

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Bruce High School
Other names/site number Bruce Community Center
Name of related multiple property listing N/A
(Remove "N/A" if property is part of a multiple property listing and add name)

2. Location

Street & Number: 801 Vernon Street
City or town: Dyersburg State: TN County: Dyer
Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A Zip: 38024

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D

Signature of certifying official/Title: **Date**
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting Official: **Date**

Title: **State of Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**
Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

 Signature of the Keeper

 Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	3	sites
0	1	structures
0	2	objects
1	6	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION/school

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium; sports facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium; sports facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT: International style

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Brick, concrete, asphalt

Narrative Description

Bruce High School is located at 801 Vernon Street in Dyersburg, Dyer County, Tennessee, in the city’s historically African American neighborhood. The school is sited southeast and across the railroad tracks from downtown Dyersburg (NR listed 2/28/1991). Constructed in 1951-1952, the nominated building is the third building to house Bruce High School at this location. Reflecting the International style trends of mid-20th century school architecture, the building’s profile is low, painted bricks clad the exterior walls, and the asphalt-covered roofs are flat. The foyer, hallway, classroom spaces, cafeteria, and music room are covered by a one-story-height roof, while the gymnasium – which comprises a large portion of the building, particularly the southeastern section – is capped by a taller roofline. The primary (north) façade is asymmetrical and contains the historic and current entrance to the building through a small recessed porch in the east section. Full-height walls, each with square perforations, project from either side of the recessed porch and enclose the stairs. A classroom wing with most of its windows infilled comprises the west section of the primary façade. There was one addition to the building, at the rear of the gymnasium, c.1960. After the school closed due to integration in 1972, city authorities razed sections of the building, resulting in the current footprint. The building’s original metal sash windows have been replaced or filled in with masonry.

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In 2011, the city replaced the gym floor with similar wood flooring to accommodate its use as a community center. Non-contributing resources include a flagpole, a commemorative marker, playground, carport, baseball diamond, and basketball court.

Site and Setting

Bruce High School retains its location and setting in the historically African American Bruce neighborhood. A result of race-based residential segregation during the Jim Crow era, the Bruce neighborhood remains an enclave separated from the rest of Dyersburg by railroad tracks to the north and northwest and the North Fork of the Forked Deer River to the south (See *Figure 1*). A survey of historic newspaper articles indicates periodic flooding from the river often postponed school operations at Bruce, including during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. The nominated building was closed at least once due to flooding, in February 1956.¹ The location of the nominated building in the Bruce neighborhood, and its setting in an area prone to flooding, speaks to the historic trend of southern Black communities being relegated to separate places – away from white residences and businesses – that were also considered marginal (e.g., flood prone).

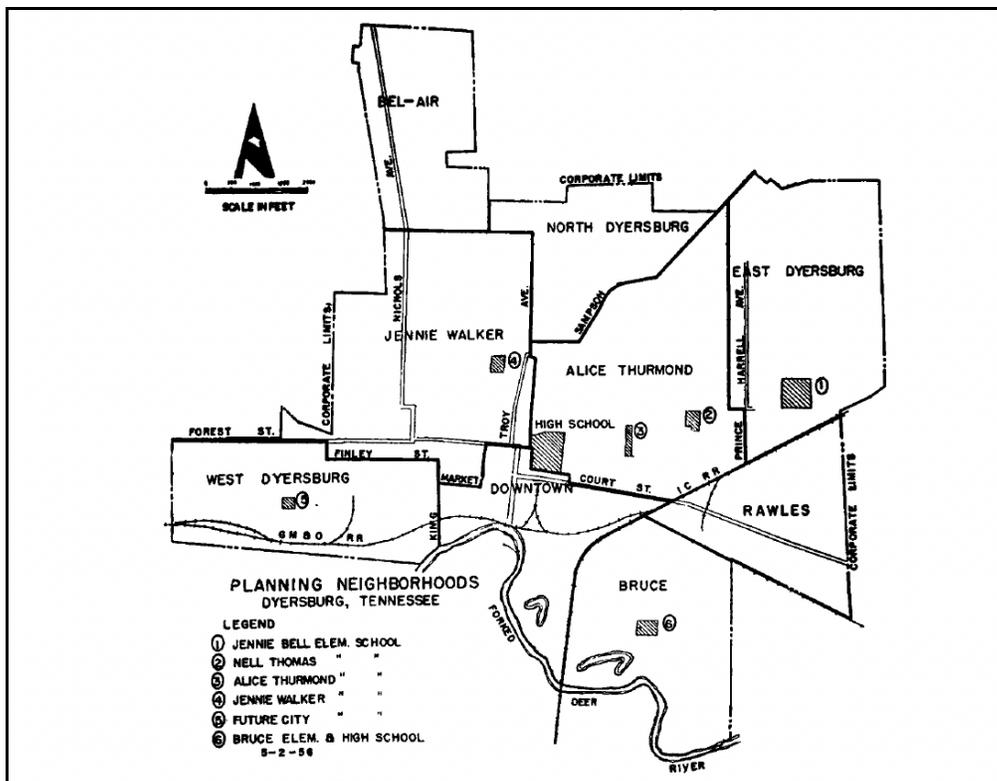


Figure 1. A neighborhood map of Dyersburg created c.1957 to aid in planning for urban renewal projects. Note the railroad tracks that create the western border and a portion of the neighborhood’s northern border, while the Forked Deer River creates the southern border.

¹ “Davis Highway Flooded: Strong Current Near Dyersburg Threatens to Ruin Roadway,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), April 15, 1927; “In Tennessee,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), January 21, 1951; “Dyersburg Flood Is Still Rising,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 2, 1956.

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Bruce High School is located in the southwestern section of the neighborhood. The building faces north onto Vernon Street, on the other side of which is a gravel parking lot used by the Bruce Community Center (located in the nominated building). Immediately east of the building is a playground and baseball field; there is also a freestanding metal carport adjacent to the building's east elevation near the southeast corner. To the west of the Bruce High School building is a basketball court. These non-contributing resources are part of the community center's recreation complex. South of the building is shaded greenspace bordered to the south by Grant Street, a residential street with single-family homes.

Historic photos indicate the space between the building's primary façade and Vernon Street is largely the same as it was during the period of significance. Manicured boxwoods line the front of the building. Four wide concrete steps with a centrally-located metal handrail lead from the street to a concrete landing that fronts Bruce High School's main entrance. Adjacent and west of this area are two spaces laid with brick pavers. Each brick is engraved with the names and graduation years of alumni who purchased a brick through the Bruce High School Alumni Association to support the beginning of the school's museum (in one of the building's classrooms) in 2012. Near these is an upright, black granite marker (non-contributing) approximately 3.5 feet tall memorializing Bruce High School. The alumni association installed the marker shortly after the brick pavers. Near the marker is a non-contributing metal flagpole. Though the school's original flagpole was located in this exact location, it was replaced at an unknown date for use by the community center.

1. Bruce High School, c.1951, c.1952, c.1960, Contributing

The gymnasium at Bruce High School was built c.1951 as a freestanding building. After the school's main classroom building burned in the summer of 1951, the new classroom building was constructed around the extant gym. After Bruce High School closed due to integration in 1972, city authorities razed sections on both ends of the building's primary façade/north elevation (See *Figures 2 & 3*). These sections included classrooms and the school library. The building has housed the Bruce Recreation Center since the mid-1970s. Many of the substantial changes to the extant building occurred to accommodate this adaptive reuse. These include alterations to windows throughout the building; removal of wooden bleachers that once lined the east and west walls of the gymnasium; replacement of the metal gymnasium windows with vinyl windows; and replacement of the gymnasium floor.

EXTERIOR

The Bruce High School building is a one story, painted brick-clad building with flat rooflines. The shape of the building is best described as a rectangle with a small, c.1960 addition at the rear (south). There are two distinct sections within the 1951 building. The one-story section with foyer, hallway, classrooms, cafeteria, and music room comprises the west and north elevations. The gymnasium, with its higher roofline, comprises the majority of the interior space; the gym's east wall creates the east elevation of the building. The c.1960 addition to the rear of the gym is brick-clad with a one-story roofline.

Many of the building's original metal windows have been replaced or infilled with masonry. These windows retain their original concrete window sills on the exterior walls. Photographs indicate alterations of the gymnasium windows began during the period of significance. The gymnasium windows were eventually replaced with vinyl windows c.2010s.

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Figure 2. c.1957 photograph of Bruce High School. Photographer unknown. Image on display in the Heritage Room developed by the Bruce High School Alumni Association.



Figure 3. c.1957 photograph of Bruce High School. Image displayed on Dan Burch photography website.

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Primary Façade/North Elevation

The primary façade/north elevation is divided into two sections. The east section contains the historic and current entrance to the building. The entry door is reached through a centrally-located recessed porch inset approximately four feet from the rest of the façade. Two full-height, brick walls project approximately 1.5 feet from the flanking façade to define the recessed porch. Four square perforations are arranged vertically in each of these walls. The walls enclose five concrete stairs that ascend from the concrete pad that fronts the school to the landing that precedes the doorway. The projecting walls support a flat roof that extends from above the recessed porch and covers these stairs. There is a metal handrail in the middle of the stairs as well as on each of the projecting walls. The floor of the recessed porch is concrete, the ceiling is wood. Two low, concentric, half-circle concrete stairs lead to the double-leaf, glass and metal doors. On each side of the recessed porch are windows that have been filled with concrete blocks. Within these filled spaces, one vertical, single-pane, metal frame window has been inserted on the east side. Two narrower windows of the same style and design have been inserted on the west side.

The west section of the primary façade/north elevation sits approximately 1.5 feet back from the east section and aligns with the building's classroom hallway. This section of the building appears bookended by the projecting porch walls of the east section and an attached brick column at the west end. The space between contains two window spaces that have been filled with concrete blocks. The largest window space is located closest to the entrance. As indicated by historic photographs and the concrete window sills that remain, within this space was once a large multilight window. The window space closest to the brick column is much smaller; its original width also indicated by the remaining sills. A fixed glass pane is located in the upper portion of the original window space.

