

COMMENTARY

# Renovations ongoing at Thurgood Marshall's former elementary school



Site superintendent Donald Jones explains how the interior transom windows will be restored at Public School 103. Jerry Jackson/Baltimore Sun photos



Former state senator Michael Mitchell reminisces about his time at Public School 103 in Upton, Thurgood Marshall's boyhood school.

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Michael Mitchell stood on the Division Street sidewalk and spoke of how he helped a crew deliver coal from a horse-drawn wagon to his then elementary school.

Mitchell, who went on to represent his home neighborhood in the Baltimore City Council starting in 1975 and State Senate, said the school's antiquated 1877 furnace often failed in the 1950s when he was a student there.

Teachers handed out mittens to students who came unprepared for the mechanical shortcomings of Public School 103.

“But this is just thrilling,” Mitchell said of an ongoing \$14 million refurbishment of the school, which put in nearly a century of hard student use in the heart of Baltimore’s historic African American Upton neighborhood.

He and National Park Service officials recently toured this historic work-in-progress. They were led by the Rev. Al Hathaway, former Union Baptist Church pastor who has championed the school’s refurbishment. Officials of the Baltimore-based general contractor, Mahogany Construction, also explained the building’s past life and the task of making the old schoolhouse shine again.

“My home was just that way,” said Mitchell, pointing to 1324 Druid Hill Ave., a block away from his school. “I would come home from class and there would be Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. having fried chicken and potato salad on our dining room table. When Thurgood Marshall came, he liked wings.”

He said the school and its staff overcame adversity. At the time, the overflowing student population would outnumber desk chairs. The teachers improvised with milk crates.

“My teachers imparted pride and an excellent education,” Mitchell said. “My first grade teacher was Wahseeola Male, a woman with long black hair. Every morning we sang the Black national anthem, [‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’], ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ and ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic.’ ”

This building ceased serving students about 1970 and was heavily damaged by a 2016 fire. It is now six months into its refurbishment as the Justice Thurgood Marshall Amenity Center at PS 103. Completion is expected by the end of this year.

Mitchell, the former state senator, said Justice Marshall was not the only notable student at School 103.

“Trazana Beverley was a student here,” he said of his former classmate. The Black actress received a Tony Award for the 1977

category of featured actress in a play, “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf”.

When it opened in 1877, the school was known as the Male and Female Grammar School No. 6. There were separate male and female principals. In those years, families of German descent lived nearby.

As Baltimore’s racial demographics changed, numerous Black families lived nearby. The city’s largest African American community flourished along Madison and Druid Hill avenues and Division and McCulloh streets more than a century ago.

Thurgood Marshall’s family operated a grocery store just down Division Street. That shop no longer stands.

The school is a good-looking brick building trimmed in Baltimore County limestone. It has a nice design pedigree. It was conceived by the prolific architect George Frederick, who designed City Hall and numerous other noteworthy landmarks.

The school was later named for Henry Highland Garnet, a minister, educator and orator who had been born into slavery in Kent County.

The school opened in 1877 and put in long hours until the early 1970s, when it served as the Upton Cultural and Arts Center and the office of neighborhood housing activist Lena J. Boone.

While other 19th century public schools were demolished, this building escaped razing and its first floor remained remarkably preserved. One of the 1877 classrooms is to be exactly restored down to the sash weights on its sizable windows and mechanical transom hardware.

Hathaway and other neighborhood leaders argued for its preservation. They pointed to its pivotal role in the education of Marshall, who would go on to argue the landmark school

desegregation case of Brown v. Board of Education before the Supreme Court starting in 1952.

“Let us never forget that public education is a valuable resource,” said Hathaway as he showed his visitors where the blackboards and cloakrooms once were.