

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

### National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

#### 1. Name of Property

historic name Mars Hill High School

other names/site number Mars Hill School; Mars Hill Elementary School

#### 2. Location

street & number 734 Bailey Street not for publication N/A  
city or town Mars Hill vicinity N/A  
state North Carolina code NC county Madison code 115 zip code 28754

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination/\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant \_\_\_ nationally \_\_\_ statewide X locally. (\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Jeffrey A. Cross SHPO 7/18/05  
Signature of certifying official Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria. (\_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

- \_\_\_ entered in the National Register
- \_\_\_ See continuation sheet.
- \_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ See continuation sheet.
- \_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register
- \_\_\_ removed from the National Register
- \_\_\_ other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed  
In the National Register

N/A

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION/school  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION/education-related  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Other: Rustic Revival  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone; Concrete  
roof Asphalt  
walls Stone  
\_\_\_\_\_  
other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

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

**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.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Education

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1938-1955

**Significant Dates**

1938

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

S. Grant Alexander & Associates, architect

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**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**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC

Madison County Board of Education Administrative Office, Marshall, N.C.

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**10. Geographical Data**

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**Acreage of Property** 0.85 acre

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1 17 359780 3966550  
Zone Easting Northing

2 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

4 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet

**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 Clay Griffith

organization Edwards-Pitman Environmental, Inc. date May 6, 2005

street & number 825-C Merrimon Ave., #345 telephone (828) 281-3852

city or town Asheville state NC zip code 28804

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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 Madison County (Mr. Rick McDevitt, County Manager)

street & number Madison County Courthouse, PO Box 579 telephone 828-649-2854

city or town Marshall state NC zip code 28753

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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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Mars Hill High School, Madison County, N.C.

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### Narrative Description

The Mars Hill High School, located at 734 Bailey Street and constructed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) between 1936 and 1938, occupies a ridge top site approximately one-half mile northwest of Mars Hill College and the town of Mars Hill's business district. The stone edifice is an important surviving public building in the small mountain town, which is located in southeastern Madison County. The school served high school students until 1973, when the consolidated Madison County High School opened in the Walnut community. The building then served middle and elementary school students until 2001 when the new Mars Hill Elementary School opened. The Mars Hill High School building stands on the west side of the ten-acre campus of the present Mars Hill Elementary School. With the exception of the gymnasium, the building is no longer used by students, and only serves as offices and storage.

Located on the east side of Bailey Street facing west, Mars Hill High School originally stood beyond the limits of the town's development. Bailey Street, which roughly forms the northern edge of the Mars Hill College campus, turns sharply to the north beyond the college and passes through a residential area with several substantial houses dating from the 1920s. At the time of its construction, Mars Hill High School replaced a 1925 frame school that stood to the south and overlooked a wooded section to the west across Bailey Street; an athletic field was located behind the school building, with agricultural fields lying in the distance to the east and north. A detached classroom wing built in 1952 for middle school grades is located immediately north of the Mars Hill High School. Memorial Stadium, an athletic field with concrete and grass terraced seating, occupies a lower site northeast of the school. A cafeteria building is located south of the old school while the modern Mars Hill Elementary School building lies immediately to the east. All of the buildings are linked by covered walkways with metal canopies added in 2003, although the canopies are not attached to any of the structures. A chain link fence bordering the property along Bailey Street was erected in the late 1940s following the death of student who was struck by an automobile while crossing the street. The west side of Bailey Street opposite the school is currently lined with small houses dating from the mid to late twentieth century and a modern apartment complex.

Designed by the Asheville architectural firm of S. Grant Alexander and Associates, the Mars Hill High School was built between 1936 and 1938 through the efforts of the WPA. Its appearance has changed little since its construction, especially on the exterior. The one-story native stone building consists of two sections: a rear-facing L-shaped classroom block and a gymnasium wing. Both sections contain a full-height lower level exposed on the east (rear) and south sides of the building as the site slopes away from Bailey Street. The classroom block has a side gabled roof and stepped end parapet with a central peak and is covered with asphalt shingles, which were replaced in the 1980s. A projecting three-bay front entrance pavilion has a front-facing stepped parapet with a central peak and paired round arch openings leading to separate sets of

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recessed double doors with multi-light transoms. One entrance opens into a vestibule that connects to the central corridor, while the other entrance accesses concrete steps leading to the lower level rooms. These main entrance doors are original wood with six-light fixed windows in the upper portion of the door. Some original hammered metal hardware also remains intact. Other exterior doors throughout the classroom block are replacement metal fire doors. Windows throughout are nine-over-nine, double-hung wood sash with concrete sills and typically appear in groups of three, although singles and pairs are also incorporated.