West Elevation

The west elevation is divided into two sections. The north section projects approximately seven feet from the rest of the west elevation and contains a centrally located entrance to the building. This entrance dates to the razing of sections of the building, as the hallway it caps was once longer. The doorway with double-leaf glass and metal doors caps the west end of the building's interior hallway. The doorway is accessed through a small portico with an asphalt-covered front gable roof. Vinyl siding covers the gable field. Supporting the portico are four square brick columns, two of which are engaged. A brick wall runs between the two northernmost columns to partially enclose the portico. Five brick steps lead from the grassy area west of the building to the portico landing. On either side of the steps are stepped brick wing walls. A wheelchair ramp enters the portico from the south, running alongside the wall of the north section. Here, there is a metal handrail attached to the wall. A stepped brick wing wall encloses the other side of the ramp.

The south section of the west elevation contains three window spaces of the same size that have been infilled with concrete blocks. As indicated by the concrete window sills that remain, within each of these spaces were large multilight windows.

South Elevation

On the south/rear elevation there are multiple rooflines and the c.1960 addition to the building. The west section of the south elevation contains an auxiliary room. Within this section there is a centrally located, single-leaf metal door that is no longer used. The doorway is inset approximately two feet from the wall,

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creating a small recessed porch. There are two small, narrow window spaces on either side of the recessed porch that have been infilled with bricks. Five concrete steps lead from the ground to the landing in front of the door.

The east section of the south elevation is partially covered by the c.1960 addition. The addition has a lower roofline than the original portions of the building, partially due to the southward slope of the land on which it was built. The south wall of the gym is visible as it rises above the addition.

c.1960 Addition

On the west elevation there is a single-leaf metal door located near the addition's connection with the gym wall. The doorway is inset approximately 2.5 feet from the wall, creating a small recessed porch with a concrete floor that is nearly flush with the ground. South of the doorway, there are three small window spaces located in the upper portion of the wall that have been infilled with brick. The concrete sills remain.

The south elevation of the addition contains three section. In the west section is one small window space located in the upper portion of the wall that has been infilled with brick. The concrete sill remains. The central section contains a single-leaf metal door. A concrete ramp leads from the ground to the door. The east section projects approximately 3.5 feet from the rest of the elevation. It contains one small window in the upper portion of the wall that has been infilled with brick. The concrete sill remains.

The east elevation of the c.1960 addition is similar to the addition's west elevation. There is a single-leaf metal door located near the addition's connection with the gym wall. The doorway is inset approximately 2.5 feet from the wall, creating a small recessed porch with a concrete floor a few inches above the ground. South of the doorway, there are four small window spaces located in the upper portion of the wall that are infilled with brick. The concrete sills remain.

East Elevation

The east elevation has two sections. The east wall of the gymnasium creates the south section. Near the south corner of the wall, there is a small window space in the upper portion of the wall that has been infilled with brick. Below this is another infilled window. Along the rest of the south section are four large, evenly spaced windows in the upper half of the wall. Each of the windows contain three vertical panels within black vinyl frames installed c.2010s. The north section of the east elevation projects approximately one foot from the gymnasium wall and contains an administrative office. Near the north corner of the wall there is one vertically-oriented window with a single pane and metal frame. A water fountain has been installed near the middle of the wall to accommodate the use of the adjacent playground and ball field.

INTERIOR

The nominated building's extant interior space includes Bruce High School's former administrative offices, restrooms, two classrooms, gymnasium and stage, cafeteria, kitchen, and music room, all of which are original to the building. The local school board added the locker rooms to the rear of the gymnasium and stage area c.1960. The gymnasium's bleachers have been removed and the flooring was replaced with similar material in 2011. Elsewhere in the building, historic photographs indicate the school's original flooring was likely vinyl-based floor tiles containing asbestos. Unless otherwise noted, the floors throughout

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most of the building are covered in c.1980s ceramic tile; the building has dropped ceilings; painted concrete block walls are located throughout; all doors are single-leaf.

Foyer/Classrooms

The historic entrance from Vernon Street opens into a foyer flanked by two small rooms. The room to the east was last used as a kindergarten classroom. The door is faux wood. Faux wood paneling covers the walls; carpet covers the floors. There is a window in the north and east walls of the room. The room on the west side of the foyer was an administrative office. The door is glass. There is a window in the north wall. In the south wall, a glass door leads to the school's vault room, where administrators kept the school's cash. The wall dividing the administrative office and the vault room has approximately a foot of open space near the ceiling. In this space there are wooden balusters.

Wood and glass trophy cases are mounted on the foyer's south brick wall. Behind the south wall of the foyer is the gymnasium. There are two double-leaf-size doorways in either side of the wall that lead into the gymnasium. Flanking the south corners of the foyer are two hallways. The hallway to the east was shortened when the east section of the building was razed. The abbreviated hallway now ends in a concrete block wall with a metal door near the south corner that leads to a storage space. The east entrance to the gymnasium is located in the south wall of the abbreviated hallway. In the north wall, a metal door leads to the men's restroom. The concrete block walls of the restroom are partially covered in faux tile.

The hallway leading west from the foyer leads to the gymnasium's west entrance, vault room, cafeteria, and elementary classroom before ending in a double-leaf glass door that leads outside. This hallway was also shortened when part of the building was razed.

In the north wall of the west hallway is a glass door that leads to the vault room. The vault room is small with no windows. In its south wall is the door that leads to the administrative office.

West of the vault room on the north side of the hallway is a former elementary classroom. The Bruce High School Alumni Association uses this space as a heritage room to tell the story of the institution and display photographs and memorabilia. The floor is covered in vinyl composition tile (VCT). Wooden display shelves have been built along the north and south walls.

West of the heritage room on the north side of the hallway is a women's restroom. A wide entryway opens from the hallway wall into a small recessed porch. In the west wall of the recessed area is a metal door that leads into the restroom. Similar to the men's restroom, the concrete block walls are partially covered in faux tile.

Cafeteria

West of the gymnasium's entrance, on the south side of the hallway is a glass door that leads into the cafeteria. Approximately seven feet west of this door is another door of the same style that also leads into the cafeteria. The floors of the cafeteria are covered in c.2010s ceramic tile. The original wood wainscoting remains and matches that seen near the building's stage area. Above the wainscoting is drywall covered in a faux plaster finish. In the cafeteria's east wall, near the south corner, double metal doors provide access to

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the gymnasium. In the south wall, a glass door leads into the music room. In the west wall, a door provides access to a small kitchen. Adjacent to this door is a serving window.

Music Room

The school's former music room is accessed through the kitchen's south wall. This room functions as the recreation center's weight room. Foam gym floor tiles cover the floor to accommodate this use. A doorway in the south wall leads to a small recessed porch with a single metal door that leads outside. West of this doorway are two small storage closets, both with metal doors. A doorway south of the exterior door leads to a small storage closet.

Gymnasium

The gymnasium contains a basketball court and stage area. The gymnasium comprises the southeastern section of the Bruce High School building. The east, west, and north walls are concrete block. The east and west walls are divided into five sections by four engaged concrete block columns. Two columns of the same style divide the north wall into three sections. The south wall of the gymnasium is wood and contains the rectangular opening to the stage in the center. The stage floor retains its original tongue-and-groove hardwood but is currently covered in carpet.

The gymnasium retains its original wood ceiling. Below the ceiling are metal roof trusses with their length running east-west. Six basketball goals with glass backboards hang from the trusses. The flooring was replaced in 2011. The original center court design was saved by the Bruce High School Alumni Association, and it is now displayed in the heritage room.

In the gymnasium's north wall, there are two double-doorways that lead into the foyer at the main/historic entrance of the building. These remain the gymnasium's primary points of ingress and egress. The proximity of the gymnasium to the main entrance of the school building speaks to the community's access to the space. Five windows are located along the east wall. Metal double doors in the west wall, near center court, lead into the cafeteria.

Backstage/Locker Room

In the south wall, there are two double-doorways flanking the stage. The east doorway opens to a landing space that precedes four concrete stairs. On the east side of this landing is a wood wall (made of the same material as the south wall of the gymnasium). In this wall, a doorway leads to a small storage room. On the west side of the landing are four wood, carpet-covered stairs that ascend to the stage. A half wall encloses these stairs, functions as a handrail, and also functions as the wall that encloses the concrete stairs. This half wall is covered in wainscoting that matches the wainscoting in the cafeteria. Beyond the concrete steps is a space with a concrete floor and a double metal door in the east wall that leads outside.

Similar to the east doorway, the doorway west of the stage opens to a landing space that precedes four concrete stairs. On the west side of this landing is a wood wall (made of the same material as the south wall of the gymnasium). In this wall, a doorway leads to a small storage room. On the east side of the landing are four wood, carpet covered stairs that ascend to the stage. A half wall encloses these stairs, functions as a handrail, and also functions as the wall that encloses the concrete stairs. This half wall is covered in

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wainscoting that matches the wainscoting in the cafeteria. Beyond the concrete steps is a space with a concrete floor and a double metal door in the west wall that leads outside. Just north of this door is a single metal door that leads to a hallway. The hallway leads south and opens into the c.1960 locker room section of the building. This section is now used by the community center as a weight room. The hallway and the former locker room are covered in rubber, weight room flooring. The walls are concrete block. The ceiling is covered in plastic paneling. A metal support pole is located within the northwest section of the room. Along the north wall of the weight room is a section that projects southward into the room and encloses the former shower area.

2. Flagpole, c.1990s, Non-contributing

The metal flagpole is located in front (north of) the school building, near the sidewalk. Though this is the location of the school's original flagpole, the pole itself was replaced c.1990s.

3. Commemorative marker, c.2000s, Non-contributing

The Bruce High School Alumni Association placed a commemorative marker in front (north) of the school building, near the sidewalk. Made of black granite, the marker is a vertical tablet with a rectangular base. The marker commemorates Bruce High School's first (1900) and last (1966) graduating classes, and the school's distinction of being the "First 'A' Rated Black High School in West Tennessee."

