

Waterproof High School is a two-story, masonry structure erected in 1926 (occupied early 1927) in the small town of Waterproof, located in Tensas Parish on the Mississippi River. The school has a spacious park-like setting amid a neighborhood of low-scale, modest residences. Based on the details of the entrance pavilion, Waterproof High is being classified as Classical Revival for the purposes of this nomination. Except for its boarded-up windows and some deterioration, the school looks much as it did when constructed. Hence it can easily convey its historical significance as a "coming of age" for education.

Waterproof High School's façade displays a five-part composition of projecting and receding planes. These consist of a projecting central pavilion and two projecting wings connected to the central section by receding hyphens. Each elevation is pierced by bands of windows. The rectangular building is capped by a parapet with a coping of cast concrete blocks.

The building's only decorative features occur on the projecting central pavilion. On its lower level, a large recessed entrance vestibule is highlighted by a handsome well-proportioned Classical Revival surround. Cast concrete block pilasters superimposed upon another layer of cast concrete blocks support an entablature containing the school's name. The pilasters feature stylized capitals. Above the entablature is a low pediment with a raking cornice. At the second story level, paired windows are centered above the entrance. These are encased in a concrete block surround connected to the lower level surround by volutes. The second floor surround is surmounted by a rusticated, projecting entablature which supports a large lunette formed of cast concrete blocks. Within the lunette is bas relief decoration, including a roundel containing the school's construction date, torches containing flame-like elements, a shell, ribbons, and floral garlands. Arches appear above single windows which pierce the central pavilion on both levels (segmental arches with keystones on the first story and lunettes with keystones on the second). Finally, the building's parapet is stepped and curved above the central pavilion to imitate the curves of the lunettes.

Access to the interior was not possible for this nomination because of certain terms of the insurance policy held by the Town of Waterproof, which has a fifty year lease on the building from the Tensas Parish School Board. Looking through one available opening enabled the National Register staff to obtain some sense of its character. The lobby is marked by a series of five arches on axis with the front door. As is typical of a period school, each classroom has a transom above the door and a transom-like window opening into the hall.

Waterproof High has been closed a few years and almost all of the building's windows and doors have been sealed by board coverings to prevent vandalism. The window sashes remain in place; however, some of the glass has been lost to vandalism. The only other alterations to the exterior are covered walkways attached to the side elevations. (These lead to non-contributing buildings on the property that are being excluded from the nominated acreage.)

Significant dates:	1926
ARCHITECT/BUILDER:	Original Architect: W. E. Stephens Completing Architect: W. E. Spink Original Contractor: G. H. Pannell Completing Contractor: W. E. Spink
CRITERION:	A

Waterproof High School is locally significant in the area of education because its construction represented a "coming of age" for public education in the Tensas Parish village of Waterproof. As will be explained below, the erection of a large "modern brick school" (a term used at the time) made possible improved education in various respects, not to mention its considerable symbolic value as a milestone. Within the context of a very small town with low-scale modest buildings, the new school must have seemed quite grand. The Mississippi delta parish of Tensas was and is quite rural. During the historic period, none of its three small towns exceeded 1,000 in population. Waterproof in 1920 had a population of 340, which had grown to only 420 by 1930.

Although information on early educational endeavors in Tensas is slim, one can safely assume that the situation there matched that found in other rural Louisiana parishes during the late nineteenth century. Although the Louisiana constitution of 1845 mandated the creation of public school systems in each parish, this law appears to have made little difference because monetary support from the state capital seldom arrived. In addition, citizens felt education to be a private rather than public concern. As a result, children were taught by tutors on local plantations; and in the 1884--1885 school year only 26 students attended "formal" schools in Tensas Parish. Most of the latter would have been small

schools sharing space in local buildings. Because of an overall lack of commitment to public education, private schools would have played an important role in providing education to the parish's children for many years. Although the situation must have improved over time, these early schools often sadly lacked adequate teachers, physical facilities, and supplies.

Furthermore, any attempt residents might have made to provide education for their children would have been hampered by the parish's poor economy, which failed to recover adequately after the Civil War.

By the mid-1920s the situation had improved somewhat. Tensas Parish had an organized school board which met at regular intervals in the parish seat of St. Joseph. At least a few public-supported one-room facilities existed in the countryside, and each of the parish's three small towns (St. Joseph, Newellton and Waterproof) had its own high school. (During this period "high" schools taught all grades.) Waterproof had hosted several small schools over the years. It was not until around 1900 that a large, two-room school was provided. Between 1905 and 1908 this building was expanded, providing a total of four classrooms, a small office, and three cloak rooms. Later two cottages were either built or moved to the school site. The school became a high school in 1906 but was not "officially" approved as such until its high school enrollment reached twenty pupils in the 1921-1922 academic year. Despite this achievement, the school faced many problems. L. M. Favrot, State Rural School Inspector, described the matter succinctly after visiting Tensas Parish in late January and early February, 1923.

