HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION
NOVEMBER 21, 2016
DEMOLITION AND RELOCATION PERMITS
HDP-2016-0529
500 MONTOPOLIS DRIVE

PROPOSAL

Demolish a ca. 1935 former school building.

ARCHITECTURE

One-story, rectangular-plan, side-gabled frame institutional building with multi-light wood-frame windows. The building has been boarded over with metal to protect it from vandalism.

RESEARCH

This building served as the Montopolis Negro School from 1935 until 1962, and as the home of the Montopolis Church of Christ from 1967 until a few years ago.

Education for African-American children in Montopolis dates from around 1891, when a school was established on the north side of the Bastrop Highway about a mile south of the Colorado River. That first school building was a small, frame building, said to be similar to a shotgun house, but was destroyed by a storm in 1935. Rev. J.H. Harrel of St. Edward's Baptist Church, the oldest African-American Baptist church in Travis County, donated 1.82 acres of land for the new school at its current site. A two-roof frame former Army barracks from Camp Swift in Bastrop County was moved to the site and renovated for school use. The school was operated by the Colorado Common School District of Travis County until 1952, when the area and the school were annexed by the City of Austin, and the school became part of the Austin Public School system.

A 1954 report of the Austin public schools shows that the Montopolis Elementary School had 43 pupils in grades 1-4. The report goes on to state "Montopolis was established for the Negro children in the Colorado Common School District #36 in about 1891 (unable to obtain exact date.) In 1952, it became a part of the Austin Public Schools. The land, 1.82 acres, was valued at $2,184. The value of the frame building was set at $651. The building has been renovated and supplied with new equipment at a cost of $4,903. There are two new classrooms, lunchroom, and toilets and showers. The principal of Rosewood School is the supervising principal." Austin's Schools, 1881 – 1954, published by the Austin Public Schools, 1954.

Like their urban counterparts, country schools, such as Montopolis, were segregated, although some Mexican children did attend schools for blacks. The schools functioned not only as places for education, but also as social and cultural centers for their communities, especially in areas like rural Montopolis, where opportunities for socialization were limited due to distances between houses, and the constant burdens of work. The teachers at these segregated schools made only a fraction of their counterparts in Anglo schools, and enrollment was typically low, due to the need for older children to participate in farm work. Attendance could therefore be sporadic, depending on the family's need for the labor of their older children, which made school a luxury. School years in the country schools were typically shorter than those in towns so that students could help out on family farms or work with their families on the farms of others for income. Poverty, hunger, and health were also constant issues in some country schools. Teachers also had to supply books and other educational materials out of their meager earnings. Many teachers in these country schools taught several grades at the same time in the same room.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a school such as this one in Montopolis, became an important center for the community. Parents of the school-children were perhaps only one generation removed from the plantations and cotton farms, and literacy among older African-Americans in the South was generally low. African-American communities put a premium on education, especially the ability to read and write, that schools like Montopolis provided for their children or grandchildren.

There were 42 rural schools for black children in Travis County at one time. Montopolis is one of the few that survive. The Montopolis Negro School is very significant for its place in the educational history of Austin, Travis County, and Texas. It served as a community hub for the African-American settlement at Montopolis, and was a segregated school until it closed in 1962. The school building, despite its current appearance, has significance for its historical associations and community value.

STAFF COMMENTS

The school building is not within the bounds of any City survey.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Initiate historic zoning. This building has great significance in the fields of African-American history, the history of Montopolis, and education in Austin and Texas. This building qualifies for landmark designation under the criteria for community value and historical associations, and as a landmark, it could be eligible for tax benefits from the city and state to restore and preserve the building.

LOCATION MAP



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SUBJECT TRACT
PENDING CASE
ZONING BOUNDARY

NOTIFICATIONS

CASE#: HDP-2016-0529
LOCATION: 500 Montopolis

1 " = 152 '

This product is for informational purposes and may not have been prepared for or be suitable for legal, engineering, or surveying purposes. It does not represent an on-the-ground survey and represents only the approximate relative location of property boundaries.

