

Walker High School is a two-story brick building with concrete trim. Built in 1930, it stands within a small educational complex located only a block from a major intersection in the Livingston Parish community of Walker. The building primarily displays Italian Renaissance and Italian Baroque motifs. Although the school has experienced some alteration since its completion, it remains eligible for the National Register.

The building's rectilinear facade exhibits a three-part composition in which a slightly projecting central pavilion with a vertical emphasis is flanked by horizontal wings. The school's footprint is that of a rectangle from which a large rear wing extends. This wing accommodates a large, two-story auditorium located directly behind the entrance pavilion and lobby. The building houses nine original classrooms, four on the first floor and five on the second. Each room opens into a "U"-shaped hallway which wraps around the auditorium (see attached sketch). All of the rooms are large, well lighted, and have doors with transoms. Changes to the floorplan will be discussed below.

The facade's most important feature is the projecting pavilion, where most of the Italian motifs are found. It is distinguished by a one-story portico whose thick columns and matching pilasters have ornate capitals and bas relief carvings on their lower portions. The columns support a heavy molded entablature with a thin row of egg and dart molding located just below the cornice. The entablature, in turn, supports a small balcony with an iron railing. Behind the portico are wood paneled doors recessed within an arched opening whose spandrels feature floral motifs. Each door has a rectangular window subdivided into a central lozenge shape and four additional polygonal panes. At the pavilion's second level two spiral columns with ornate capitals support stylized acanthus leaves. These columns separate a set of three arched windows. Above the windows bas relief floral motifs surround a baroque cartouche displaying the numerals "1930". The pavilion is crowned by a curvilinear parapet flanked by low walls. The latter are decorated with colored tile insets and classical urns. In addition, the parapet is decorated by a brick band beneath a concrete coping, a central keystone piercing the curved section of the brick band, a raised and curved panel in which the school's name is spelled out, and an element slightly suggestive of an onion dome rising from the top of the parapet's curve.

The building's horizontal wings feature decorative brick panels, subdivided windows (some in sets of three), and a watertable (laid in a darker color of brick) whose upper edge forms a belt course immediately below the first floor windows. A red tile roof surmounts the classroom section of the building.

Except for two stylized arches decorating each end of the first floor central hall, interior ornament is confined to the school's auditorium. This space features a molded cornice with a stylized scroll motif; a chair rail; a beamed ceiling; and a stage whose proscenium displays three molded bands: an egg and dart band, a middle band of stylized acanthus leaves, and a final bead and reel band.

Alterations to the school include the installation of tile ceilings in the classrooms, the conversion of the former auditorium balcony into two additional classrooms, the closure of an opening which connected the school's former small first floor library to the adjacent classroom, the removal of a wall between the two small administrative offices, the adaptation of one first floor classroom to create additional offices, the painting of the poorer quality bricks which cover the rear elevations, the construction of a new metal roof above the auditorium's curving roof to correct problems with leakage, and the attachment of covered walkways at the side and rear of the auditorium wing.

Despite the above-mentioned alterations, Walker High School would still easily be recognized by its first graduating class should they return to the campus today. And the building retains all of the decorative features which make it architecturally significant. As the symbol of a "coming of age" of education in the Walker area, and as an architectural landmark within Livingston Parish, the school is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

SIGNIFICANT DATE: 1930
ARCHITECT: W. R. Burk
BUILDER: R. L. Roland & Son
CRITERIA: A, C

Walker High School is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is a rare landmark in Livingston Parish. It is also locally significant in the area of education because its construction marked a "coming of age" of education in the Walker area. As will be explained below, the erection of a large modern brick school made possible improved education, not to mention its considerable symbolic value as a milestone.

Architecture

Livingston Parish has not yet had a Historic Structures Survey implemented. However, the Louisiana National Register staff is very familiar with the area and can provide a fair assessment of its architectural patrimony.