4. Playground, c.1980s, 2010s, Non-contributing

A children's playground is located immediately east of the school building. The now-demolished east wing of the school was previously sited here. The playground was constructed c.1980s and is part of the Bruce Community Center's outdoor recreation complex. The area is ringed with a plastic curb that holds mulch. The plastic and metal play structures themselves date to c.2010s.

5. Carport, c.2000s, Non-contributing

There is a freestanding, rectangular carport set adjacent to the school building's east elevation. It is made of aluminum poles that hold up a bow-shaped roof made of metal panels. It sits on a rectangular concrete slab and is used by the community center as a picnic shelter.

6. Baseball diamond, c.1980s, Non-contributing

A baseball diamond is located east of the Bruce High School building and non-contributing playground. The now-demolished east wing of the school was sited here. The dirt diamond is enclosed by a chain-link fence. Dugout shelters and aluminum bleachers are located on either side of a concrete block announcer's box sited directly behind home plate. The announcer's box is elevated and accessed via six concrete steps leading to single-leaf wood door.

7. Basketball court, c.1990s, Non-contributing

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An asphalt basketball court is located west of the school in the general area where the school's west classroom wing was prior to it being demolished. A chain-link fence encloses the court.

Integrity

The Bruce High School building retains integrity of location and setting in the historically African American Bruce neighborhood southeast of downtown Dyersburg. Though outmigration of the population has affected the neighborhood's building stock, it remains an area of mostly single-family residences and small church buildings. The Bruce High School building's extant place in the Bruce neighborhood conveys the historic racial segregation that dictated where Black communities and institutions formed, as well as the separate facilities in which Black children obtained an education.

The feeling of "separateness" still imparted by the Bruce neighborhood also speaks to the school's role in the lives of all Bruce neighborhood residents regardless of age, and elevates the importance of the building's design that incorporated large, flexible spaces (the gymnasium and cafeteria) that made the building conducive to community use. The neighborhood being set apart from other parts of the Dyersburg municipality highlights the role of the then-modern gymnasium and stage as a large, flexible community space where neighborhood residents and other Black Dyer Countians gathered to celebrate milestones, showcase their talents, entertain, and strategize for the continued success of their communities during Jim Crow.

Alterations to the windows of the building, specifically a partial infill of the original gymnasium windows with concrete blocks, began during the period of significance. The infill speaks to the evolution of the building's materials to match the needs of the community center. Other substantial changes occurred after the period of significance during the building's transition from a school to a recreation center and include the razing of building sections by the city following local school system integration; window infill and replacement; and floor replacements. These changes do affect the building's design, workmanship, and materials to varying degrees but have enabled the building to remain in service to the neighborhood as a community space. Additionally, the building's primary façade and extant interior spaces – gymnasium, stage, cafeteria, music room, elementary classroom, locker room, and restrooms – convey significant evidence of the building's original design, workmanship, and materials, enough so to elicit integrity of feeling and association with the 1951 to 1972 period of significance.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

N/A

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black

EDUCATION

SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance

1951-1972

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Fumbanks, C.F. (architect)

L & M Construction Co. (contractor)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The Bruce High School building located in Dyersburg, Dyer County, Tennessee, is locally significant under Criterion A in the areas of Black heritage, education history, and social history. The nominated building is the third building and only extant physical iteration of Bruce High School, the only place Black Dyer Countians could obtain a secondary education during the Jim Crow era. As such, the building features prominently in Dyer County’s history, and the development and longevity of Dyer County’s Black communities. The school’s location in the historically Black neighborhood southeast of downtown Dyersburg, across the railroad tracks in a low-lying area prone to flooding from the Forked Deer River, speaks to the segregation of the Jim Crow era and provides the physical context for the significance of Bruce High School as a haven, anchor, and point of pride for the local African American community. Though the academic spaces were constructed to replace an earlier classroom building that burned, the earliest section of the building is the gymnasium, constructed as part of Tennessee’s mid-20th century attempt to improve Black school facilities and prevent integration. Despite school officials having built the gymnasium to maintain the status quo, the new facility provided Bruce High School with a spacious, modern center that proved a boon to some school programs; enabled Bruce to continue as an institutional anchor where milestones and culturally important events were held; and served as a point of pride to the local Black community during the Jim Crow era. The Period of Significance begins in 1951, when the school was constructed, and ends in 1972, the year the school eventually closed due to integration following *U.S. vs. City of Dyersburg Board of Education*.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Historical Background

Considered part of the Mississippi River’s delta region, Dyer County’s incredibly rich soil and riverside location gave rise to a robust antebellum economy centered on cotton, corn, tobacco production, and river-related commerce. This economy relied on the labor of enslaved African Americans. By 1860, 25% of the county’s population was enslaved. Civil War combat did not directly affect Dyer County, and its Black and white population grew in the years immediately following the war as indicated by the 1870 Federal Census. This population growth continued for the next several decades as the county underwent an industrial boom due to new timber industries, the arrival of the railroad, expanding cotton market, and river commerce. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Black and white populations of Dyer County had more than doubled since the Civil War.²

It was during this time of industry and population growth that Black Tennesseans – making up approximately a quarter of the state’s population in 1870 – suffered under increasing anti-Black sentiment. In the early 1870s, African Americans gathered at state conventions and “complained of systematic discrimination against blacks by the state government, citing the courts and juries, the poll tax, segregation in public accommodations and schools, and unchecked Ku Klux Klan violence.”³ As the nineteenth century

² 1860 Federal Census; Carroll Van West, “Dyer County,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia* online (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018), <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/dyer-county/>, accessed September 5, 2022; 1870 Federal Census; 1900 Federal Census.

³ Joseph H. Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880s* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 19.

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neared its end, state and local governments across the South codified such discrimination against Black citizens in what came to be known as Jim Crow laws. The policies were sundry and far reaching. Voting laws restricted Black men’s ability to cast a ballot and affect their governance, while segregation laws regulated aspects of everyday life such as which doors Black families used when in public and which schools children attended. The Supreme Court validated segregation in 1896 when it infamously decided “separate but equal” public accommodations were acceptable under the U.S. Constitution in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. In response, African Americans across the South, including those in Dyer County, formed semiautonomous communities based on familial, social, and economic networks facilitated by institutions such as churches, fraternal organizations, and schools.

Local African Americans established Dyer County Colored High School c.1893 southeast of downtown Dyersburg, across the Newport News and Mississippi Valley railroad tracks. At the time of the school’s establishment, Black churches and dwellings were already located in the area east and southeast of downtown near the Dyersburg Cotton Compress and the Dyersburg Lumber Company.⁴ Photographs and community memory indicate the first school building was a two-story frame building. During the first quarter of the 20th century, Dyer County Colored School was the only place in the region of Dyer, Obion, Lake, and Lauderdale counties where African American students could attend high school classes. The school only offered classes up to the 11th grade due to Tennessee’s racial segregation laws.

The first principal was William H. Fort, a Fisk University graduate (1894) and leader in the state’s Grand United Order of Odd Fellows – an African American mutual aid society and counterpart to the white International Order of Odd Fellows. The institution’s name changed to Bruce High School in honor of Blanche K. Bruce during Fort’s tenure as principal. Born enslaved, Bruce was the second African American to serve in the United States Senate (1875-1881), the first to serve from Mississippi, and the first African American to preside over the Senate (1879). The name change was not only meant to honor Bruce’s achievement but to inspire the school’s students to excellence.⁵

Bruce High School developed a reputation as a school of academic excellence under Professor Fort’s leadership. In 1905, the State Institute for Colored Teachers, an annual professional development event for Black educators, took place at Bruce. A 1906 *Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction* considered the institution one of the leading African American high schools in the state. A description of the institute provides a picture of the school’s first building and its surroundings:

The institute was held in the Bruce High School, of which Prof. W.H. Fort is principal. This is a two-story frame building with a large hall on the second floor where the teachers

⁴ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Dyersburg, Dyer County, Tennessee*, Sanborn Map Company, October 1891, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Information from Johnnie Whitelaw (Bruce High School alumna) in Kathy Krone, “Bruce Alumni Association Working to Make Museum a Reality,” *State Gazette* (Dyersburg, Tennessee), February 28, 2010; “City Items,” *Nashville Globe*, April 12, 1907; Leigh Ann Gardner, *To Care for the Sick and Bury the Dead* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022), 22, 57; W.L. Miller, “Progressive Dyersburg,” *Nashville Globe*, July 22, 1910. In the early 20th century, Dyersburg was home to a “network of [African American] lodges” including Masons, Odd Fellows, Phythians, U.B.F., Mosaics, Sons of Tabor, each with a ladies’ auxiliary; “Blanche K. Bruce: A Featured Biography,” United States Senate website, https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_Bruce.htm, accessed September 5, 2022.

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assembled and where our sessions were held. The first floor is divided into four recitation rooms. The building was recently equipped with new desks – single seats – new blackboards, new piano and a new coat of paint. The grounds are spacious and level, containing about three acres, with good water and shade trees. These pleasant surroundings made our work enjoyable, rendered discipline easy and made the teachers happy.⁶

M. L. Morrison, Sr. became the principal of Bruce High School in 1910. Morrison Sr. continued to grow Bruce High School's tradition of academic excellence. A *Nashville Globe* article indicated the school opened its 1913-1914 academic year with nearly five-hundred students and boasted, "The Faculty is made up of some of the strongest teachers in West Tennessee. Some of our colleges would be glad to get them."⁷ By 1919, Bruce High School offered a full, four-year high school department and became a state-accredited school, meaning its graduates were able to teach elementary and secondary grades after graduating. During the 1922-1923 academic year, the institution received an "A" rating, becoming the first Black high school in Tennessee to acquire the designation.⁸ This achievement is commemorated by a marker in front of the nominated building. In addition to its academic excellence, Bruce High School offered a robust extracurricular program that included music, sports, drama, debate teams, and New Farmers of America and New Homemakers of America clubs.

