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Douglass High School Statement of Significance

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Douglass High School is significant locally as a tangible symbol of the sense of purpose and quiet tenacity of the black people of Loudoun County in their determination to secure a good secondary education for their children. Black citizens bought the land and presented it to the school board, who in 1953 bought additional land from a neighboring black family. The classroom and gymnasium additions of 1954 and 1960 respectively offered black students the opportunity for more varied classes. This opportunity in turn allowed the students of Douglass High to plan for higher levels of education than had been possible for previous generations.

The school was operated as the County's first and only black high school from its opening in 1941 until the end of segregated education in Loudoun County in 1968, at which time the building became a middle school. Its active alumni association has a number of prominent graduates who could not have reached their potential if Loudoun County's black citizens had not worked so hard to acquire the land and see that the school was built.

JUSTIFICATION OF CRITERIA

The Douglass High School is a focal point for all of its graduates and those who helped build and outfit it. It is a local symbol of what Loudoun County blacks accomplished through will and hard work, and its very active alumni association has planned a 50th anniversary celebration in 1991. The Douglass School is unique in Loudoun County as a tangible symbol of the black struggle for equal rights in education and as such is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Until the Douglass High School was built, Loudoun County provided secondary education to black students in quarters within the building known as the Loudoun County Training School. This building on Union Street in Leesburg housed the black elementary school on the ground floor and the high school on the second floor. The building was an antiquated frame structure with no proper safety devices. For example,



the windows opening onto the fire escapes would not open, and an open oil drum was stored under the stairs. Only a very sparse curriculum was offered and the school was not accredited with the State of Virginia. No laboratory science classes were offered. There were not even any facilities for a home economics course because there was no equipment. Bus transportation was not offered to all students, so some had to live in Leesburg or their parents had to arrange to get them to the school. Those children who planned to go to college had to go to the boarding school for black high school students in Manassas in Prince William County, resulting in extra expense for their parents as the boarding school charged tuition.

In the 1930s the parent/teacher association of all the black schools in the county formed the County-Wide League. Each school paid a \$6 per year membership fee. The league was formed as a body designed to take complaints or suggestions to the school board. The league was concerned about the inadequate secondary education for black students and in the late 1930s sought land to purchase for a school. In interviews, older black citizens who worked to acquire the land and get the school built explained that the league and all its members held bake sales, rummage sales, dances, ball games, field days, recitation programs, and any other fundraising activities they could think of to raise money. They have reported that they were not too proud to beg and received donations from both blacks and whites.

Those interviewed said it took two or three years to get enough money to buy the land. Eight acres were found on the eastern outskirts of Leesburg, and Willie Hall [William Nathaniel Hall], a successful black contractor in Middleburg, co-signed the note for the purchase. The trustees of the County-Wide League purchased the land from W. S. Gibbons on November 4, 1939. Final transfer of the land from the league to the school board did not take place until December 16, 1940, when the black citizens sold the land to the school board for \$1 after a court determination the “such sale and conveyance will be for the best advantage and benefit of the colored citizens of said County and said County-Wide League of Loudoun County and . . . ordered that the said sale be and the same was thereby approved and ratified by said Court. . .to execute and deliver the said School Board of Loudoun County, Virginia, and proper conveyance of the aforesaid land was further approved and ratified by said court.”

In early 1940 the school board recommended to the Board of Supervisors of the county that it apply for a loan from the State Literary Fund, part of which would be used to build a new black high school. However, they were told that the Literary Fund had no money to lend and would not be able to consider a loan for twelve to eighteen months. Therefore, the County-Wide League retained Charles H. Houston of Washington, D. C., an attorney active in many civil rights cases (see Exhibit I), to represent them in bringing their complaints about the high school accommodations to the school board and to try to persuade the county to find the money to build the school building.

On March 16, 1940, Houston wrote to Mr. O. L. Emerick, then superintendent of Loudoun county schools. He pointed out the unsafe quality of the existing high school facility on the second floor of the Loudoun County Training School. He spoke of the inadequate curriculum, the lack of accreditation, and lack of bus transportation for all students. 2 The school board had argued that no additional bus transportation could be provided since the school was already overcrowded. The board offered no solution to these problems. Houston pointed out the right of equal protections of the laws under

the Fourteenth Amendment and legal procedure for dealing with the problem, suggesting that court action would be the final appeal. He emphasized that the county's black citizens were anxious to cooperate with the school administration and the school board. Certainly their efforts to secure land for a school building to donate to the school board illustrated a cooperative spirit. Houston urged Emerick to revise the budget and provide funds for the construction of a new high school.

