

**NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE**  
Office of Archives and History  
Department of Cultural Resources

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**

**Central School**

Bessemer City, Gaston County, GS0933, Listed 1/9/2008  
Nomination by Susannah Winstead  
Photographs by Susannah Winstead, July 2007



Side view



Gymnasium



Central School  
Name of Property

Gaston County, North Carolina  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
5	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
5	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed  
In the National Register

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

N/A

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION: School

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**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

WORK IN PROGRESS

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**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Late Gothic Revival

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Classical Revival

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Other: Rustic Revival

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No Style

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**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

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roof SYNTHETICS: Rubber

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walls BRICK

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other CONCRETE

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**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Central School  
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Gaston County, North Carolina  
County and State

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**  
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**  
(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or a grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**  
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Areas of Significance**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**EDUCATION**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**  
1933-1957  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**  
1933, 1938-9, 1946, 1953  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**  
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)  
N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**  
N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**  
Unknown  
\_\_\_\_\_

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**  
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS):**
- \_\_\_ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
  - \_\_\_ previously listed in the National Register
  - \_\_\_ previously determined eligible by the National Register
  - \_\_\_ designated a National Historic Landmark
  - \_\_\_ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

- Primary Location of Additional Data**
- X** State Historic Preservation Office
  - \_\_\_ Other State agency
  - \_\_\_ Federal agency
  - \_\_\_ Local government
  - \_\_\_ University
  - \_\_\_ Other
- Name of repository:  
\_\_\_\_\_

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### 10. Geographical Data

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**Acreage of Property** approximately 3 acres

#### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	<u>17</u>	<u>474840</u>	<u>3904460</u>	3	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	4	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>
					<u>See continuation sheet</u>		

#### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

#### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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### 11. Form Prepared By

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name/title Susannah V. Franklin, Architectural Historian

organization The Landmark Group date 7/11/07

street & number 401 East Fourth Street, Suite 201 telephone (336) 714-8917

city or town Winston-Salem state NC zip code 27101

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### Additional Documentation

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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### Property Owner

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Central School Apartments, LLC and Bessemer City

street & number 406 East Fourth Street/ 132 West Virginia Avenue telephone (336) 722-9871

city or town Winston-Salem/ Bessemer City state NC zip code 27101/ 28016

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**Materials** (cont.)

walls STONE

**Summary**

The Central School in Bessemer City is located on the northeast corner of East Washington Avenue and North Ninth Street. The school faces south onto East Washington Avenue and is situated on 2.91 acres. The surrounding area consists of small single-family houses, ball fields, and a few nearby industrial buildings. The school is situated close to the sidewalk and the corner of the lot. A sidewalk leads to the front entrance of the school. The school runs east-west with wings projecting north to the rear on both ends of the building. To the east of the main building is the gymnasium building, which is set back farther from Washington Avenue. At the northeast corner of the main building is the home economics building, which also faces south. A classroom building is located behind the main school, with classroom entry doors facing south. A small storage shed is to the east of the classroom building, also behind the main school building.

The lot slopes gradually to the north of the site. A ballfield is adjacent to the property to the northeast of the buildings. There is parking along Washington Avenue and Ninth Streets. There are mature trees, including a number of crepe myrtles around the main school building and interspersed between auxiliary buildings. There is a metal breezeway projecting from the rear of the main school building on the west side. This may have once connected to the metal canopy of the classroom building. There is a free-standing, non-historic sign facing Washington Avenue immediately to the west of the front entrance approximately half way between the building and the sidewalk.

**Main School Building, c. 1929, 1946, contributing**

Built in 1929, the Collegiate Gothic-influenced U-plan school building is executed in running-bond brick and is two stories high on a raised basement. The auditorium in the center of the building projects to the rear of the building in the center of the "U." The seven-bay façade projects slightly at each end and features a concrete belt course under the first-story windows. On each projecting end bay there is a square decorative brick accent that frames the current signage on the building, "Central School." There are wings extending north from each end of the main block. Both wings are two-stories on a raised basement and are seven-bays long and two-bays deep. Exterior stairwells project in the second bay of each side wing. There is a small, one-story addition on the rear of the west wing. It is running bond brick veneer with a flat roof. There is a single metal door on the

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west side of the addition along with two rectangular small vents on the west and south elevations. There is a former smokestack on the east wing that is visible from the rear of the building.