The façade (west) consists of six bays flanking the entrance pavilion (four to the north and two to the south), with the gymnasium adjoining the classroom block at the north. A straight run of concrete steps flanked by stone side walls with a concrete coping rises to the recessed entrance bays. The shallow portico is faced with thick, rough stucco applied over wood lath. The third bay to the side of the recessed entrances is composed of paired six-over-six double-hung sash that illuminated the principal's office. A second front entrance, which is similarly recessed behind a round arch opening, is located at the corner where the classroom block abuts the gymnasium wing. At the south end of the façade, single nine-over-nine windows appear on the lower level as it is gradually exposed. The south end elevation of the classroom block is dominated by the peaked parapet and a T-plan staircase rising to a recessed central entry behind a round arch opening.

The rear (east) elevation consists of two stories and six bays adjoining the rear-facing L section. At the inner angle of the L, a descending concrete ramp sheltered by an asphalt shingled shed roof leads to a single-leaf entry and the boiler room. An arched opening in the lower level near the south end of the building provides access to a double-leaf entry and the lower level rooms. A large T-shaped staircase descends from the second-level arched entry at the rear of the L-section. A double-leaf door located on the lower level at the rear of the L-section provided access to the boys' locker room, which was also accessed on the interior from the boys' bathroom on the main level. The rear of the gymnasium block contains two single windows on the main level, which illuminated rooms flanking the stage, and two storage rooms with single-leaf doors and paired windows on the lower level.

The full six-bay side elevation of the gymnasium comprises the north end of the building. Raised stone pilasters divide the bays, which typically contain one or two large metal-frame industrial type windows to illuminate the interior. At the northeast corner a blind bay marks the location of the stage area. Double-leaf metal doorways under single windows are reached by a concrete ramp at the second bay and a straight run of concrete steps and landing at the fifth bay, with stone sidewalls and concrete copings present at both locations. The façade of the gymnasium is a solid stone wall pierced by two double-leaf replacement metal doorways and plate glass transoms. These two doorways are sheltered by canopies supported on triangular brackets. Wooden handicap-access ramps were constructed ca. 2000 in front of the gymnasium and the adjacent secondary front entrance. The ramps are sheltered by metal canopies erected in 2003.

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The interior of the Mars Hill High School consists of a double-loaded central corridor running north-south through the classroom section with a second corridor running east-west where the classroom wing and gymnasium abut. The entrance vestibule originally opened directly into the main corridor from the front entry, but was closed off with the addition of new partition wall and double-leaf doors. Seven classrooms were located along the main corridor with three on each side and a seventh classroom situated in the rear L-section. A small principal's office, secretary's office, and supply closet flank the vestibule to the south. Originally the second corridor and the gymnasium were not partitioned, and were separated by only four square posts. A partition wall was constructed ca. 1990 between the four posts, which remain clearly evident within the gymnasium. The interior retains original hardwood floors, tall baseboard moldings, glazed and paneled doors topped by transoms, plaster walls, and fiber board ceiling panels. Some original radiators and blackboards also remain in place, although most of the blackboards have been covered with modern dry-erase surfaces. Two operable interior windows provide additional light between the corridor and classrooms on the east side of the building. One original door opening was removed at some point to be replaced by a new single-leaf door with no transom located several feet to the north. Metal locker units were placed in the corridor in the late twentieth century. The gymnasium interior also retains much of its historic material and character, with original hardwood floor, exposed steel bowstring trusses, wood roof joints, and stage area at the east end.

The lower level of the building beneath the classroom block contained a kitchen, cafeteria, home economics classrooms, and a janitorial closet. The kitchen and cafeteria were eventually moved to a new structure to the south in the 1950s (portions of the cafeteria have been incorporated into the cafeteria for the new Mars Hill Elementary School) and the space was used for classrooms. A boys' locker room was housed on the lower level of the rear L section, and two storage rooms were located on the lower level of the gymnasium.