Historically a rural area, the parish was settled fairly early in the nineteenth century. However, very few pre-1900 buildings have survived (a notable exception being the old Livingston Parish Courthouse in Springfield). The parish's collection of early twentieth century buildings is undistinguished, consisting primarily of folk bungalows, unstyled cottages, and nondescript commercial buildings. In addition, the parish's close proximity to the City of Baton Rouge has generated the construction of a number of modern subdivisions and strip developments. Within this context, Walker High School is a rare architectural gem. It achieves this distinction from its size and from the rich use of Italian Renaissance and Italian Baroque ornament on its facade. Indeed, it is unusual to find such a highly decorated building within Livingston Parish.

Education

Governing officials and residents of the Walker area were slow to provide quality education for their children. For many years students attended one- or two-room schools located in various isolated areas where transportation was primitive. Typically, the facilities provided only the bare essentials as far as curriculum and supplies were concerned. Although this situation was not unlike that found in most rural Louisiana communities, the problem of providing education to Walker area youngsters was compounded by the fact that many of the rural residents were too poor to provide any money for education. By 1917 the situation had improved in the Village of Walker. Although there is no description, the community had its own school by that year, when its first class graduated. The school was approved by the state in 1921; by 1928 it consisted of one ten-room frame building which housed both the elementary and high school grades.

Interest in providing better education to children grew in the late 1920s. By that time the Walker area was organized as District Four of the Livingston Parish School Board. On April 3, 1928, the board extended the boundaries of District Four and called for a special election to approve the sale of \$52,000 worth of bonds to finance a new school. Because the bonds were to be redeemed through property tax funds, citizens of the district had to approve the proposal. However, the proposition failed by a wide margin (54 in favor, 85 against). Despite this setback, the school board and interested citizens refused to give up. The following July the board extended District Four's boundaries even further and called for another tax election. Apparently there was great interest in the issue, with local citizens predicting a close race. They were correct. On August 21, 1928, the proposition passed by a mere eight votes (73 in favor, 65 against). The school board almost immediately began the process of selling the securities, but the bonds did not sell until April 1930. Near the end of that month, and after negotiations to lower the contractor's bid, the board awarded the construction contract to R. L. Roland & Son. Apparently, the masonry building (designed by New Orleans architect W. R. Burk) was quickly completed. However, money for educational equipment was at first lacking. This problem was solved in January 1931 when voters' approval of an additional property tax indicated their desire for education to remain a priority in Livingston Parish's School District Four (now the Walker School District).

This transition from frame school buildings to "modern" brick facilities is a recognizable chapter in the history of public education in the state, with the latter universally by their very nature considered to be better. In its 1924-25 annual report, the State Department of Education in Louisiana bragged that the number of brick school buildings in the state had grown from 40 in 1900 to 388 in 1925. By way of explanation, the report noted: "In the earlier years the custom was to erect cheap frame buildings. The custom now is to use permanent materials...." The 1930 Walker High School continued this trend.

The new building brought a great improvement in the physical facilities and the quality of education received in Walker and vicinity. Previously all eleven grades were in a ten classroom building. Now the elementary grades had their own building (the old one) and grades eight through eleven had a new "modern brick school" with nine classrooms (including science and home economic laboratories which the old building lacked), a library, administrative office and a large auditorium. Because of overcrowding at the old building, two elementary grades were very soon moved to the new school.

The building thrilled the students. "I remember how excited we were about moving into the new school. . . ." commented Alice Roux Stafford, Class of 1935. "It was hard to believe that Walker had such a modern school." Added Eleanor Peak Eccles, Class of 1934,

The thing that impressed me most was the beauty of the building

. . . The interior was bright and cheerful; we had looked at dull beaded ceilings and walls for so long in the old building. . . . The auditorium, with its stage and wood molding, was most impressive. We thought we were really something as we walked upon that stage during our graduation ceremony.

With more space in which to offer a variety of courses, the district's officials expanded the high school curriculum. In addition, the building's existence allowed the parish to begin a program of consolidation through which the older rural schools were gradually closed and their students sent to the new facility. The entire community enjoyed the benefits the building provided. The auditorium was especially important, providing a space for cultural activities enjoyed by the broader community as well as the youngsters. As Mrs. Stafford remembered, "There were activities in the new auditorium practically every week."

The building continued to serve as a high school until 1975, when it was converted into a junior high. To date, it still operates in this capacity.

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Staff knowledge of Livingston Parish, Louisiana.

Site visit by National Register staff.