There is a flat roof behind the parapet, which is stepped in the central bay over the main entrance, at each projecting front end, and over the projecting stairs on both the west and east elevations. Narrow concrete accents extend from the soldier and rowlock beltcourse above second story windows, reaching just above the stepped parapet that is capped with concrete coping. These accents are symmetrically spaced on the center and end bays of the front elevation in pairs and as single elements as well. Along the side elevations these decorative elements are on the projecting stairwells.

Historic wood-sash six-over-six, double-hung windows with concrete sills punctuate all elevations of the school. In a 1942 newspaper photograph showing the building following a devastating fire, the few remaining windows appear to be double-hung, six-over-six wooden sash. Though most, if not all windows, were replaced after this fire, they were designed to match the original windows. Currently, some panes are missing and window unit openings have been cut in in some places. Windows are paired on the front elevation but not on the projecting end bays. There is a triple window with four-over-four double hung sash over the main front entrance. Windows along the side elevations are single and two groups fo three on each elevation. There are no windows on the last bay of these elevations. There are small three-over-three wood windows at the basement level along the west and rear elevations. On the projecting end bays of the rear elevation they are in sets of two and three. On the center projecting rear bay, or auditorium, there are three single, small, three-over-three windows on the upper level, and two single, and three double, three-over-three windows at the lower level.

There are entrances on the front and sides of the building, as well as fire escapes on the rear wings. Within a slightly projecting central bay, concrete steps with brick knee-walls capped with concrete lead to the main entrance, with a double-leaf wood panel and six-light door with seven-light transom, similar to the doors on the side elevations. The front door is recessed behind a Tudor archway under a block of square panels fashioned in cast stone. The entrances on the side elevations are accessed under double rounded archways with keystones, by way of concrete steps leading to a landing under the arches. Stairs lead to an open second-story landing behind paired square openings with concrete sills. The sides of these projecting bays also feature rounded arch openings on the first story and square openings on the second story, creating sheltered, but open entry and stairwell

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landings. Single solid doors access the fire escape exits to the rear. Wood double-leaf doors are located on the rear of the auditorium.

Brick and concrete accents continue down the building façade. There are recessed, rectangular brick panels between first and second floor windows on front and side elevations. First floor window headers are soldier under rowlock courses, in the same pattern as the second story beltcourse. A concrete watertable runs just below the first floor windows on front and side elevations. Beneath this table are projecting rows of runners, in a 6:1 configuration on both front and side elevations.

The interior of the school retains much of its post-1946 historic fabric. Following a devastating fire in 1942, almost all of the school's interior was destroyed. It was rebuilt within the original exterior walls which survived the fire. The school's roof and most windows burned and were consequently replaced.

The first-story entrance opens into a small hallway flanked by office space and leads to the main corridor of the building which runs east-west. The auditorium is across from the main entrance. It projects to the rear of the center section and is accessed by two sets of double doors. Wainscoting with recessed square panels remains in the auditorium, as well as a stage with proscenium. There are wood floors and rows of folding auditorium seats that are in good condition. Glue-on acoustic tiles have been applied to the ceiling plaster.

There are no classrooms on the north side of the main corridor. The corridors in wings are flanked by classrooms. Ten classrooms line the south wall of the first story. Interior doors are nine-light glass and single-panel doors under four-light transoms. Double sets of these doors access the stairwells on each wing and stairs behind the auditorium leading to the basement. Stairs in the east and west wings lead to the second floor. Terrazzo floors remain in the corridors and wood floors remain in classrooms, though some are covered with carpet. Plaster walls remain as well, though ceilings have been dropped and are now acoustic tile. Mouldings of chalkboards remain in some classrooms, though the slate boards have been covered or replaced with dry-erase boards. In the rear of many classrooms, there are openings to a coat room, lined with coat hooks. Some later lockers remain in the corridors.

The second-story has eight classrooms, some offices and storage and the library in a similar configuration to that of the first story. Floors are also terrazzo in the corridors and wood in classrooms. Like the first story, doors are nine-light glass and single-panel



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doors under four-light transoms. The media center occupies an enlarged classroom space along the south wall of the west end of the main corridor. The rest of that corridor houses office space that was partitioned off at a later date.