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### Statement of Significance

#### *Summary*

The Mars Hill High School, a one-story stone building erected between 1936 and 1938 and located at 734 Bailey Street, occupies a prominent ridge top site in the small town of Mars Hill in southeastern Madison County. The school was built through the cooperative effort of the county and federal government working under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal-era relief program. Designed by the Asheville architectural firm of S. Grant Alexander and Associates, the school embodies the regionally-popular Rustic Revival style, which utilized local stone and wood building materials as well as local craftspeople and laborers. The style also drew from the naturalistic design principles established by the National Park Service in the western national parks and later applied at Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway in the 1930s and 1940s. The Mars Hill High School is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the area of education as an example of a consolidated school built under the New Deal-era building programs. The school is also eligible under Criterion C as an intact example of a WPA-built, Rustic Revival style stone school building, the largest facility constructed during the county's building campaign of the late 1930s. The period of significance for the school, which served high school students until 1973, extends from its completion in 1938 to 1955. The years after 1955 do not meet Criteria Consideration G for exceptional significance.

#### *Historical Background and Education Context*

The earliest settlers in present-day Madison County arrived in the late eighteenth century as the Cherokee were slowly, but steadily driven westward. Buncombe County was formed in 1791, and contained much of the mountain territory of western North Carolina, including all of present Madison County, formed in 1851. Settlement followed the French Broad River and the numerous smaller creek and river valleys that feed into it—Spring Creek, Walnut Creek, Big Pine Creek, and the Laurel and Ivy rivers. Much of the county, which was once known as “the Kingdom of Madison” for its geographic isolation and the independence of its people, is defined by the rugged slopes of the Bald and Newfound mountain ranges, although areas of southern Madison County more closely resemble the rolling agricultural lands of Buncombe County.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine W. Bishir, Michael T. Southern, and Jennifer F. Martin. *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Western North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 247. Taylor Barnhill, “Preliminary Assessment, Architectural Survey of Madison County, North Carolina,” (North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Asheville, N.C., October 23, 1984), 1-2.

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Due in part to the difficult terrain of the area, most development occurred along the French Broad River, which bisected the steep mountains, including the towns of Marshall, the county seat, and the resort community of Hot Springs (known as Warm Springs until 1886). The Buncombe Turnpike, a drover's road, opened in 1827 and followed the French Broad River through much of the county to Asheville and on to markets in South Carolina and Georgia. While the towns of Marshall and Hot Springs directly benefited from the construction of the Buncombe Turnpike and the railroad in the early 1880s, the town of Mars Hill developed along with Mars Hill College, a Baptist institution founded in 1856, and as a trading center more directly related to Buncombe and Yancey counties. Civic and church leaders organized the school to address the lack of opportunities for higher education in Madison County, and the school eventually became an accredited junior college in 1921 and four-year college in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

The history of public schools and education in Madison County follows patterns typical to many western North Carolina counties. During the nineteenth century the first schools were subscription schools taught by educated individuals in private homes or small log schoolhouses for short three or four month terms. Early public schools were established beginning in the 1830s through the State Literary Fund and were usually held in one-room log structures. These one-room, one-teacher schools were supplemented in the latter nineteenth century by church-sponsored mission or field schools, which often added a secondary education curriculum. While the Baptists sponsored and supported Mars Hill College, the Presbyterian Church provided support to the Dorland-Bell School in Hot Springs. Toward the turn of the century, the county board of education offered more organized administration of the many disparate schools. Like many other mountain counties, the lack of improved roads greatly influenced the development and location of Madison County schools.

Between 1890 and 1900, the number of schools in the county decreased from seventy-nine to fifty-seven, although the population of school-age students increased from approximately 6,500 to over 8,100. Presumably improved transportation and road networks accounted for some consolidation of these community schools. Enrollment, however, was reported as only 4,870. The fifty-seven school buildings owned by the county in 1900 consisted of one brick, eleven log, and forty-five frame buildings, with a total property value of nearly \$10,500. Consolidation of these schools throughout the twentieth century led to the present eight schools in the Madison County system.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barnhill, 1-3, 6-8. See John Angus McLeod, *From These Stones: Mars Hill College, the First Hundred Years* (Mars Hill: Mars Hill College, 1955), 12-16.

<sup>3</sup> Madison County Heritage Book Committee, *Madison County Heritage, North Carolina*, Vol. 1 (Waynesville, N.C.: Don Mills, Inc. and Madison County Heritage Book Committee, 1994), 90. Madison County Public Schools website ([www.madison.k12.nc.us/history.cfm](http://www.madison.k12.nc.us/history.cfm)).