It was during Bruce High School's formative decades at the turn of the century that the school became an anchor for the Black residents of Dyersburg and Dyer County. Though it is not clear when the Bruce neighborhood adopted the school's name, sources indicate the tight relationship between the school's faculty and students to the broader community led to the community's renaming. The school's home economics classes made clothes for the needy children of the neighborhood, and extracurricular activities such as sports, plays, recitals, and spelling contests established Bruce's campus as a place for community recreation. The school's extracurricular events even drew Black residents from different regions of the county. Bruce High School faculty were also revered members of the local community network. Some local pastors held revivals on Bruce's campus; students, in turn, sometimes traveled off campus to provide music for events, such as local funerals or the openings of Black-owned businesses. A 1916 *Chicago Defender* article stated, "Perhaps no school in the state is in a more flourishing condition or is doing more for the community than Bruce High School."⁹

In the early 1920s, the Dyersburg city school board replaced Bruce High School's original building with a new \$50,000 facility designed by Memphis architectural firm Mehan and Broadwell.¹⁰ The school opened in fall of 1922. A Memphis newspaper claimed, "The erection of this building at such a cost in a town the size of Dyersburg has been cited throughout the country as a sign of improved relations between the races and of

⁶ Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Tennessee* (Nashville, Tennessee: Foster, Webb, and Parkes Printers, 1906), 139.

⁷ "Dyersburg Notes," *Nashville Globe*, September 26, 1913.

⁸ "Negro School Made State Accredited High School," *State Gazette* (Dyersburg, Tennessee), October 11, 1919; Esthma Coleman, "A History of Bruce High School – Dyersburg, Tennessee" provided by Bruce Alumni Association.

⁹ "Dyersburg, Tenn.," *Chicago Defender*, March 28, 1936; Crawford L. Robinson, "Eight to Graduate," *Chicago Defender*, March 4, 1916.

¹⁰ "Bids Wanted.," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), March 15, 1920.

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increasing interest in Negro education.”¹¹ A few years later, the Julius Rosenwald Fund (JRF) supported the construction of a new domestic and agricultural science building for Bruce. The JRF was a philanthropic organization that supported the construction of modern school buildings for African American children across the rural South by providing matching funds to local communities. The dedication of the new building occurred on May 8, 1925.¹²

The success of Bruce High School during its early decades reflected Dyersburg’s vibrant Black community which made up a third of the city’s population. An article in the *Nashville Globe* boasted that African Americans contributed immeasurably to the town’s industrial success, stating “These sons of toil are found in large numbers in all the hardwood mills... They are the bone and sinew of the many cotton gins that dot the city.”¹³ The same article mentioned successful Black men owning considerable real estate and beautiful homes, several Black churches of various denominations, and “a network of lodges.” Black businesses included grocery stores, a butcher shop, a “master workman” in carpentry, undertaking, headquarters for twenty life insurance agents, beauty shops, and restaurants. Many of these establishments were located along Cedar Street located just northeast of the Bruce neighborhood.

Bruce High School, 1951-1966

The landscape of Jim Crow era school segregation changed during World War II. By then, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had investigated and legally challenged segregation for decades, exposing the disparities between white and Black school systems across the South.¹⁴ In addition, recent legal victories affecting voting, racial disparities among teacher pay and higher education, and desegregation in interstate transportation, paired with the return of Black soldiers who sought to fully realize their freedoms as U.S. citizens, caused much anxiety among white, segregationist officials who “felt threatened by the possibility of court-mandated school desegregation.”¹⁵ After the War, southern legislatures, including those of Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi, appointed committees to conduct statewide surveys of their dual school systems in efforts to equalize – at least in appearance – white and Black schools and thus preempt federal intervention.¹⁶

Tennessee’s General Assembly initiated this process in 1945 when it authorized a thorough study of the state’s public education program. The stated goal was to identify deficiencies and provide recommendations that “may lead eventually to the installation of as nearly an ideal program of public education as possible” –

¹¹ “Bruce High to Open,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), October 25, 1922.

¹² “New Science Hall,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), January 24, 1925; “Dedicate Colored School,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 9, 1925.

¹³ Miller, “Progressive Dyersburg.”

¹⁴ Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP’s Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987), 5.

¹⁵ V.P. Franklin, “Introduction: Cultural Capital and African American Education,” *Journal of African American History* vol. 87, no. 2 (Spring 2002), 175-176.

¹⁶ Thomas Victor O’Brien, “Georgia’s Response to *Brown v. Board of Education*: The Rise and Fall of Massive Resistance, 1949-1961” (Ph.D. diss, Emory University, 1992); Charles C. Bolton, “Mississippi’s School Equalization Program, 1945-1954: A Last Gasp to Try to Maintain a Segregated Educational System,” *Journal of Southern History* vol.66. no.4 (November 2000), 781-814; Rebekah Dobrasko, “Equalization Schools in South Carolina, 1951-1959,” February 2008, <http://nationalregister.sc.gov/SurveyReports/EqualizationSchoolsHistoricContext.pdf>.

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rhetoric veiled with the implication of improving schools for all children with the hoped-for function of bringing Black schools up to par with white schools to ward off federal mandates.¹⁷ The directors of the study presented their findings to the General Assembly in 1947. Though the final published report seldom distinguished between the systems for white and African American children, the study found Tennessee's segregated schools lacking in regards to instruction, teacher training, school plants, financing, and organization and administration. For school buildings in particular, the study indicated that only 8% of the 5,134 public schools surveyed "were satisfactory for a modern program of educational services."¹⁸ Needed improvements required substantial and theretofore nonexistent public funds. The report emphasized its recommendation to revise the state's tax code, stating "real estate in Tennessee cannot carry the burden of financing the services which the people need and demand."¹⁹

As a result of the report, Tennessee's 1947 General Assembly levied the state's first retail sales tax of two percent, with the vast majority of funds allocated for public education. Other southern states revised their tax codes to include retail sales tax to benefit education around the same time. In Tennessee, the sales tax generated more than \$41 million during the first year. A 1948 piece in the *Southern Economic Journal* read, "Vast improvements in practically every phase of the state's city and county school systems have materialized," including new building and improvement projects.²⁰ In 1949, during his outgoing speech to the General Assembly, Tennessee Governor Jim Nance McCord boasted of improvements to the state's education program "made possible by the retail sales tax."²¹ Further into his speech, McCord entwined states' rights – and averting federal intervention – with the late improvement of Tennessee's education system, stating, "We talk much of States rights...I believe in States rights, but I also believe that the best way to preserve these rights is for the States to accept and discharge their responsibilities. This is particularly true in the field of education...[which is] the last great domain reserved to the States which, as of today, has not been surrendered to the federal government." It was during this new era of Jim Crow education in Tennessee that the state's racially segregated school system received a facelift through projects like the construction of Bruce High School's extant gymnasium.

Just two years after the retail tax transformed public school expenditures, the Dyersburg Board of Education began planning to build a new, detached gymnasium for Bruce High School. Completed c. late 1950 - early 1951, Bruce High School's extant gymnasium was erected as a major upgrade to the campus and exists today as an example of the ways white school officials attempted to pre-empt federal orders to desegregate following the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision that declared "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional. Though there are certainly examples of completely new school buildings constructed for African American communities in Tennessee in the years leading up to *Brown*,²² a more common route

¹⁷ Chapter 121, House Bill No. 974, quoted in Burgin E. Dossett, *Public Education in Tennessee: A Study Of Tennessee's Program of Public Education And Suggestions For Continuing Its Development, Report to the Governor and the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee* (1946), "Foreword."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 466.

²⁰ James E. Ward, "Tennessee," *Southern Economic Journal*, vol. 15, no.2 (October 1948), 237.

²¹ Jim Nance McCord to Tennessee General Assembly, Speech to the 76th General Assembly, January 5, 1949, *House Journal*, 35.

²² Katherine Merzbacher O'Bryan, "Asia School," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2011); Rebecca Schmitt, Holly Barnett, Tom Skehan, "Stanton School," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service,

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toward attempts at equalization saw white school officials fund substantial improvements, expansions, and renovations to existing Black school plants as seen in the case of Bruce High School’s new gymnasium. A nearby example is the National Register-listed Lauderdale High School (NR Listed 10/29/2021) building in Ripley, Lauderdale County. There, officials funded a major c.1950 renovation and expansion of the all-Black school’s 1912 building.²³ Another West Tennessee example is the National Register-listed Gibson County Training School (NR Listed 03/12/2012) in Milan. Originally constructed as a Rosenwald-funded building c.1926, school officials funded a gymnasium addition in 1951 and classroom additions in 1953, as well as numerous additions after *Brown*.²⁴

Bruce High School’s new gymnasium building featured many characteristics distinctive to post-World War II school facilities, including concrete block construction (extant, visible on the interior), metal windows, and steel roof trusses (extant). The new gymnasium was Bruce High School’s first indoor sports facility, and it boosted the school’s already robust sports program (whose mascot was the Bulldogs), particularly men’s and women’s basketball and cheerleading.

The new gymnasium also provided a modern community facility for the residents of the Bruce neighborhood, as well as African Americans from across the region who had limited access to public spaces due to Jim Crow segregation. The stage (extant) at the south end of the building with the open basketball court (extant) in front allowed flexibility as chairs could be lined up on the court for nonsporting events, then taken away for competitions that took place on the court. Alumnus Milton Kirk specifically recalled students putting on an annual comedy show for a week and chairs would be lined on the gymnasium floor, from the stage to the wall at the north end.²⁵ Bruce High School alumna Yolanda Harris remembered the bustle of the gym and its stage during recitals and concerts, plays, holiday pageants, PTA events, May Day celebrations, and elementary and high school graduations, all of which were popular events attended by community members.²⁶ The various clubs and sports teams also used the space for fundraisers in order to acquire equipment and clothing. Alumna Johnnie Whitelaw stated, “There was always something going on to bring families back to the school.”²⁷ Local white residents occasionally attended events at Bruce’s gymnasium, and Bruce faculty prepared a segregated “whites only” section for them to sit in on these occasions.²⁸

In June 1951, a fire of undetermined origin destroyed the second Bruce High School building that housed the institution’s main classrooms. The local fire chief marked it a “complete loss” of building and contents.²⁹

2020); Savannah Grandey and Tonya Blades, “Ward School,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2020). These historic Black schools were built in the years leading up to *Brown*, with Stanton and Ward schools each completed in 1948 and Asia School c.1952.