The basement level housed the boiler room and storage in the west wing and the kitchen and cafeteria in the east wing. Under the auditorium there is a crawl space. The basement level has concrete floors, some covered with asbestos tiles. There are exposed concrete block walls and acoustic tile ceilings. The former cafeteria area is in the east wing of this level. The former kitchen is under the center section. Though the interior of the school retains a high degree of integrity, it is no longer in use as a school and has suffered roof leaks, vandalism and general neglect.

**Gymnasium, c. 1933, contributing**

To the east of the main school building, connected by a concrete sidewalk, is the rough-cut stone gymnasium with Rustic Revival-style influences, constructed in 1933 as part of the WPA program. It is one-story, on below-grade basement. This front-gabled rectangular building faces south onto Washington Avenue. The building is three bays wide and seven bays deep. It has a parapet roofline on the front and rear elevations. There are stone buttresses on all sides the building. The gymnasium is accessed through a projecting, one-story entrance with a flat roof behind a stepped parapet roofline. It has a double-leaf solid door and two flanking narrow windows that have been infilled with concrete block. There are also two, high, square windows filled with glass block on the front elevation. Five tall, narrow, recessed arches are centered higher on the front façade. Windows along the side elevations and across the rear have also been filled in with concrete block.

The interior remains largely unaltered and is still in use as a gymnasium. The wood floor was replaced recently, but the structure remains unchanged as do the wooden bleachers, exposed metal roof trusses, plaster walls and locker rooms in the basement. Lights and basketball goals are more modern, as are scoreboards. Narrow stairs lead to the locker rooms in the basement. These have concrete floors and wood walls and ceilings. Wood lockers without doors remain, as do shower stalls. An exterior door on the northeast corner of the building also provides access to the basement. A modern basketball court is located to the front of the gymnasium.

**Home Economics Building, c. 1938-9, contributing**

Between the main school building and the gymnasium, also facing south, sits the former home economics building. Built in 1938-9, this building has Classical-Revival elements

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and is one-story with a side-gable, asphalt-shingle roof. It is seven-bays wide and is clad in running bond brick with a water table executed in a soldier course circling the building. The three center bays project slightly. The windows are likely historic and are wood double-hung six-over-six with storm windows. There is a bank of three windows on the east elevation and four singles on the west elevation. Wood panels under two windows flanking the front entry suggest the building had three entrances at one time. There is a handicap ramp with wood rails now leading to the front entry door. A simple portico with pediment supported by square posts covers the single wood, panel door on the south elevation. It is flanked by four-light sidelights and a six-light transom. There is a center chimney, though no fireboxes remain on the interior. The interior is divided into four rooms. There is a large classroom space and two smaller workspaces along the south elevation. Two larger classrooms are located in the rear of the building. There are no hallways, and rooms are accessed by single and double doors leading from one room to another. There are two single, solid doors on the rear elevation and four single windows. There are plaster walls, wood floors and the ceiling has been covered with glue-on acoustic tile.

**Classroom Building, c. 1953, contributing**

Behind the main school building stands a one-story, running bond brick classroom building, constructed in 1953. The building is eight bays long and one bay deep and has a flat built-up roof and a flat metal canopy with metal support posts that extends the length of the south elevation. Each of the eight classrooms had its own entrance along the south wall under the canopy. The current doors are solid metal with a small square window. A bank of windows runs along the north wall. Most of these have been covered over with metal sheets. These are in groups of four divided by brick pilasters. There is a concrete sill under each window group and the windows extend to the roofline. There are no windows on the south, east or west elevations. The building is currently used for book storage and the interior is divided into three bays by concrete block walls. Inside there are concrete floors and metal supports.

**Storage Shed, c. 1953, contributing**

A small, flat-roofed, square, one-story brick shed sits behind the home economics building directly adjacent to the chain-link fence. It is laid in running bond, and has a solid metal entry door on the west elevation. There are two small vents on this elevation flanking the door and two small vents on the south elevation. It was inaccessible at site visits.