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William Jasper Ebbs (1851-ca. 1935) is credited with being “the father of public education in Madison County.” One of ten children, Jasper Ebbs was the son of Francis Marion Ebbs (1822-1901), the patriarch of all the North Carolina Ebbs’ in Madison and Buncombe counties. Marion Ebbs had no formal education, but became an avid reader and instilled in his children an understanding of the value of education. One son, Issac Newton Ebbs, began his career as a teacher in rural schools while also studying law. Newton Ebbs later opened a law practice in Hot Springs and served two terms in the state legislature where he advocated for greater state support for public schools. Beginning around 1880, however, Jasper Ebbs served for more than fifty years on the Madison County Board of Education, acting as chairman for all but two terms. During his tenure he actively sought to improve school facilities and educational opportunities for students in Madison County.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Robert Lee Moore (1870-1949) became president of Mars Hill College in 1897, and during his tenure, which lasted until 1938, oversaw great changes to both the college and the town of Mars Hill. The first public elementary school in Mars Hill was taught from 1900 to 1902 by Mrs. Edna Moore, wife of the college president, in a room of one of the college buildings. In 1904, the first public school building, containing three classrooms, was erected on North Main Street. Enrollment soon required the construction of another larger building, and land was acquired from E. W. Gibbs in 1906. In 1924, the Madison County Board of Education, comprised of Jasper Ebbs, N. B. McDevett, and Wiley M. Roberts, began purchasing land to the north of town for the Mars Hill public schools. (This site would continue to be enlarged and buildings added and torn down through the twentieth century, eventually becoming the ten-acre campus presently occupied by Mars Hill Elementary School.) The board acquired 1.5 acres from F. M. and Tildia Webster and an adjoining three acres from Esther Runnion on June 11, 1924, for the site of a new school to serve the students in the Mars Hill area.<sup>5</sup>

Madison County, like many other areas of western North Carolina, directly benefited from the efforts of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, especially the Works Progress Administration, which offered considerable assistance to the construction and renovation of educational facilities across the country. In Madison County, the WPA helped to build eight school buildings, including schools at Mars Hill, Ebbs Chapel, Beech Glen, Hot Springs, Laurel, Marshall, and a gymnasium at Spring Creek. Mars Hill High School was begun in 1936, and local workers were hired at fifteen cents per hour. Men providing their own horses to haul building rock were paid fifty cents per day per horse. The building was constructed with field rocks, as opposed to creek rocks, that weighed from 300 to 500 pounds. A system of scaffolding and chain

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<sup>4</sup> Eloise Buckner Ebbs, *A Record of the Ebbs Family in Western North Carolina* (Published by author, c.1930), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> McLeod, pp. 157-68, 174-75. Madison County Register of Deeds Office.

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hoists enabled the stones to be lifted into place. Cement was supplied through the WPA and hauled from the railroad in Marshall to the site by a local truck driver.<sup>6</sup>

Completed in 1938, Mars Hill High School served students until 1973, when a new consolidated high school opened near Marshall. Erskine Bailey served as the first principal, and roughly half of the faculty were graduates of Mars Hill College. Although the school opened to students in 1938, the building still needed work. In the two years following its opening, the Board of Education approved money for molding, hot water equipment, bathroom fixtures, water fountains, class bells, coat racks, lumber to build book shelves, and paving around the school. According to Board of Education minutes, the installation of the septic tank and finishing the concrete floor in the lunch room did not occur until 1940. Mars Hill High School is remembered as an exemplary school with a strong curriculum and well respected teachers. Students from the southeastern and eastern parts of the county, including Ebbs Chapel, Beech Glen, Bright Hope, and Brush Creek, were consolidated to Mars Hill through the 1940s and 1950s. Through the consolidation movement, Mars Hill became one of the county's three major schools, along with Hot Springs and Marshall.<sup>7</sup>

In 1951, the Board of Education purchased land from Fred and Lucille Anderson, expanding the school property to the north and east for additional facilities and for additional grade levels. A freestanding classroom block, constructed in 1952 just north of the high school building, housed middle school grades. Memorial Stadium appears to also have been built in the 1950s on land acquired from the Andersons. A survey prepared in 1954 shows a detached building located directly behind the high school; this was reportedly the vocational training building but no longer stands. Additional property to the east was acquired in 1958, from E. C. and Louise Teague, and a separate cafeteria building was constructed to the south of the high school, possibly in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

After the high school grades moved to the new central high school facility in 1973, the rock building continued to be used by middle and elementary students. Middle school students were relocated to a central middle school campus in the 1990s, but elementary grades remained in the building until the new Mars Hill Elementary School opened in 2001 on the eastern portion of the site. The new elementary school is oriented to the east, away from Bailey Street, with access from Bruce Road and overlooking a small creek valley. The gymnasium is still used by elementary students, and the classrooms are currently used for offices, storage, and after school programs.