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CITY OF AUSTIN
FOUNDED 1839

MONTOPOLIS SCHOOL Around 1891, the Montopolis School was established in the Colorado School District as school No. 34. The original location was on the Bastrop Highway, north side, about one mile south of the river, according to Artie Brown and James Edwards, who were both in their 90s, and were students at the school. The first school building was similar to a shotgun house, and was used until 1935, when it was destroyed by a storm. In 1935, the St. Edward's Baptist Church, under the leadership of the Rev. J. H. Harrel, donated 1.82 acres off Montopolis Road for the new school site. A two-room Army Barrack was moved from Camp Swift and renovated to serve as a school. Some of the schools notable teachers were Mrs. M. E. Smith, Mrs. Madalyn Moore Strong, Ms. Delores Merriweather, Mrs. Charles Henderson, and Mrs. U. V. Underwood. Students of Montopolis School had fond memories of their teachers and school's spacious tree covered campus. Holidays and school closing programs were great productions. The annual May Pole Dance was a spectacle. Annual Juneteenth picnics were held on the school grounds with a baseball game with the rival Lamar School. In J. Mason Brewer's Online of the History of the Negro in Travis County, he noted that the school had 43 students in 1951, and covered grades 1 through 8. In 1952, the school became part of the Austin Independent School District. The land, 1.82 acres, was valued at $2,184.00, and the value of the frame building at $641.00. The building was renovated and supplied with new equipment at a cost of $4,908.00. A new room was added that served as a classroom and lunchroom, toilets and showers. In 1953, Madelyn Strong was transferred due to declining enrollment. In 1962, due to the inadequacy of the physical plant, John Bell, supervising teacher, recommended that the school be closed and students transfer to Sims Elementary. On March 30, 1962, Montopolis School officially closed.

TEACHERS: Mrs. M. E. Smith Mrs. Madalyn Moore Strong Ms. Delores Merriweather Mr. Charles Henderson Mrs. U. V. Underwood

LIST OF STUDENTS: Artie Brown James Edwards

INTERVIEWS: ARTIE BROWN AND JAMES EDWARDS contributed to the information about the school. They could not provide other names of students.

From African-American Rural Schools of Travis County, Travis County Historical Commission, 2014.

Montopolis Negro School/Church of Christ
Timeline

Year	Milestone	Source
circa 1891	School is established as Colorado School No. 34	Montopolis School Reunion Book, 1999
1897-1903	St. Edwards Baptist Church moves to donated land at 408 Montopolis Drive. The new building is constructed out of recycled materials from the original building built in 1868.	Montopolis School Reunion Book
ca 1891-1935	The school and church serve as important community centers and are used for civic functions such as annual Juneteenth celebrations, baseball games and BBQ's.	Travis County Historical Society, 2014
1935	The original one room school building located on Bastrop Highway is destroyed by a storm. St. Edward's Baptist Church donates 1.82 acres of land at the school's present location on Montopolis Drive. An old Army barracks building from Camp Swift is procured to serve as a replacement school.	Montopolis School Reunion Book, 1999, Travis County Deed Records Vol. 520, p. 280
1952	City of Austin begins annexing Montopolis	*Austin's Montopolis Neighborhood*, p. 7-8
November 1952	Colorado School District No. 36 transfers the school to the Austin Free Public Schools	Travis County Deed Records Vol. 1297, p. 401
1952-1955	The school building is renovated and supplied with new equipment and a new room is added to the building that serves as a classroom and lunchroom. The new room also has toilets and showers obviating the need for an outhouse.	Montopolis School Reunion Book, 1999
1955	The Austin Free Public Schools open Allison Elementary School	*Austin's Montopolis Neighborhood,* p. 48
March 1962	Austin ISD officially ceases operating the Montopolis School	Montopolis School Reunion Book, 1999
1963-1964	Austin ISD places the Montopolis School up for auction and starts receiving bids	May 11, 1964 Austin ISD minutes
August 1967	Austin ISD accepts the bid of O.A. Willhoite for the school property. The winning bid was $5,102.	July 26, 1967 Austin ISD minutes
December 1968	David Willhoite deeds the property to the Montopolis Church of Christ with Ross and David Willhoite as Trustees	Travis County Deed Records Vol. 3604, p. 1244
November 1970	The City of Austin secures road easements through the property	Travis County Deed Records Vol. 3953, p. 725
August 1987	Ross and David Willhoite deed .740 acres of the original 1.82 acre tract to the City of Austin	Travis County Deed Records Vol. 10395, p. 414
1990	City of Austin condemns the original church property. The church moves to its present location at 702 Montopolis Drive. The old property, currently addressed as 400 Montopolis Dr. is now owned by David Willhoite with portions owned by Marion Sanchez.	Montopolis School Reunion Book, Travis County Deed Records
March 2015	David Willhoite sells property to KEEP Investment Group	Travis County Deed Records 2015037818

Timeline prepared by Dr. Fred McGheesadows






CHURCH OF CHRIST
THE ENTRANCE


CHURCH OF CHRIST


IS CHRIST FIRST IN YOUR LIFE?
INVITATION SONG


IS CHRIST FIRST IN YOUR LIFE?
INVITATION SONG



Interior photographs courtesy of Dr. Fred L. McGhee