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**Statement of Significance**

The Central School in Bessemer City is locally significant under Criterion A for Education. Central School was built in 1929 and it is associated with the focused improvement on public education for white students during the early to mid-twentieth-century in Gaston County. The school's auditorium and gymnasium also served as a focal point of the community's social and recreational activities during the period of significance. The period of significance for Central School begins in 1933 with the construction of the Works Progress Administration-sponsored stone gymnasium. The main school building, while built in 1929, was severely damaged by a fire in 1942, and all that remained was the outer shell of the building. Therefore, the historic significance of the main school building begins with its reopening in 1946. The period of significance continues until 1957, which acknowledges the important contributions of the 1938 home economics building and the 1953 primary education classroom building. Although the complex continued to function as a school until 2000, the fifty-year cut-off date of 1957 for Criterion A is the end of the period of significance because the property does not meet the requirements for Criteria Consideration G.

**History of Bessemer City**

Located in the western central region of Gaston County, Bessemer City was founded in 1893 by John A. Smith. Smith, his brother Turner, and brother-in-law John A. Pinchback came to the county in 1891 with the intention of investing in the region and starting a town. Smith bought 1700 acres of land from the Ormand Mining Company and had surveyor W. R. Richardson lay out a grid plan of streets.<sup>1</sup> The new town was named after Sir Henry Bessemer, developer of a conveyor for processing steel from molten pig iron, when large deposits of iron ore were found in and around the city.<sup>2</sup> This area profited from mining, though by the time of its incorporation, that industry, as across the county, was waning and the textile industry was taking over. The town's first mill, Southern Cotton Mills, was established by the town founders. Southern Mills built the first stores, the first thirty mill houses, and founded the first newspaper.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Griffin, *Gaston Remembers: Weaving a Tapestry in Time* (Montgomery, AL: Community Communications, 1994), 60; and Susan Jenkins, "Bessemer City," North Carolina History Project online, accessed 23 June 2007, <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/83/entry>.

<sup>2</sup> Lois Smith, "John Smith Came to Build a Town," *Bessemer City Record*, 7 January 1981; and "Bessemer City got its name for steel ore," *Gastonia Gazette*, 30 April 1977, 10G.

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By 1900, the county's population had reached 27,903, and Bessemer City, less than ten years old, was home to 600 people.<sup>4</sup> The town's second textile mill, Bessemer City Cotton Mill, was established in 1897 with others being constructed until 1917 when American Cotton Mills, Inc. erected the city's last mill. Like many towns in Gaston County, Bessemer City had established itself as a textile town, though much smaller in size than nearby Gastonia. During the first World War, the growing demand for military clothing fueled a growth period. Prosperity continued during the 1920s. By the mid-1920s infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks and underpasses were constructed in Bessemer City. City Hall and a local jail were built in 1922 and the town established its first fire department in 1928. Also during this decade police efforts, particularly in dealing with drunken citizens and patrolling the train tracks at night, were increasingly organized. There were also strikes and some efforts to unionize mill workers during this time. Despite strikes and economic decline during the Depression years, the mills, and overall economic conditions, across the county were strong again by the 1940s. Industrial development has continued to attract a variety of businesses and large manufacturers to Bessemer City including FMC Lithium, Inc. in the 1950s. FMC Lithium continues to be one of Bessemer City's largest employers.<sup>5</sup>

### **Education in North Carolina**

Early educational opportunities across North Carolina were limited to a wealthy few who could hire private tutors or attend private academies. In 1839, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the first state common school law. Based on an earlier plan devised by North Carolina Judge Archibald D. Murphy to create a statewide public school system, the law combined state and local monies to fund schools. The Education Act of 1839, allowed counties to authorize or reject local taxes to fund public education. Counties that upheld a tax designated for education received matching funds from the State Literary Fund in order to foster primary and college preparatory schools.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Crawford and others, eds., *Centennial: 1893-1993, Bessemer City, North Carolina, A compilation of Facts and Fancy as they have affected our town over the Past 100 Years* (Charlotte, NC: Walsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Huntington Hobbs, *Gaston County: Economic and Social* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton Printing, 1920), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Jenkins, "Bessemer City," online.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Ward, *History of Education in North Carolina*, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.