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. J. Bruce Phillips, "Saving Mars Hill High," *News-Record & Sentinel* (August 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Madison County Board of Education Minutes. Board of Education Administration Office, Marshall, N.C., 1939-1940. Carol Coble, interview with author, December 10, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Madison County Register of Deeds Office. Interviews with Carol Coble and Dr. J. Bruce Phillips, December 10, 2004, and Susie Cody, January 25, 2005.

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### *WPA Schools in Western North Carolina: Architecture Context*

The Works Progress Administration was one of a number of relief agencies formed under President Roosevelt's New Deal program of the 1930s to put the nation's unemployed labor force back to work on public projects. In particular, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), also part of the New Deal program, had a strong presence in western North Carolina. The CCC trained unemployed young men in various skills and worked extensively building roads, bridges, and recreational facilities through the region. CCC workers helped build the Appalachian Trail through the southern mountains and undertook a wide range of projects to develop visitor areas in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The creation of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a 469-mile scenic highway through North Carolina and Virginia, ranks as one of the most spectacular accomplishments of the public works era. Although the idea for a scenic highway along the Blue Ridge originated years earlier, construction finally began in North Carolina in 1935. The WPA tackled a wide variety of public works projects, but the building projects remain the most visible reminders of the agency's relief work.<sup>9</sup>

The natural and rustic style of CCC construction and engineering work reflected a national style developed from the National Park Service's design standards for national parks, which emphasized a close harmony of built structures and natural environment. The style was manifest in low, horizontal buildings constructed using native stone or rock, massive logs, and heavy timbers. CCC workers were heavily involved in the construction of buildings, structures, trails, and roads in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the late 1930s and early 1940s, which greatly influenced the character of other WPA and CCC projects throughout the region. The WPA adopted a similar rustic style for the numerous civic buildings—schools, post offices, libraries—erected under the auspices of the agency, although traces of the Craftsman or Colonial Revival styles helps to distinguish these structures and their important public functions.

Nearly every county in western North Carolina had some buildings constructed by the WPA, including many stone schools, to help deal with the economic effects of the Great Depression in rural communities. Cove Creek High School in Watauga County (NR, 1998) was erected in 1941 by the WPA. The architect-designed two-story stone building was executed in the Collegiate Gothic style. The United States Post Office in Boone (NR, 1996) was built by the WPA in the 1930s, but the stone building is finished with numerous Colonial Revival style details. Yancey County also received WPA funds to build five consolidated schools in the 1930s, all of which still stand. The schools at Bald Creek and Micaville in Yancey County are relatively unaltered. Madison County received assistance from the National Youth Administration to construct three schools in remote areas of the county, in addition to the WPA-supported Mars Hill High School. New

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<sup>9</sup> Bishir, 73-78.

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classrooms and gymnasiums at Hot Springs and Marshall were also constructed in cooperation with the WPA. Other examples survive at Cowee in Macon County and Stecoah in Graham County. The surviving buildings have undergone a wide range of alterations and renovations to remain viable educational or other public facilities.

The architectural firm of S. Grant Alexander and Associates from Asheville designed the Mars Hill High School. The firm, which was comprised of Scottish-born Samuel Grant Alexander and his son Ludovic John Grant Alexander, opened in 1936, when Ludovic Alexander joined his father's practice. Samuel Grant Alexander was born in 1875 in Inverness, Scotland, the fourth of five children to Samuel and Jessie Alexander. Educated and professionally trained in Scotland, Alexander first worked as a bookseller before entering architectural practice, eventually becoming a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a Fellow of the Faculty of Surveyors of Scotland. He was honored with the Order of the British Empire medal for his work during World War I. Following the war, he emigrated with his family to the United States seeking a better climate and greater opportunities for his two children. Alexander apparently heard a great deal about his adopted country through his work with "top officials of the U.S. Navy during the war."<sup>10</sup>