²³ Kelsey Lamkin, “Lauderdale High School,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2021).

²⁴ Mary Hoffschwelle, et al., “Gibson County Training School,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2012).

²⁵ Milton Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon, interview, July 5, 2014.

²⁶ Yolanda Harris to Savannah Grandey Knies, interview, December 8, 2021.

²⁷ Johnnie Whitelaw, quoted in Krone, “Bruce Alumni Association.”

²⁸ “Bruce High Will Stage Two Plays For Class Night,” *State Gazette* (Dyersburg, Tennessee), May 14, 1951.

²⁹ “Fire Destroys School,” *Jackson Sun* (Jackson, Tennessee), June 8, 1951; “MidSouth News In Brief,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), June 8, 1951.

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Classes at Bruce were to begin just a month later due to a “split session” system where Black schools opened in mid-July and closed in mid-September for cotton harvesting season. It then opened again in November when the cotton harvest was over. When school began in July 1951, faculty held classes in the campus’s new gymnasium, the industrial building (non-extant), and in the basement of Womack Temple Colored Methodist Episcopal’s building. Despite the destruction of the school’s main building, Bruce remained an important place to the African American community. As was the tradition, Dyer County’s fall fair for African Americans took place at Bruce in September, with the new gymnasium building playing a prominent role in the fair. The city opened bids for contracts on a new classroom building for Bruce in October 1951.³⁰

Despite the prospects of what the newspaper called a “modern new home” for the school, the tragedy of the fire went beyond the loss of the building. When Bruce’s school building burned, so did all of its books, music instruments, furniture, memorabilia, and more. Alumna Audie Wahl recalled, “. . . a lot of our trophies, and a lot of stuff . . . we can’t see now, I think it burned with the school.”³¹ The accumulation of items within a Black school was a valuable asset and reflected the social capital of the community. Though southern public schools have generally been underfunded, Black schools were doubly disadvantaged by white education authorities who funneled a disproportionate amount of funds to whites-only schools for nearly a century. Black parents and school faculty were left to fill the gap, purchasing and donating necessary supplies to equip, repair, and decorate their children’s schools. The most basic of necessities, such as textbooks, were often passed on secondhand to African American schools. This point is illustrated by an August 1951 article in the Dyersburg newspaper wherein the county’s attendance teacher asked the publication “to make a plea for used schoolbooks for Negro children.”³² One Bruce High School alumni wrote more than a decade after the new Bruce High School building opened, “Although the fire resulted in the acquisition of a better school plant, much of the equipment and books that were destroyed have not been replaced.”³³

Designed by local architect Claude Fumbanks, Bruce High School’s third and last physical iteration was built in the stylistically-restrained and economical International style common to school buildings of the mid-20th century. Fumbanks incorporated the school’s still-new gymnasium into the plan, attaching a one-story classroom building to the gymnasium’s north end to create a long, low primary facade typical of the decade. Alumna Audie Wahl stated, “They built the gym and they built the school around it.”³⁴ This is corroborated by the juxtaposition of the gymnasium’s former north exterior wall of brick and the concrete blocks walls of the hallways and rooms that were later attached to it (See *Figures 4 & 5*).

³⁰ “Open Bruce High Bids Yesterday,” *State Gazette* (Dyersburg, Tennessee), October 4, 1951; “Negro Schools to Open Monday,” *State Gazette* (Dyersburg, Tennessee), July 18, 1951; Samuel A. Lee, Jr., “An Evaluation of the Science Program, Grades 7-12, Bruce High School, Dyersburg, Tennessee,” (master’s thesis, Tennessee A & I State University, 1963), 27-28.

³¹ Audie Wahl to Ginna Foster Cannon, interview, July 5, 2014.

³² “Makes Plea for Books For Negro School Children,” *State Gazette* (Dyersburg, Tennessee), August 21, 1951.

³³ Lee, Jr., “An Evaluation of the Science Program,” 29.

³⁴ Audie Wahl to Ginna Foster Cannon.

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Figure 4. Photograph of gymnasium's north wall joined with the concrete block wall of the hallway.

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Figure 5. Arrow pointing toward masonry unit change in the west hallway.

Simple, low-massed buildings like Bruce High School, with its one-story height, flat roof, and unadorned walls were efficient. The single level eliminated costly staircases and were easier to evacuate compared to multi-level buildings – a feature reflecting the anxieties of the Cold War. Perhaps most importantly, this style allowed schools to be easily expanded to accommodate the postwar population boom occurring across the country after World War II. That the architect chose to attach the music room, cafeteria, and classroom wing to the extant gymnasium’s west and north elevations speaks to the logic and “flexibility” of mid-20th century school building design.³⁵ Furthermore, the ease of expanding these buildings, somewhat fortuitously for segregationist school officials, was useful in the scheme to avoid integration by continuing to fund improvements and additions to Black school buildings years after *Brown v. Board*. In fact, c.1960,

³⁵ Kenneth Reid, ed. *School Planning: The Architectural Record of a Decade* (New York: F.W. Dodge Corporation, 1951), 263; Amy F. Ogata, “Building for Learning in Postwar Elementary Schools,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 67, no. 4 (December 2008), 568.

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approximately six years after *Brown*, Dyersburg's city school board chose to fund the addition of a locker room to the south wall of Bruce High School's gymnasium. In addition to the nominated building's gymnasium being an example of pre-emptive construction projects on Black school campuses ahead of the *Brown* decision, Bruce High School's c.1960 locker room addition points toward white school officials' sustained commitment to segregation after *Brown*.

Continuing to spend public funds to not only maintain segregated school buildings for Black children but expand them years after the *Brown* decision declared such facilities unconstitutional, was a pattern seen across the state. Regional examples include the previously mentioned National Register-listed Gibson County Training School in Milan which saw substantial additions to its campus c.1960, 1964, and 1967. The National Register-listed Allen-White School in Hardeman County (NR Listed 11/09/2005) gained an entirely new elementary school building in 1964. National Register-listed Montgomery High School in Henderson County (NR Listed 07/03/2007), similar to Bruce High School, saw a locker room addition to its gymnasium in the early 1960s.³⁶ Indeed, the characteristics that made these buildings relatively easy to expand also made adaptive reuse easier.

Ethsma Coleman remembered the new Bruce High School building "was huge compared to the other two buildings. Included[sic] in the design were grades 1-12 all on one floor, a home economics department, building and trades, kitchen cafeteria, gym with stage, and music room."³⁷ Despite the setback caused by the fire, the school in its modern facility continued to be an important place for African Americans in Dyersburg and Dyer County. Despite the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling declaring "separate but equal" education unconstitutional, the nominated Bruce High School building remained the only place for Black Dyer Countians to pursue a high school education until c.1966 when a few Black Dyer countians were allowed to attend the previously all-white Dyersburg High School. Due to earlier consolidation efforts that merged many schools in both the white and Black education systems, by the early 1960s, Bruce was one of three Black schools remaining in the county. The others being the "consolidated grammar school" or "County Central" in Dyersburg, and the Monroe Grammar School in Newbern.³⁸

Though the walls within which Black students across the South attended school certainly affected their learning environment, Bruce High School alumni recall the school's faculty and staff as major factors that shaped their experiences. Black faculty and staff went above and beyond their prescribed duties to help bridge the chasm caused by race-based underfunding of Black schools. Many of Bruce High School's faculty wore several hats to meet the needs of the students and ensure they received the best education and had access to as many opportunities as possible. The school's principal in the extant building was M.L. Morrison, Jr., who was, according to alumna Katherine Moore Kirk, "everything from the principal to the French teacher to the music teacher to the football coach."³⁹ Alumnus Dr. Cleo Kirk stated, "These people

³⁶ "Gibson County Training School," Carroll Van West, "Allen-White School," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2005); Heather L. Bailey, "Montgomery High School," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2007).

³⁷ Coleman, "A History of Bruce High School."

³⁸ Lee, "An Evaluation of the Science Program," 27.

³⁹ Katherine Moore Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon, interview, July 5, 2014.

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were paid very little money to teach but they gave you their best.”⁴⁰ Another alumnus recalled “If we had a weakness, they kept us after school to work on that weakness.”⁴¹ Several alumni echoed one another, emphasizing that the Bruce faculty gave them “something to reach for.” Kirk mentioned the faculty’s dedication, “The teachers were interested in you as a person. They made sure you learned... Even when we got ready to go off to college, they just courted you... to make sure you had your papers right and that you were interested in going... It gave you such a feeling of camaraderie.”⁴² Alumni Judy Cooper and Vicky Haynes echoed that the faculty fostered a “real sense of belonging” at Bruce.⁴³

Like the other Black schools in Dyer County, Bruce High School continued to operate on the “split session” schedule mentioned above until at least the early 1960s. Alumni remember elementary students were first taught manners and hygiene, reading, grammar, basic arithmetic, physical education, and social studies. Milton Kirk, who attended Bruce from the first through twelfth grade, remembered that each year elementary students and high school students had to study different cultures and the histories of faraway places. Older students learned the sciences, geography, took civics classes, building and trades classes, French, home economics, agriculture classes, and studied literature. Several alumni remember reciting excerpts from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in English classes.