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Though immediate improvements resulted from the Education Act of 1839, the Civil War interrupted concerted efforts to advance public education in the South. Following the war, the 1868 State Constitution was passed. The new Constitution ordered that education be free and guaranteed to all children ages six to twenty-one years of age. It also instated a minimum four month school term, provided for the education of African-American children, and designated the Governor as the president of a State Board of Education.<sup>7</sup>

Governor Charles Brantley Aycock (1901-1905), a strong advocate for public education, oversaw extensive improvements to the state's public school systems during his tenure and campaigned for universal education for students both black and white. With the assistance of his Superintendent of Public Instruction, James Y. Joyner, Aycock, increased the number of tax districts in the state, created greater efficiency by consolidating school districts, secured state funding for education, and reorganized funding structures for school construction through the State Literary Fund.<sup>8</sup> This campaign led to the establishment of the Central Committee for the Promotion of Public Education in North Carolina. The goals of this Committee included encouraging local taxes, building better schools, lengthening school terms, consolidating school districts, and supporting better pay for teachers.<sup>9</sup>

Due to economic growth and prosperity from the cotton and tobacco industries, the beginning of the twentieth century saw phenomenal educational development throughout North Carolina. Greater tax revenues allowed government leaders to improve poor public school facilities and fund solutions to the state's problem of low school attendance with the hope that an educated work force would boost productivity and industrial expansion.

While the state expanded opportunities for rural education in 1907, the federal government supplied monies toward agricultural and vocation education to the state through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. Many of the ideas advocated earlier by Aycock and others were implemented across the state during the 1920s. School consolidation, particularly in rural areas, became widespread. According to a School Superintendent report in 1929, research showed that much progress had been made in consolidating smaller schools into large ones. There were significant improvements to the roads across North Carolina during the 1920s that facilitated easier transport of students to consolidated schools. More pupils were being

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James L. Leloudis, *Schooling in the New South, Pedagogy, Self and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xii.

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transported by bus, or “truck,” to larger schools that had been built to serve a wider population. By 1928, North Carolina was ranked second among states in the number of school buses in operation.<sup>10</sup>

The combination of local, state, and federal funding accelerated the growth of North Carolina Public Schools until the economic downturn of the Great Depression. With local funding severely hampered by widespread economic distress, the state government intervened with the School Machinery Act of 1931. This act required that counties serve as “the basic governmental unit for operating public schools.” However, the General Assembly continued to increase state funding for supplies during the 1930s and further lengthened the academic year.<sup>11</sup>

### **History of Public Education in Bessemer City**

The earliest schools in Gaston County were generally housed in one room of a home in the community. In 1873, the Gaston County Board of Commissioners, who served as a board of education until 1885, passed a tax to support maintenance and construction of schools.<sup>12</sup> Oates School House, an early private school in Bessemer City founded in 1880, was comprised of one room that housed forty students. The first public school in Bessemer City was begun in 1892. Miss Daisy Chandler, a niece of Mrs. Smith, wife of one of the founders, was the first teacher at the school.<sup>13</sup> As described in a 1957 newspaper article, the school, typical of its time, “was heated by an open fireplace, and two students sat together on a rough bench at a long table.”<sup>14</sup> School attendance in much of Gaston County remained low through the end of the nineteenth century.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the textile mill industry provided almost all of the economic stability in Gaston County, including Bessemer City. In some of the county’s textile mill

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<sup>10</sup> *State School Facts*, Volume IV, no. 21 (Raleigh, NC: Published by the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1 January 1928).

<sup>11</sup> Ward, *History of Education*.

<sup>12</sup> Frank L. Ashley, “Col. Gaston Gossips,” *Gastonia Gazette*, 9 March 1957.

<sup>13</sup> “Early Town History is Written by Woltz,” *Bessemer City Record*, 10 December 1969, 2.

<sup>14</sup> North Carolina Education Association, “Bessemer City Schools,” *Gaston County’s Educational Heritage: 1857-1957* (Gastonia, NC: Gaston County Unit of the North Carolina Education Association, 1957).