In April, Houston and a group of citizens appeared again before the school board asking for better facilities for the students. As a result, the board asked for a supplementary appropriation from the Board of Supervisors of \$4,500 for two more teachers, work on the building, laboratory equipment, home economics equipment, furniture, and transportation. In May the superintendent reported that the Board of Supervisors had denied this request.

The black citizens of the county were amazingly patient but did not let themselves be forgotten and on December 10, 1940, the minutes of the school board noted the appointment of Charles F. Harrison as attorney to examine and approve in writing the title to "the lot of land being donated by the negro citizens of Loudoun County for use as a high school site at Leesburg and that the said Charles F. Harrison is hereby designated by the board to make the necessary certificate in connection with the application of this board for a loan of \$30,000 from the State Literary Fund of Virginia for use in erecting a colored high school." 3 On January 14, 1941, the minutes stated "That the Superintendent of Schools be hereby authorized and directed to advertise for bids for construction of ... the unit for the Leesburg colored high school." 4 The February 19, 1941, minutes show that the proposal of the Taylor Manufacturing Col. of Farmville, Virginia, was accepted to build the school for \$35,438. 5 In March supplementary loans were requested from the Board of Supervisors and contracts were signed.

The May 13, 1941, minutes noted that teachers were authorized for the new school and were hired. 7 In June the board authorized water connection to the school. 8 In September the school opened for partial service although both buildings were still used for a short while. John Tolbert, former vice-mayor of the town of Leesburg, drove a school bus at that time and remembers driving students from the old building to the new building for two classes and then returning them to the old building.

The name for the school was chosen by the citizens who with quiet persistence and great cooperation with the county had supported the effort to have a high school for their children. It was named for Frederick Douglass, a former slave who became a prominent abolitionist and who shared these qualities. Born on a Maryland plantation in 1817, Douglass later escaped to New England where he was engaged by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Nantucket as a lecturer. He took part in political action campaigns, and conferred with John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. He traveled in Great Britain and Canada, always pressing for abolition. He was an eminently practical man and worked for suffrage and civil rights. He championed the cause of all women by working for women's suffrage as well as suffrage for freed slaves. He urged education as a means for blacks to succeed as free men and many of his ideas were used by Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute. His own dogged determination and pragmatic approach were mirrored in the act of the black people of Loudoun County who worked so hard to get the Douglass High School built.

The school board only provided the barest necessities, such as desks, for furnishing the school, so again the back parent/teachers associations and the County–Wide League went to work to earn money, this time for furniture. They provided the chairs for the auditorium. Tolbert recalls that he gave money for several chairs. The parents and other school supporters also provided curtains, laboratory equipment, a piano, equipment for a home economics department, equipment for a band, and numerous other items. The school board arranged a loan from the State Literary Fund for \$2000 to build a shop of cinderblock and brick and students did some of the construction work. A number of contributions came from white community individuals and businesses.

Eventually the school was accredited [1941-42 school year]; more land was acquired so that the school could be enlarged by the addition of more classrooms and a full gymnasium, and Douglass High School served the county as the only black high school until desegregation of all school in the 1968-69 school year. The building then became a middle school and finally an alternative school (for students with varied problems) and a special education school both of which are still accommodated in the buildings. The Douglass Community Center shares the space with the Douglass Community School at the present time. [Photograph]

The public continues to support the Douglass School as it has always done. Much work has been done to the ten-acre lot that now contains the buildings which make it an oasis surrounded by the modern development that has grown up around it. This work has been done by civic groups of all types or has been accomplished by donations of time or money by individuals. For example, much of the landscaping and tree planting, particularly around the periphery to screen the facility was done by the Leesburg Garden Club, a member club of the Garden Club of Virginia, which won the Commonwealth Award for its work. A fitness trail, picnic tables and outdoor play equipment have been installed. The Douglass School continues to represent a successful community effort and those of its early supporters who still remain, its alumni, and the School Board, would like to see it continue serving the needs of the community in the future.

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