Extracurricular activities featured prominently at Bruce High School. The school hosted the New Farmers of America and New Homemakers of America clubs, the Black counterparts to then whites-only Future Farmers of America and Future Homemakers of America clubs.⁴⁴ Several alumni emphasized music being a large part of their experience. In addition to music classes required by the public school curriculum, Bruce High School had a successful marching band that performed at football games, in Dyersburg’s holiday parades, and competed in regional competitions. They used the music room (extant) and gymnasium to practice. After marching band season was over, faculty and students focused their time and energy on the concert band, developed in the 1950s, that also practiced and performed in the music room and on stage (extant) in the gymnasium. Milton Kirk, who played the baritone and clarinet during his time at Bruce, remembered coming to school early in the morning before classes started to attend band class in the music room.⁴⁵ For female students, becoming a Bruce High School majorette was an achievement. The majorettes performed at sporting events, including those held at the extant gymnasium, as well as community events. Singing in the school’s choir was also an option for students, and Julia Morrison, a Bruce educator married to principal M.L. Morrison, Jr., was the pianist.

Though the nominated building only housed Bruce High School for 15 years due to partial integration in 1966, after which it housed elementary grades for approximately six additional years, a 1957 source further indicates the school carried on and embodied the history of the institution and its significance to the Black communities of Dyer County. This is the case especially for the Bruce neighborhood. In the mid-1950s, Dyersburg’s participation in the federal Urban Renewal program encouraged the formation of neighborhood

⁴⁰ Dr. Cleo Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon, interview, July 5, 2014.

⁴¹ Milton Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon, interview, July 5, 2014.

⁴² Katherine Moore Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon.

⁴³ Judy Cooper and Vicky Haynes to Rachel Martin, interview, July 5, 2014.

⁴⁴ “Two Schools Tie in NFA Judging,” *Jackson Sun* (Jackson, Tennessee), February 9, 1964; “Students Attend Speech Session,” *Nashville Banner*, October 14, 1963.

⁴⁵ Milton Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon.

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associations to assess infrastructure needs and provide input on how funds could benefit the immediate surroundings of residents. The Bruce Improvement Association (BIA) formed c.1957 and often met in the gymnasium of Bruce School. The residents' own preliminary assessment of the Bruce neighborhood mentioned as problems the lack of paved roads (by 1957, there was reportedly only one paved road in the neighborhood, others were dirt); the tendency of "most sections of [the] neighborhood [to] flood once a year"; the lack of running water and toilets within most homes; and the predominance of renting.⁴⁶ Near the end of this list of needed improvements, the association highlighted a shining asset: "We have a very fine school in our neighborhood." Later, the BIA elaborated on more of the neighborhood's assets, with "School-Churches-Family ties and Friends" being the top factor: "We are very proud of our school."⁴⁷

In the years leading up to integration, the average size of Bruce High School's graduating class was 40-50 students. According to Samuel A. Lee, Jr., who attended Bruce before eventually completing a master's degree at Tennessee A & I (now Tennessee State University), most Bruce High School graduates who attended college went to Tennessee A & I "for economic" reasons.⁴⁸ Those who could afford it attended Fisk, Lane College, Columbia University, Western Reserve, and LeMoyne. A few Bruce graduates attended predominantly white universities such as 1957 alumnus Dr. Cleo C. Kirk, who attended the University of Michigan in the late 1950s as one of just over 10 Black students there.⁴⁹

Bruce High School during Integration, 1966-1972

Twelve years after the *Brown v. Board* decision declared "separate but equal education" unconstitutional, Dyersburg City Schools slowly began integrating its dual system. For the 1965-1966 academic year, thirteen Black students were admitted to white schools in Dyersburg under the school board's "freedom of choice plan," which technically allowed children of any race to attend the school of their choice. Such plans were implemented by many southern school boards to comply with *Brown* but were often ineffective toward meaningful integration.⁵⁰ After a summer 1966 investigation of Dyersburg's school system, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) ordered the board to move all Bruce High School students in grades 10, 11, and 12, and seven Bruce faculty members to the previously all-white Dyersburg High School for academic year 1966-1967 to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Newspaper articles noted the school board's decision to comply with the orders was "arrived at with reluctance."⁵¹ Two days later, the school board rescinded its decision after "angry protests" of five-hundred white Dyer Countians at a public meeting.⁵²

⁴⁶ Bruce Neighborhood Association, quoted in William Bishop Nixon and Joseph M. Boyd, Jr., *Citizen Participation in Urban Renewal: A Report of a Demonstrated Project* (Nashville, Tennessee: Tennessee State Planning Commission, 1957), 211.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Dr. Cleo C. Kirk to Ginna Foster Cannon, interview, July 5, 2014.

⁵⁰ "Mid-South Briefs," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 27, 1966; Tennessee Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, "School Desegregation in Tennessee: 12 Districts Released from Desegregation Orders, 17 Districts Remain Under Court Jurisdiction," April 2008, 5.

⁵¹ "Dyersburg Yields to Federal Order," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), July 27, 1966.

⁵² "Mothers Sigh As Youngsters Moan," *Jackson Sun* (Jackson, Tennessee), August 30, 1966; "Dyersburg Files Answer to Suit," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), September 15, 1966.

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In response to Dyersburg School Board's noncompliance, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) sued in September 1966, making it one of forty-three school districts in Tennessee sued to desegregate schools. By this time, the number of high school students at Bruce had dropped significantly as the majority chose to attend Dyersburg High School at the beginning of the 1966-1967 school year. The Dyersburg School Board then officially closed grades 10, 11, and 12 at Bruce High School, and the DOJ dropped the suit. A newspaper quoted Dyersburg School Board superintendent W.O. Warren who stated, "In our opinion, it (Bruce High School) closed itself by freedom of choice."⁵³ The school's status thereafter was junior high school, referred to by media outlets and education officials as Bruce Junior High School.

Days later, a new suit brought by the DOJ sought an injunction to transfer Bruce's junior high school students (grades 7, 8, 9) to Dyersburg High School; increase faculty desegregation throughout the system; an "end of plans to accept non-resident students in the Dyersburg system to preserve segregation" (at the time there were more than one-hundred white county students attending the white city high school, taking the rightful spots of Black students who lived in the city); and a nondiscrimination policy pertaining to other school activities.⁵⁴ The local school board answered that it did not fail to provide Black students equal protection under the law and that it would, "without intervention," continue with its freedom of choice plan. What followed spotlighted the century-long practice of southern school boards funneling money away from Black schools. Attorneys for the DOJ responded in the spring of March 1967: "The question here is not whether Negroes in Dyersburg, Tenn., are being compelled by the defendants to attend all-Negro school, but whether defendants have participated and are participating in the planning or maintenance of schools...for Negroes in such a way as to denote inferiority or to deprive them of an equal educational opportunity."⁵⁵

The Dyersburg School Board's former superintendent W. O. Warren, who assumed the role of coordinator of state and federal programs for the Tennessee Department of Education, testified in federal court in March 1967 that "Dyersburg officials are 'paying extra' to maintain all-Negro Bruce Junior High School and avoid integration."⁵⁶ Warren elaborated that the "number of students at Bruce does not justify the number of teachers who must be maintained at the school to offer the necessary courses," such as Latin, vocational agriculture, and industrial arts, all of which were no longer offered at Bruce. Another witness for the Department of Justice, school plants and facilities expert Dr. James Woofter, had recently conducted a comprehensive study of both Dyersburg High School and Bruce Junior High School at the request of the DOJ. He reported to the court that Bruce High School rated 33% "in 19 categories ranging from libraries to lighting" – compared to Dyersburg High School's ranking of 71%.⁵⁷

Though the federal court met some of the DOJ's requests, it did not order the closing of Bruce Junior High School in 1967. Instead, the judge ordered the Dyersburg Board of Education to file a "real freedom of choice plan" that gave all city students the right to attend the previously all-white city schools before any county students could attend them. Before this ruling, white county students were often admitted to

⁵³ "Dyersburg Files Answer to Suit."

⁵⁴ "Dyersburg Files Answer to Suit."

⁵⁵ Louis Lucas and Joe A. Cannon, quoted in "Superintendent to Testify for U.S." *Leaf-Chronicle* (Clarksville, Tennessee), March 29, 1967.

⁵⁶ "School Case Being Heard," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 29, 1967.

⁵⁷ "3 Testify in Case," *Leaf-Chronicle* (Clarksville, Tennessee), March 30, 1967.

Bruce High School
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Dyersburg’s previously all-white city schools. This inflated the student body in those schools, leading city school officials to use overcrowding as a factor when assigning students under the freedom of choice plan. The judge’s injunction forbade that practice, which opened up more than one-hundred spots for city students in Dyersburg High School alone, giving many Bruce students the opportunity to attend. In 1968, in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent*, the Supreme Court declared freedom of choice plans ineffective toward racial integration. In addition to student assignment, the ruling required the consideration of faculty assignment, staff assignment, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities when assessing a school district’s integration.⁵⁸

From the late 1960s until its closure in 1972, the Bruce school building housed Kindergarten through 6th grade for Black children. Yolanda Harris, who attended Bruce during its period as an elementary school, remembers her second grade teacher at Bruce, Sevilla Fisher Randolph, addressing the closure of the school and integration to her and her classmates: “Some of you may be in the classroom, and you may be the only child that looks like you.” Harris recalled, “I remember the last day they closed the doors here. I remember standing on the steps that still exist...my teacher, Mrs. Sevilla walked me out...she said, ‘I want you to put your listening ears on. It’s going to be okay.’” Shortly after Bruce School closed completely in 1972, city officials razed the high school wing and library, leaving the current footprint. The city then opened the Bruce Community Center, which remains active in the building today. In 1983, several female alumni began holding a biennial Bruce alumni reunion at the school that continues today.