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communities, such as in McAdenville and Cramerton, the mill owners inaugurated “programs of improving the living conditions in the villages.”<sup>15</sup> Schools and healthcare facilities were among such programs. However, in other communities many social and educational needs were not met by the mill owners. Gaston County held a relatively low position among North Carolina’s counties for literacy and school attendance. In the first decade of the twentieth century Belmont, Bessemer City, Lowell, and Cherryville constructed new school buildings “with all the modern conveniences,” in an attempt to remedy the significantly low literacy rates for the county.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of child labor laws also contributed greatly to the county’s low educational standing. As was observed, “Gaston ranks low in school attendance... it is a good policy to invest time in education... this problem will soon cease to exist, once the child labor law and the compulsory school attendance law work together... [then] the prospects of a greater Gaston in the future are exceedingly bright.”<sup>17</sup> Often working in the mills out of necessity, many children in the area did not receive adequate education.

In 1900, the public school in Bessemer City moved into a house with three rooms provided by the Southern Cotton Mill. A tax for the Bessemer City School District was levied in 1903 to educate all children between the ages of six and twenty-one. This same year a second school was established in a converted boarding house. By 1905, a third, three-room school had been set up in the old Associated Reform Presbyterian Church and the system was changed to a graded system.<sup>18</sup> The Associated Reform Church School had a new four-room school addition the following year.

During the 1910s and 1920s, brick schools for white students were constructed in Bessemer City. West School was built in 1914 after a bond election in 1913 provided a forty-year, \$50,000 construction bond. It replaced the 1905 schoolhouse and housed grades one through eleven. West School also boasted many modern improvements such as furnace heat, indoor toilets and drinking fountains. By 1920, West School was overcrowded despite scholar Samuel Huntington Hobbs’s claim that “[M]ost of the present day ills are the direct result of the desire on the part of

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<sup>15</sup> Robert F. Cope and Manly Wade Wellman, *The County of Gaston: Two Centuries of a North Carolina Region* (Gastonia, NC: Gaston County Historical Society, 1961), 166.

<sup>16</sup> Hobbs, *Gaston County*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Cope and Wellman, *The County of Gaston*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> “Early Town History,” 1.

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parents to make their children earn a living instead of going to school. The parents are not educated as a rule and they fail to see why their children should be educated.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1922, East Elementary School, a four-room brick school was constructed. Need for another school was felt in 1925 when the surrounding rural areas consolidated with the Bessemer City system. The city’s schools were so overcrowded by then that two seventh-grade classes were held above the city hall for two consecutive years. West School and East Elementary School housed grades one through eleven until Central School was erected in 1929.

The boom in school construction in Bessemer City that began in the 1920s echoed countywide changes. After two decades of industrial and population growth, there was a great need for the consolidation of one-room, rural schools as well as county redistricting to reduce the number of schools. Such consolidation was possible in part because of improved roads and transportation, but the driving force behind the consolidation plans was the ability to pay a smaller number of teachers a larger salary and thus retain more qualified teachers. Between 1908 and 1918, white schools in the county that boasted two or more teachers increased in number from sixteen to thirty-seven so that by the 1920s there were six-month school terms and over 950 white students and 240 black students in the county system.<sup>20</sup>

Continued attempts at consolidation prompted the county to take over Bessemer City’s buses in 1932.<sup>21</sup> The following year, Bessemer City Schools merged with the Gaston County School System.<sup>22</sup> Busing continued to increase in popularity and the number of buses in the county rose from sixty-eight in 1946 to ninety-one in 1955.<sup>23</sup>

### **The History of Central School**

Consolidation of rural school in the county resulted in an increased enrollment in Bessemer City Schools and the construction of Central School in 1929. The failure of the city school system to

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<sup>19</sup> Hobbs, *Gaston County*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> State Board of Education records, Teacher Allotment Division, 1929-36, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>21</sup> State Board of Education records, County Annual Transportation Records, 1927-1955, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>22</sup> “1968 County System Becomes One,” article on file at Gaston County Public Library, 1.

<sup>23</sup> County Annual Transportation Records.



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raise adequate funds to maintain its independence resulted in the 1933 merger of Bessemer City Schools with the county school system. Nevertheless, improvements were made at Central School through federal government funding. Two buildings were constructed in the 1930s: a stone gymnasium in 1933, and a home economics building in 1938.

