

University Heights

Details:

Name: **University Heights School**
Location: 5031 University Way
Building: 8-room, 2-story wood
Architect: Bebb & Mendel
Site: 2.52 acres

1902: Opened December 8
1903: Renamed Morse on March 7; returned to University Heights on September 1
1907: Addition (James Stephen)
1919: Cafeteria added
1977: Exteriors designated city landmark
1989: Closed
1990: Leased on May 1, University Heights Community Center
2009: Sold to University Heights Center
2010: National Register of Historic Places
2016: New public park constructed on site
Present: Site of University Heights Community Center and University Heights Plaza



University Heights, 1902 MOHAI 9444

A small community developed on the north shore of Portage Bay, and the area, known as Brooklyn, was annexed into the City of Seattle in 1891, then linked to Capitol Hill by the Latona Bridge in 1892. The children of the sparsely settled neighborhood attended the Latona School.

In the early 1890s, the composition of the Brooklyn neighborhood was forever changed. Growing enrollment at the University of Washington, then situated in downtown Seattle, required the construction of a larger campus, and a 600-acre site in Brooklyn was selected. Construction began in 1894.

At the turn of the century, the citizens of Brooklyn sought to convince the Seattle School District their community needed its own school. At first, they utilized church buildings. In 1900-01, the Brooklyn School, an annex to Latona, held its classes in the basement of the Congregational Church.

The following year, the school moved to the University Methodist Episcopal Church at Brooklyn Avenue and (N)E 42nd Street. The Brooklyn Church Annex, still an annex to Latona, closed in 1902 when construction began on property purchased the previous year.

The site for the new school, northwest of the University of Washington campus, was in a sparsely settled area that held promise of future growth. The name, University Heights School, reflected a change in the neighborhood name, from Brooklyn to the University District. The Mission Revival style building was one of the last of Seattle's monumental wood school buildings.

The students entered the new building in December 1902, coming from Latona and the Latona Church Annex. Students marched into the building to the beat of an iron triangle, and assemblies were held in the second-floor hallway.

By 1907, more space was needed as enrollment reached nearly 500. The original eight rooms became the south section of the school as central and north units were added. The building now contained 21 rooms. On



University Heights, 1960 SPSA 274-2

rainy days, the girls spent their recess in the basement, where they danced on a cement floor. A garden planted and tended by students took up a lot across the street from the school.

For several years, the school grounds included seven houses owned by the school district. The school custodian lived in one, which he protected from stray balls by building a nine-foot fence. The last house was moved off the property in 1927.

During the 1920s, enrollment at University Heights often exceeded 900 students. Even with the additional two wings, the building could not hold so many, and a total of seven portables were moved onto the site. A cafeteria opened in 1919, and in 1927 an auditorium was made out of two classrooms

on the second floor. In 1927, the 7th and 8th graders left to attend John Marshall Junior High School, bringing enrollment down.

An appreciative Japanese American father donated Japanese cherry trees to the school on behalf of his children. The seedlings were planted in front of the building.

During the 1940s between 330 and 400 students attended University Heights annually and two nursery schools operated in the building

A PTA project in 1944 provided funds for University Heights pupils to purchase a painting by a local artist for their school. An exhibition of original paintings by Pacific Northwest artists was held at the school, with the students voting on their favorite. The winner, a large pastoral scene by Kenneth Callahan, was purchased for \$35. Annual exhibits of regional art continued at the school for a several years after.

In September 1955, a program for deaf children began at University Heights, starting with 35 students and increasing to 70 by 1960. This program, together with a sight-saving class, boosted enrollment to approximately 500 children and, once again, portables were needed. The program was relocated to View Ridge in 1971.

When the Voluntary Racial Transfer Program was initiated in 1965, University Heights was not designated a “receiving school” but sought to desegregate by accepting transfers and developing a multiethnic curriculum.

Several innovative programs developed at the school with active community participation during the 1970s. A program for individualized instruction and continuous progress for each child was launched in 1971. Because of its proximity to the university, numerous joint educational projects, such as the Study for Teaching and Learning, were formulated.

An alternative school program, first called the University Heights Alternative Program and later Alternative Elementary School #2 (AE #2), grew out of planning sessions between community members, staff, and regional administrators. It opened in 1974 with 212 pupils using two-thirds of the building. The other third continued with a traditional organization. The alternative school caused enrollment to grow by 100 students. The program was based on the philosophy that children would respond with curiosity, exploration, and responsibility in a more open environment. Students could choose from a variety of learning areas. Emphasis was placed on individualized and small, multiage group instruction. Parents and other volunteers contributed many hours to help make the alternative school program a success.

In 1988, University Heights was placed on a list of north-end schools to be considered for closure by the school district. The school's October 1988 enrollment was 138 in the regular K-5 program and 213 in the K-6 Alternative Elementary School #2 program. On April 20, 1988, hundreds of parents, students, staff, and supporters protested plans to close the school by joining hands and forming a circle around the historic building, chanting, "Be cool, save our school." District officials cited the high costs of maintaining the 82-year-old structure, while supporters cited the advantages of a multiethnic, urban environment and the quality of academic programs.

A lawsuit was filed challenging the district's decision to close the school, and in January 1989, the King County Superior Court ruled the closure could proceed. The following year, the alternative program moved to Decatur. In 2007, the alternative program was renamed Thornton Creek, and in 2016, the Thornton Creek program moved into the newly constructed Thornton Creek School.

After the closure in 1989, the district loaned the Callahan painting to the University Branch of Seattle Public Library. In 2000, Roosevelt High School parents, students, and alumni successfully lobbied to have it permanently installed at their school.

Meanwhile, many of the activists who originally tried to save University Heights as a school worked to establish a neighborhood facility there. The building was leased to the nonprofit University Heights Center for the Community Association in 1990. The University District Farmer's Market operated on the playground every Saturday from May 30 to October 31 until 2013, when it moved to University Way to accommodate the City's plan to convert the land into a public park. The park, known as University Heights Plaza, opened in 2016 on land purchased in 2009 by the Seattle Parks Department.

In 2009, the building was sold to the University Heights Center with state, county, city and UHeights funds, including a state grant. The site was to be used in perpetuity as a community center. University Heights Center offers a variety of arts and culture programs and houses an artist collective and several resident organizations, including NW Choirs and Jet City Improv. In 2010 the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior.



University Heights, 1960 SPSA 274-6