Alexander brought his family to Asheville in 1924, and opened his architectural practice "specializing in residence and business buildings." In 1925, he purchased a lot in Lakeview Park and the following year the family moved into their "Villa Rosalia." Alexander designed a number of fine houses in Lakeview Park (as well as a number of unspectacular examples) including Stratford Towers in 1925 for Wallace B. Davis, president of the Central Bank and Trust Company. Stratford Towers, a rambling two and one-half story manorial English Tudor style dwelling, ranks as possibly the grandest of all houses built in the subdivision. Alexander often designed houses in the Tudor Revival style, but also worked on larger commissions such as American Legion Post 70, a quaint fortress-like stone building near the Veterans Administration Hospital in Oteen; Grace Baptist Church in West Asheville; Church of the Transfiguration at Kanuga (NR, 1995), the Episcopal retreat in Hendersonville; and the rebuilt Calvary Episcopal Church and parish hall in Fletcher.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Family notes by Marguerite Nelson Alexander, daughter of S. Grant Alexander, dated July 2, 1992. Biography files, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC. Also see *Asheville Citizen* (January 22, 1953) and Asheville City Directories.

<sup>11</sup> Buncombe County Register of Deeds, and Douglas Swaim, ed. *Cabins & Castles: The History & Architecture of Buncombe County, North Carolina* (Asheville: Historic Resources Commission of Asheville and Buncombe County, 1981), 204-206.

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Mars Hill High School, Madison County, N.C.

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Alexander's design for the Mars Hill High School combines the Rustic Revival style of its native stone construction with other, more formal elements such as the projecting entrance pavilion and the stepped and peaked parapet walls. The plan of the school is generally straightforward, but clearly shows the efficient use of space and thoughtful detailing of an experienced architect. Mars Hill High School, the largest of the WPA schools built in Madison County, remains the most intact school surviving from the period, with minimal alteration to both the exterior and interior. Many of the alterations to the building—replacement doors, new partition walls, handicap ramps, and canopies—are reversible changes. Among the other WPA schools built in Madison County, the Rustic Revival style school buildings at Beech Glen, Hot Springs, and Laurel have been demolished. Asheville engineer Arnold Vanderhoof provided the plans for classrooms and gymnasiums at Hot Springs and Marshall that were constructed in cooperation with the WPA. The Ebbs Chapel School, built 1940-41 by the National Youth Administration, is a one-story, L-plan Rustic Revival style stone building with an attached auditorium. The Ebbs Chapel School is smaller than the Mars Hill High School and is currently undergoing an extensive renovation though its overall form and character remain intact. Spring Creek School includes an intact detached stone gymnasium that erected using WPA funds. The Mars Hill High School stands as the most intact example of the WPA schools in Madison County.

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Mars Hill High School, Madison County, N.C.

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### Geographical Data

### Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property for the Mars Hill High School is shown by a heavy line on the accompanying survey map, "Madison County Board of Education," prepared by McMahan & Associates and dated August 16, 2004.

### Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes 0.85 acre immediately surrounding the Mars Hill High School building. The property owner, Madison County Board of Education, subdivided this parcel including the school building, from the ten-acre campus of current Mars Hill Elementary School to present to Madison County. Although the full property has been utilized by the Madison County Board of Education for public schools in Mars Hill since the 1920s, the nominated boundary contains the oldest surviving building on the property and the only structure associated with the WPA-era school building program at this site. The other buildings and structures on the property date from the second half of the twentieth century.

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**Mars Hill High School – National Register Boundary Map**  
(Source: Madison County Tax Department)

National Register Boundary is shown by the dashed line.

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### Photograph Index

All photographs of Mars Hill High School at 734 Bailey Street in Mars Hill by Clay Griffith of Edwards-Pitman Environmental, Inc., on December 10, 2004. Negatives are kept at the North Carolina Office of Archives and History Western Office in Asheville, North Carolina.

1. Oblique front view, looking northeast
2. Oblique rear view, looking north
3. Oblique front view of gymnasium, looking southeast
4. Interior – central corridor, looking south
5. Interior – central corridor and classroom door
6. Interior – lunchroom (lower level)
7. Interior – gymnasium, looking to stage at east end

UNITED STATES  
TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY  
MAPPING SERVICES BRANCH

MARS HILL QUADRANGLE  
NORTH CAROLINA  
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC) 191-SE

4555 IV NW  
(Bald Creek 200-AW)

4455 NE  
(Sams Gap 191-NE)

ERWIN (TENN.) 29 MI.  
SAMS GAP 8.2 MI.

960,000 FEET

82° 30'  
35° 52' 30"



790,000  
FEET

3970

3969

10 11 MI.  
10 17 MI.  
JUNCTION  
BURNSVILLE

MARS HILL HIGH  
SCHOOL  
734 BAILEY STREET  
MARS HILL  
MADISON CO, NC  
3967 UTM  
ZONE 17  
E 359730  
N 3966550

50'

3966