Though no records remain from the year the school was erected, a statewide survey from the 1939-40 school year illustrates the number and usage of rooms in the school. At the time of the survey, there were twenty-one classrooms, nine bathrooms, two library rooms, two storage rooms, an office and a janitor closet in the school. A separate building housed home economics classrooms, a commercial/vocational room, and a cafeteria that served forty lunches a day. Three iron boilers provided steam heat; sixteen drinking fountains served the school, and there were two ceiling lights per classroom. Also listed were an auditorium and a gymnasium that housed the school's football and boys' and girls' basketball programs.<sup>24</sup> Central School's "Lads and Lasses" competed in the "Little Seven" league against seven nearby towns, including Dallas and Stanley. The original school colors of black and white were later changed to purple and gold. Ultimately the student body became known as the "Yellow Jackets".<sup>25</sup>

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were very instrumental in the construction of Central School in the 1930s. These programs were developed as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s to rescue America's economy from the Great Depression. Created in 1933 by the passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Act, the FERA, predecessor to the WPA, oversaw millions of dollars of grant-in-aid to state and local agencies that provided direct relief to individuals and public organizations devastated by the economic depression. The CCC, created in the same year employed young men across the country with the aim of improving, restoring and conserving the nation's natural resources.<sup>26</sup> While the CCC improved public lands, the WPA, created in 1935, resulted in the construction of numerous permanent,

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<sup>24</sup> State Board of Education records, Plant Operations Division, Plant and Sanitation Survey Reports, 1940, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>25</sup> Student Nancy Capps class of 1948, Kathryn Eury, student class of 1938 and teacher/guidance counselor at Central School and in Bessemer City for 38 years, Pat Lindsay, student class of 1948, interview by author, 23 October 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 264, 267, 15, 338-40.

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public buildings including schools, recreational facilities and hospitals, and provided much needed jobs to the unemployed.<sup>27</sup>

WPA projects were prevalent in many North Carolina counties. Like the CCC, the WPA built numerous buildings and structures across the state including the Blue Ridge Parkway. There are WPA schools in nearly every western county, often constructed of stone. The Rustic Revival Style was often employed since it was in keeping with the natural surroundings. Large logs, timbers and stone were often used. This style was often used for civic buildings as well.<sup>28</sup>

The stone gymnasium at Central School was built by the WPA in 1933 and exhibits the typical design elements of their buildings, including irregular stone construction and a low, gabled roof. It housed boys and girls locker rooms on the basement level. The brick building that housed the home economics building was also constructed by the WPA. There were other WPA projects constructed in Bessemer City as well, though none for school complexes. Privies were built for some families, and the CCC built a public pool with a pavilion and dressing rooms.<sup>29</sup>

On October 7, 1942 a fire broke out in the auditorium area of the school. Only a boiler room and a nearby room survived intact.<sup>30</sup> Because the fire occurred in the midst of World War II, manpower and resources for reconstruction were limited. The outer walls of the school remained and were used to rebuild the school when monies were approved in 1946. During the war, however, students attended classes in the gymnasium, which was partitioned to create classrooms. A year and a half later the scarcity of building resources persisted and makeshift classrooms resembling “tar-paper army-type buildings” were constructed on the grounds, referred to by the students as “chicken coops.” After state government officials faced protests regarding facility conditions, plans to rebuild the school were developed.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Douglas Carl Abrams, “Works Progress Administration (WPA): One Failure to End the Great Depression.” North Carolina History Project online. Accessed on 23 June 2007, <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/85/entry>.

<sup>28</sup> National Register nomination draft, Elk Park School, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Crawford, *Centennial*, 99.

<sup>30</sup> “Bessemer City School Building Burns,” *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 7 October 1942, 1, 5.

<sup>31</sup> “History of Schools.” *Bessemer City Record*, 19 February 1975, 2.

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In the fall of 1946, Central School reopened as Bessemer City High School, although the school contained only the bare necessities. The chemistry lab had no equipment at all. Nonetheless, the students and community were proud of their achievements and celebrated the commencement of the first class to graduate from the 12th grade in the spring of 1947.<sup>32</sup> During the 1940s, enrollment continued to increase and the first yearbook was produced in 1948.

