, located north of the Huntersville and Barboursville, on the north side of the Lafayette River.

The school was designed by William T. Zepp, a local architect. He also designed five other schools for the City of Portsmouth and Norfolk County. Charles F. Harper was the general contractor of the school.²

1 Henry S. Rorer, History of Norfolk Public Schools, 1918-1968, Norfolk: Henry S. Rorer, 1968, 129.

2 School Date stone.

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Unlike other schools for African-American school children found in the counties of the Commonwealth of Virginia, John T. West School was constructed in brick. Most public African-American schools were of frame construction, served students of all ages, and accommodated the entire county. In a survey of public schools in Virginia, schoolhouses were described as "wretched buildings."³ Most had no plumbing and were in a deplorable condition. John T. West was constructed in a predominantly African-American neighborhood to serve the surrounding African-American community and similar communities also had schools for African-American students in other regions of Norfolk County. John T. West School, with its brick construction and two-stories, was an improvement in school design for minorities. Compared to other schools constructed during the same period in Norfolk County, it is approximately the same size, though slightly smaller and plainer in form and lacking interior restrooms.

John T. West School was originally named Tanner's Creek School No. 4, with a colored designation. In 1911, it was renamed the Barbourville School when the city of Norfolk annexed the Huntersville and Barbourville neighborhoods.⁴

Shortly after the 1911 Huntersville neighborhood annexation by the City of Norfolk, the City of Norfolk public schools were renamed for notable persons. This was suggested by Supervisor J. Paul Spence. The Barbourville School was renamed John T. West School, for John T. West, the Norfolk county School Superintendent. David G. Jacox, principal, was instrumental in having the school named in honor of John T. West School.⁵ John T. West was the first Superintendent of Schools for Norfolk County after the Civil War and was instrumental in having schools constructed for children of all races.⁶ (David G. Jacox, a graduate of the Norfolk Mission College, would also later be memorialized by the city of Norfolk Schools, by having a middle school named after him.)⁷

³ M. V. O'Shea, Public Education in Virginia: Report to the Educational Commission of Virginia of a Survey of the Public Educational System of the State, Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia, 1908, 206.

⁴ Rorer, 203.

⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁶ Lyon G. Tyler, Men of Mark in Virginia: Ideals of American Life. A Collection of Biographies of the Leading Men in the State, Washington, DC: Men of Mark Publishing Company, 1906, 407.

⁷ Rorer, 299.

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The John T. West School gained significance in its earliest years. In 1909, the graduates of the Cumberland Street School, an African-American public school, petitioned the city of Norfolk School Board to implement high school classes that were unavailable in Norfolk's public African-American schools. The Norfolk Mission College, established by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1883, was a private African-American high school in Norfolk that offered a broad curriculum of high school classes. The Norfolk Mission College was tuition free and only requested that students pay \$0.25 per week, but it was not mandatory and the school did not turn students away who could not pay.⁸

In 1911, the principal of the Barbourville School, the soon to be John T. West School, David G. Jacox, also requested of the School Board that high school classes be held for African-Americans and that he be "allowed to introduce studies of a higher grade." Then city of Norfolk School Superintendent, R. A. Dobie implemented high school classes for African-American school children and later expanded the John T. West School. An addition designed by the short-lived firm of Browne and Lehman was constructed to the south and cost \$31,295.00 in 1913.⁹

John T. West School was known for having stronger literary courses than any other African-American high school in the South. Students had a curriculum of English, History, Science, Latin, Domestic Arts, and Mathematics. The first high school class graduated from John T. West High School in June 1914.¹⁰

The John T. West School also boasts the first African-American high school football team in Norfolk. In the fall 1914, Chester "Robbie" Robinson organized and coached the first football team for John T. West High School. The team was financed by the sale of season tickets and each team member had to purchase his own uniform. There were no cheerleaders for the team,

⁸ Rorer, 195.

⁹ John E. Wells and Robert E. Dalton, *The Virginia Architects 1835-1955: A Biographical Dictionary*, Richmond, VA: New South Architectural Press, 1997, 50.

¹⁰ D. G. Jacox, "Brief History of Norfolk Colored Public Schools," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Vol. XXII, No. 32.

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but the team was quite successful and won its first game against the Royal Social Club.¹¹

The John T. West High School only held classes in the John T. West School until 1916. The City of Norfolk purchased the Norfolk Mission College in 1916 for \$15,000 and converted it into a public African-American High School. In 1922, a new school was constructed and named Booker T. Washington High School. Classes moved from the Norfolk Mission College building to the new school at that point.¹² John T. West continued to hold elementary classes for students until 1980 when it was closed. It is presently used as storage.

¹¹ Rorer, 222.

¹² Ibid., 195.

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Jacox, Prof. D. G. "Brief History of Norfolk Colored Public Schools." Norfolk Journal and Guide, 12 August 1922, p.1.