In the matter of school buildings [he wrote in his report], Tensas Parish has not kept pace with the great majority of the parishes of the state. The parish can boast of only one modern brick school building, the building at Newellton. There are few schools in the state today as poorly housed as are the high schools of St. Joseph and Waterproof. The rooms are inadequate in size, improperly lighted, and unsatisfactorily arranged.

An April 1924 report of the Tensas Parish School Board agreed with this assessment, describing the Waterproof High School as old and of "poor design." By piecing together information printed in various issues of the *Tensas Gazette* during the spring and fall of 1924, one learns that Waterproof's school had 138 enrollees and that, at that time, classes were taught in four separate frame structures. And, although the school had teachers for its commercial (business) and home economics classes, each teacher of younger children had to teach two elementary grades. (Teacher assignments would change yearly depending upon needs.)

St. Joseph began taking steps to obtain a new school in 1923, but Waterproof did not officially address the issue until late 1924. On October 29 Waterproof citizens met and passed a resolution calling for the appointment of a committee to work with the school board to define a new school district (to be known as district number four), select a site, and construct and equip a modern school building at Waterproof. The next day the school board responded by calling an election so citizens could approve the monetary measures needed to finance the building. The election proved successful, with citizens agreeing to tax themselves in order to underwrite school bonds in the amount of \$60,000. An agreement was reached with a bond company in March 1925. By June a building committee had been appointed and a site had been chosen. Also by that date, Architect W. E. Stephens had drawn preliminary plans. The bid of contractor G. H. Pannell of Wesson, Mississippi for the construction of the school was accepted at the July 26 school board meeting. Pannell's bid was \$55,981.60.

From this point forward, the Waterproof school project did not progress smoothly. By October 1925 the school board had become dissatisfied with the professional behavior of architect Stephens and removed him from the job. W. E. Spink was chosen to replace him. Although construction seems to have begun, Spink was required to make a number of alterations to the plans due to safety and other considerations. Spink was also asked to have his plans approved by the committee on building plans of the State Department of Education. Contractor Pannell was given an extra sixty days to complete the school. However, two months later he abandoned the job and filed for bankruptcy.

It appears that no further work took place until the summer of 1926. In July of that year the school board directed its Waterproof School building committee to assume all responsibility for financial matters relating to the school's construction and accepted architect Spink's proposal to serve as the school's de facto general contractor. By November, the board was purchasing equipment for the new building. This included, among other things, tables and desks for children of all ages, beginning at the kindergarten level. Construction and furniture installation were complete by the end of January, 1927.

The new school consolidated Waterproof's previously scattered classrooms into one large, two-story brick building. The structure provided fourteen classrooms and a large study hall. Although no other description of the school is available, newspaper accounts of equipment purchased and events which took place there make it clear that chemistry and home economics classrooms existed. Equipment purchased suggests there may also have been a small library tucked somewhere within the school. The large, well-organized, and finely equipped facility would have made it possible to separate students by grades and expand the curriculum. Thus, the opening of the new school greatly improved the quality

of education received by Waterproof's children.

The transition from frame school buildings to a "modern" brick facility experienced by the Waterproof School 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. The Annual Report of the State Department of Education in Louisiana for 1924-25 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...." Waterproof citizens, especially the 188 students now enrolled, were pleased and proud to join this movement. Bragged the *Tensas Gazette*, "The people of this town and community now have a building equal to that of the best in the state."

The building continued in use as a school into the 1990s. Upon its closure, the Town of Waterproof acquired a fifty-year lease on the building, with an option to renew for another 50 years. There is a keen interest in the mayor's office in preserving the building – an interest hampered, of course, by lack of funding. In the meantime, at least it has been secured to prevent further vandalism. The present nomination is an effort to call attention to the importance of the school. It is a joint project of the Town of Waterproof and the Delta Ministry, an Episcopal faith-in-action program which provides mobile health care to this underserved region.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Tensas Gazette, March 2, 1923 - January 28, 1927; copies of pertinent articles in National Register file.

Tensas Parish Planning Board. *Tensas Parish Resources and Facilities*. Department of Public Works Planning Division, 1949.

Site visit by National Register staff.