Overcrowding at Central School in the middle of the twentieth century prompted the construction of a one-story classroom building behind the main school building. This eight-room building was constructed in 1953 to house the primary grades. A year later, two classrooms were added in the basement of the main building of Central School to ease further crowding. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Central School housed pre-elementary grades in this small building, elementary grades on the first floor of the main building, and high school grades on the second floor, with a cafeteria, added by 1957, in the basement.<sup>33</sup>

The 1960s saw changes in Bessemer City's segregated educational system. Stewart School, Bessemer City's black elementary school, was closed in 1964 as part of the integration process, and its seven faculty members were transferred to other schools in town.<sup>34</sup> Caring teachers, like the Eury sisters, helped make the newly transferred teachers and students feel welcome, according to Mrs. Stewart, the first and only black teacher to teach at West School. In 1969, black and white students in grades five and six were moved to West School and grades seven and eight moved to Lincoln Junior High. Integration was completed in the 1970s and school officials consolidated the two schools resulting in the closure of West School and the renaming of Lincoln Junior High to Bessemer City Junior High School.

Central School retained its high school students until 1968 when the county school system merged the City of Gastonia, Bessemer City, and the City of Cherryville Schools into a consolidated county-wide school system.<sup>35</sup> Central School housed grades one through four in 1973 and kindergarten classes were added in 1974. Crowded conditions persisted and in 1977 the Bessemer City Primary School opened on Twelfth Street to ease the burden on Central School. Central School remained in use until 2000 when it was declared surplus.

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<sup>32</sup> Crawford, *Centennial*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> "History of Schools," 2.

<sup>34</sup> Crawford, *Centennial*, 150.

<sup>35</sup> "1968 County System Becomes One," 5.

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Central School's furnishings and landscaping were a point of civic pride, and the school housed many civic and neighborhood events. The Civic League helped to furnish the original Central School building with curtains, bookcases, and even a piano and in 1946, the Bessemer City chapter of the American War Mothers planted crepe myrtle plants on the school grounds.<sup>36</sup>

The Parent-Teacher Association was very active, and many events took place in the school auditorium such as the Recitation and Declamation when students memorized and recited texts, and the Eastern Star beauty pageant put on by the local women's branch of the Masonic lodge.<sup>37</sup> Because Central School was located in a town, rather than the county, there were more events and opportunities for gatherings because many students and their families could walk to the school. The beauty pageant, for example, was such a draw for local residents that it spawned the creation of the Neighbor's Club, a social organization founded by local residents who had previously only congregated at fundraising events at the school. The group continued to meet for over forty years.<sup>38</sup>

Many of the consolidated schools across Gaston County are no longer standing. The 1936 Cherryville High School was abandoned in 1980 and destroyed shortly thereafter. The 1925 Elementary School Number 11 in Cherryville and the 1924 Myrtle School in Gastonia stood vacant by 1982. These abandoned, and now demolished, schools were prone to both vandalism and fire, both intentional and otherwise. Abernathy School, built in the 1920s, was abandoned in 1969 and burned in 1974.<sup>39</sup> The East Belmont School, built in the 1920s, was burned by the fire department as a training mission in 1976 and the Lowell Elementary School, c. 1921, was destroyed by fire in 1974.

In Bessemer City, the 1914 West School and the 1922 East Elementary School have both been demolished. The West School, which at one time housed elementary students through the sixth grade, was abandoned in 1977 when the Bessemer City Primary School was completed. The empty structure fell to the wrecking ball in March 1979.<sup>40</sup> Central School is the last early twentieth-century school standing in Bessemer City.

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<sup>36</sup> Crawford, *Centennial*, 50, 113.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> Gary Martin, "Arson suspected in school blaze," *Gastonia Gazette*, 12 March 1974.

<sup>40</sup> "End of School," *Gastonia Gazette*, 18 March 1979.

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The main building and classroom building of the Central School complex will be rehabilitated into an elderly housing complex. All rehabilitation work will be done in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and will be reviewed by the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service for historic tax credit approval. The gymnasium and former home economics building are owned by the City of Bessemer City.

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**Verbal Boundary Justification**

The nominated property includes approximately three acres identified as Gaston County tax parcels 0201408900000 and 0201408901000. Parcel is outlined and shown on enclosed tax map.

**Boundary Justification**

The nominated property includes the land historically associated with the Central School.