O'Shea, M. V. Public Education in Virginia: Report to the Educational Commission of Virginia of a Survey of the Public Educational System of the State. Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia, 1908.

Rorer, Henry S. History of Norfolk Public Schools, 1918-1968. Norfolk: Henry S. Rorer, 1968.

Tyler, Lyon G. Men of Mark in Virginia: Ideals of American Life, A Collection of Biographies of the Leading Men in the State. Washington, DC: Men of Mark Publishing Company, 1906.

Wells, John E. and Robert E. Dalton. The Virginia Architects 1835-1955: A Biographical Dictionary. Richmond, VA: New South Architectural Press, 1997.

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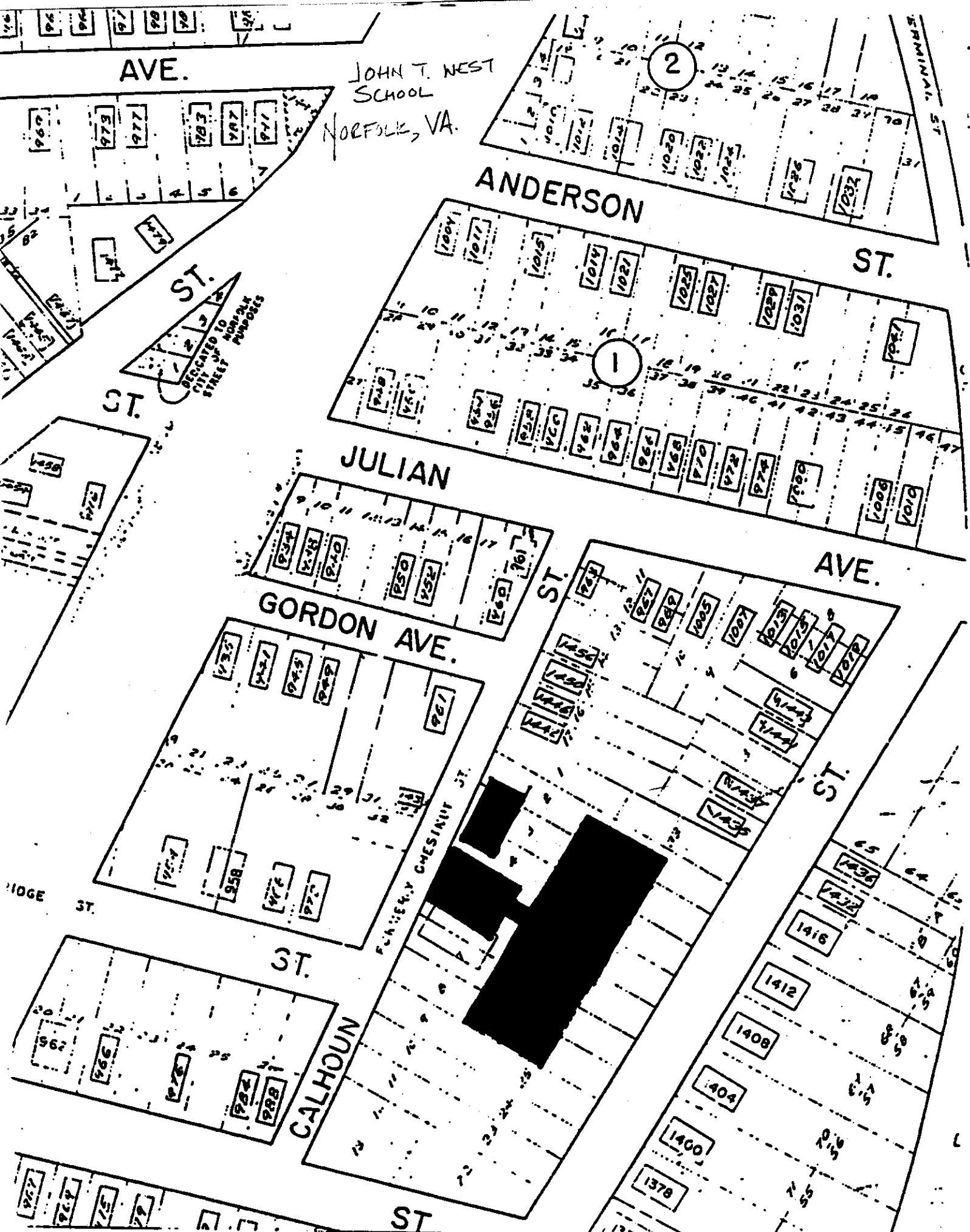
Verbal Boundary Description:

John T. West School and its site are bound by Bolton Street on the east, Denhart Street to the south, Calhoun Street to the west and the dwellings and their respective lots marked 1442 Calhoun Street and 1435 Bolton Street to the north.

Legal Description: 1 to 9 and 25 to 33 256.8 ft (Section J01, Plate 0677)

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries established for John T. West and its site are the original school boundaries established at the construction of the school.



Source: City House Plates #30

Scale: 1" = 100'

North