⁵⁸ Ibid; Tennessee Advisory Committee, “School Desegregation,” 5.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):		Primary location of additional data:	
preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)	X	State Historic Preservation Office	
previously listed in the National Register		Other State agency	
previously determined eligible by the National Register		Federal agency	
designated a National Historic Landmark		Local government	
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #		University	
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #		Other	
recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #		Name of repository:	
Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):			

Bruce High School
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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 4.5 **USGS Quadrangle** Dyersburg 420-SW

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 36.024697 | Longitude: -89.377764 |
| 2. Latitude: 36.024621 | Longitude: -89.375742 |
| 3. Latitude: 36.023727 | Longitude: -89.375769 |
| 4. Latitude: 36.023868 | Longitude: -89.377898 |

Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is roughly rectangular in shape and contains approximately 4.5 acres. The corners of the property correspond to the coordinates above and follow the legal parcel boundaries of Dyer County Tax Parcel number 099K C 020.00 as depicted on the enclosed tax map. The property is bounded by Vernon Street to the north, McLean Avenue to the east, Grant Street to the south, and Bruce Avenue to the west.

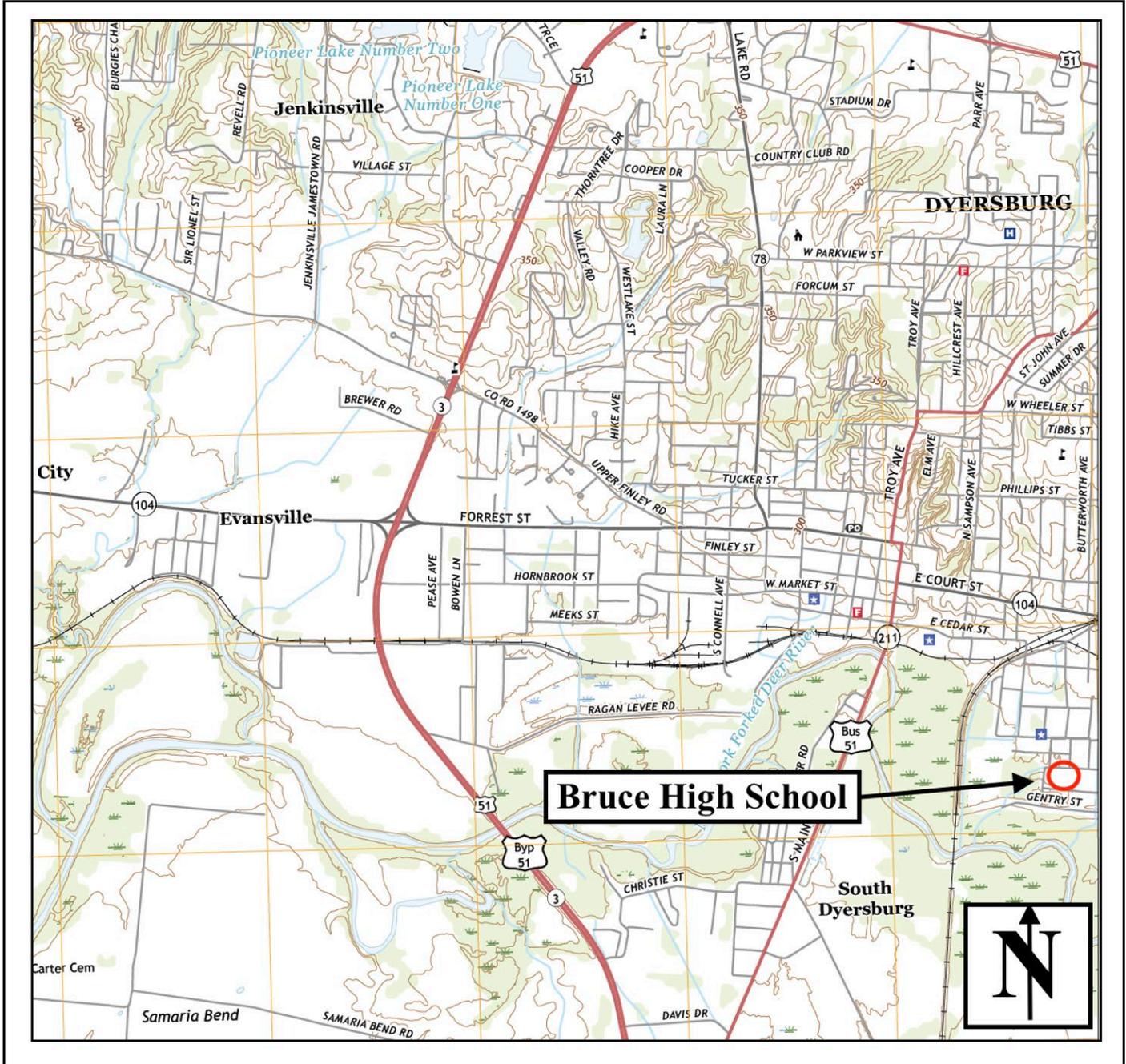
Boundary Justification

The nominated property boundaries correspond to the boundaries during the property's 1951 to 1972 Period of Significance.

Bruce High School
Name of Property

Dyers County, TN
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USGS Topographic Map



Location of Bruce High School is indicated by the red circle
Original map scale 1:24,000

Bruce High School
Name of Property

Dyers County, TN
County and State

Tax Map with Corresponding Boundary Vertices

Dyer County Property Tax Map with Bruce High School Boundary
**Nominated boundaries correspond with those of Parcel 099K C 020.00*



2021 imagery courtesy of Dyer County Property Assessor

Bruce High School
Name of Property

Dyers County, TN
County and State

11. Form Prepared By

Name Savannah Grandey Knies

Organization Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University

Street & Number Box 80 Date October 2022

City or Town Murfreesboro Telephone 615-494-8938

E-mail Savannah.grandey@mtsu.edu State TN Zip Code 37132

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to map.
- **Photographs** (refer to Tennessee Historical Commission National Register *Photo Policy* for submittal of digital images and prints)
- **Additional items:** (additional supporting documentation including historic photographs, historic maps, etc. should be included on a Continuation Sheet following the photographic log and sketch maps)

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Bruce High School
----- Name of Property
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----- County and State
N/A
----- Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number _____ Page 36

Photo Log

Name of Property: Bruce High School
 City or Vicinity: Dyersburg
 County: Dyer State: TN
 Photographer: Savannah Grandey Knies and Carroll Van West
 Date Photographed: December 8, 2021

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 28. Northeast oblique. Non-contributing playground also shown. Photographer facing southwest.
- 2 of 28. Historic entrance. Photographer facing south.
- 3 of 28. Southeast oblique. Also shown is non-contributing carport. Photographer facing northwest.
- 4 of 28. South elevation. Photographer facing north.
- 5 of 28. West elevation. Photographer facing northeast.
- 6 of 28. West elevation entrance. Photographer facing east.
- 7 of 28. Northwest oblique. Also shown are non-contributing flagpole and marker. Photographer facing southeast.
- 8 of 28. Interior. Foyer. Photographer facing south.
- 9 of 28. Interior. Former classroom. Photographer facing northeast.
- 10 of 28. Interior. Former administrative office. Photographer facing west.
- 11 of 28. Interior. Looking through vault room into west hallway. Photographer facing south.
- 12 of 28. Interior. Abbreviated east hallway and gymnasium entrance. Photographer facing southeast.
- 13 of 28. Interior. Abbreviated west hallway. Photographer facing west.
- 14 of 28. Interior. Former classroom. Photographer facing northwest.
- 15 of 28. Interior. Women's restroom. Photographer facing north.

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National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Bruce High School
----- Name of Property
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----- Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number ____ Page 37

- 16 of 28. Interior. West hallway. Photographer facing east.
- 17 of 28. Interior. Cafeteria. Photographer facing southwest.
- 18 of 28. Interior. Former music room. Photographer facing southwest.
- 19 of 28. Interior. Gymnasium. Photographer facing south.
- 20 of 28. Interior. Gymnasium. Photographer facing north.
- 21 of 28. Interior. Gymnasium stage. Photographer facing southwest.
- 22 of 28. Interior. East stage access, looking into c.1960 addition (painted blue). Photographer facing south.
- 23 of 28. Interior. West stage access, looking into c.1960 addition (painted blue). Photographer facing southeast.
- 24 of 28. Interior. Looking into c.1960 addition toward hallway to locker room. Photographer facing southwest.
- 25 of 28. Interior. c.1960 locker room addition. Photographer looking southeast.
- 26 of 28. Non-contributing marker. Photographer facing south.
- 27 of 28. Non-contributing baseball diamond. Photographer facing southeast
- 28 of 28. Non-contributing basketball court. Photographer facing west.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Bruce High School

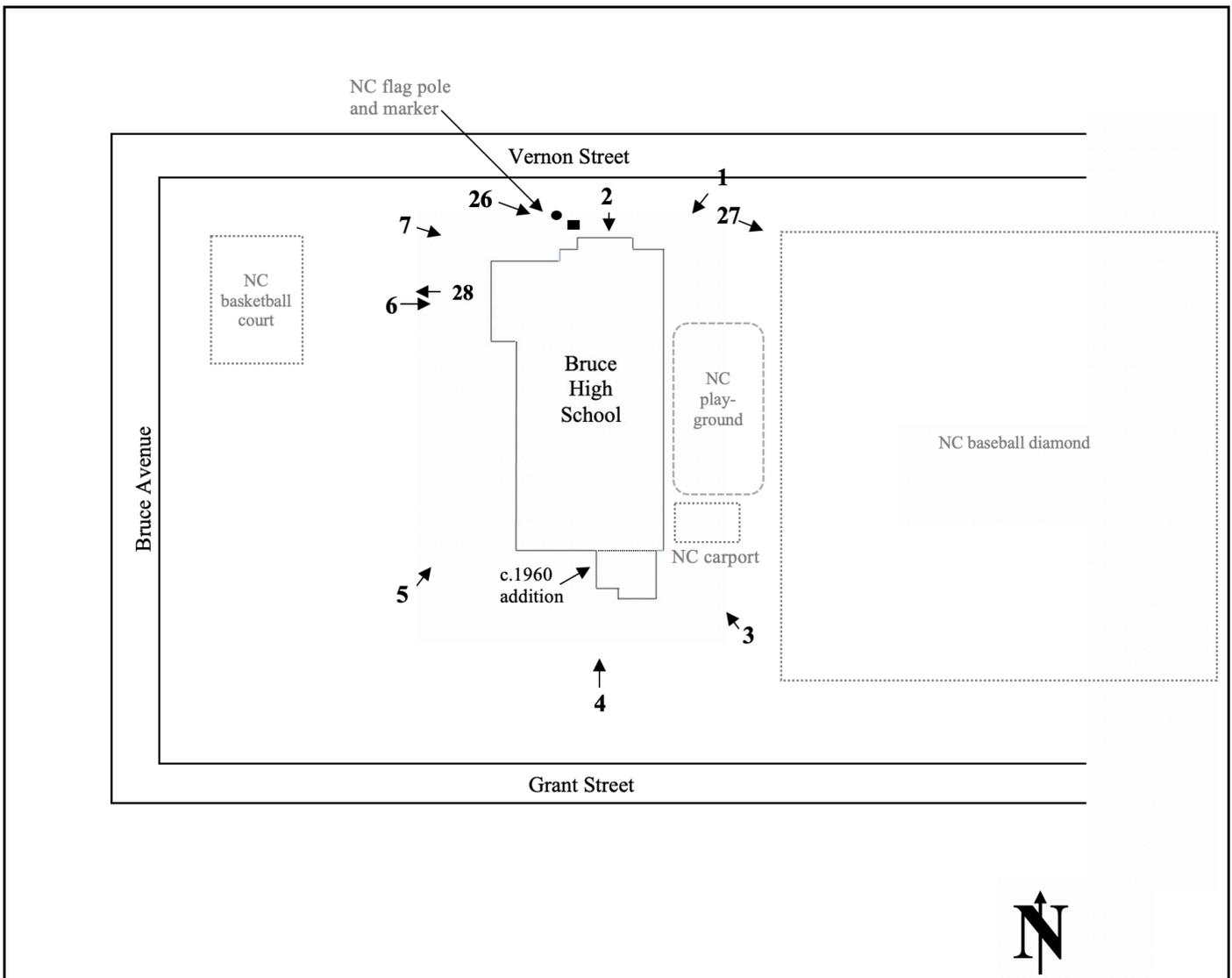
Name of Property
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N/A

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Section number ____ Page 38

Site Plan (Not To Scale)



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Continuation Sheet**

Bruce High School

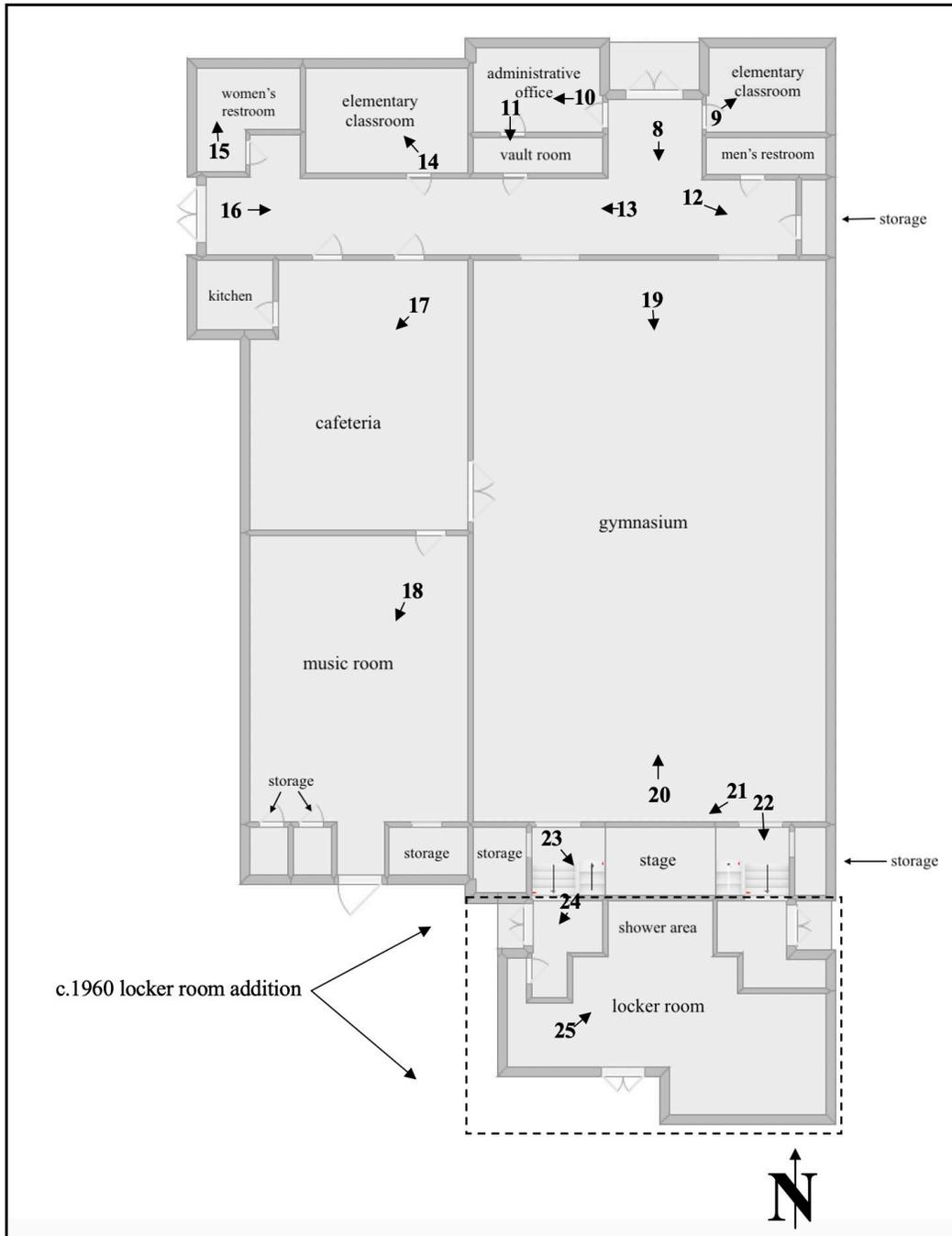
Name of Property
Dyer County, Tennessee

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N/A

Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number ____ Page 39

Floor Plan (Not to Scale)



Property Owner:

(This information will not be submitted to the National Park Service, but will remain on file at the Tennessee Historical Commission)

Name City of Dyersburg, ATTN: Mayor John Holden

Street &

Number Dyersburg City Hall, PO Box 1358 Telephone

City or Town Dyersburg State/Zip TN 38025

*****Please also send official correspondence to the Bruce High School Alumni Association (who initiated the nomination process)**

Bruce High School Alumni Association

c/o Mrs. Yolanda Harris

917 Summer Drive

Dyersburg, TN 38024

Dyersburg Parks and Recreation Department, ATTN: Andy Baker

Dyersburg City Hall

PO Box 1358

Dyersburg, TN 38025

**BRUCE HIGH SCHOOL
DYERSBURG, DYER COUNTY, TENNESSEE**



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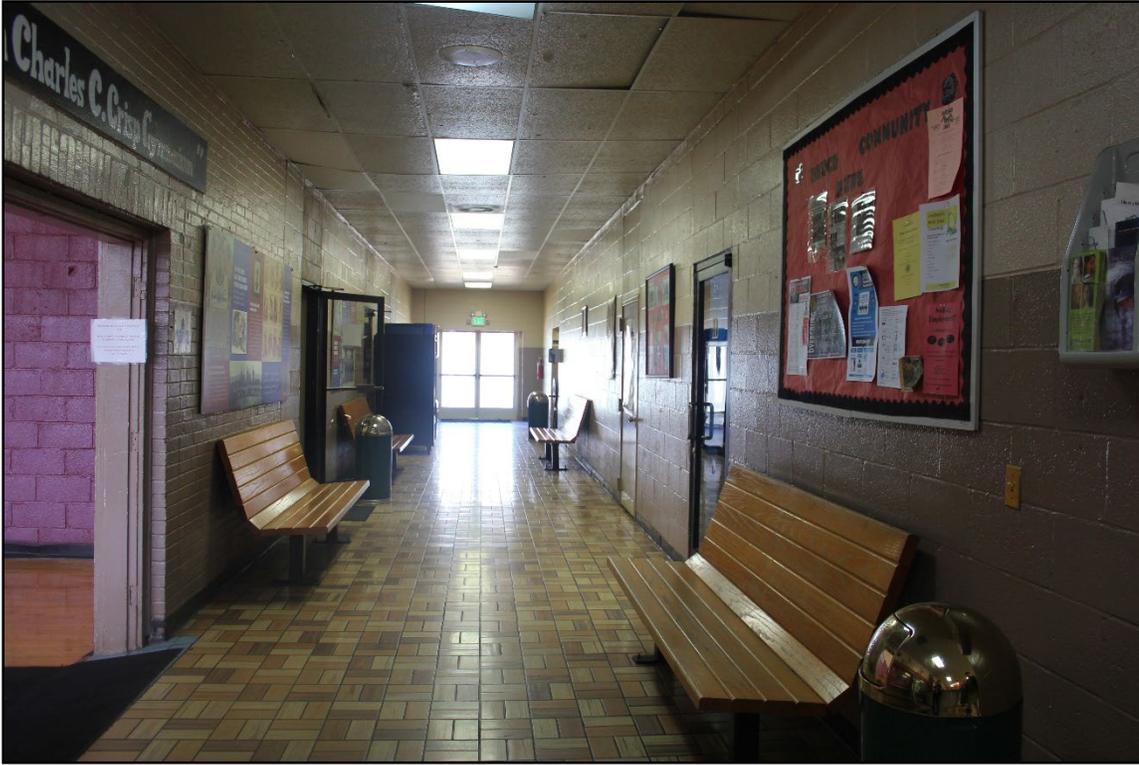
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**BRUCE HIGH SCHOOL
DYERSBURG, DYER COUNTY, TENNESSEE**



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