



For Kalamazoo's Washington Writers' Academy, today marks end of 91-year era

[Julie Mack | jmack1@mlive.com](#) By [Julie Mack | jmack1@mlive.com](#)

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KALAMAZOO, MI -- When [Washington Writers' Academy](#) first opened in 1922 in Kalamazoo's Edison neighborhood, Warren Harding was president, radio was just catching on and a trolley line ran from Portage Street to downtown Kalamazoo.

Over the next 91 years, thousands of schoolchildren went through the doors of the building at 1919 Portage St. It has undergone at least three extensive renovations and a conversion to a magnet school.

But today will be the last day of classes at Washington. With the end of the 2012-13 school year, Kalamazoo Public Schools is closing the school and will begin its demolition this summer. Meanwhile, a groundbreaking ceremony was held Tuesday evening for a replacement school to be built next door to the current building.

The new school will be two stories and will incorporate the current gymnasium, which was built in 2003 and is the one part of the current structure that is being preserved. The new building is expected to open in January 2015.

"People are excited about the new school," said Craig Herschleb, a KPS board member and former president of the Washington PTO. "It's going to be neat for the community and good for the neighborhood."

Still, the old school has plenty of history, which was noted by many of those in attendance at Tuesday's groundbreaking -- a crowd that included people who attended Washington decades ago.

Ron Overloop and Gil Cummins, who are now 81, were classmates at Washington in the 1930s and '40s. On Tuesday, they recalled the name of their kindergarten teacher and how during World War II, Washington students took second place in a citywide competition to collect scrap metal for the war effort.

They also were among those who remember when the 3.4-acre site along Portage Street held two schools. The original building was constructed in 1907 and named Portage Street School. When the current school opened in 1922, it became Washington Elementary and Portage Street School became Washington Junior High.

For the next 27 years, the campus served grades K-8 in the two buildings and for a time, Washington Junior

High School was the city's largest junior high school. The site still has underground tunnels that connected the two schools.

In 1950, the junior high students were moved to the newly constructed South Junior High and the 1907 building became an auxiliary facility for Washington Elementary, housing first-grade and kindergarten classes as the Baby Boomers became school-age.

The 1907 structure was torn down in 1963 after it was condemned by the city, and Washington Elementary underwent renovations and expansion.

Also worthy of note about Washington: It was one of 12 schools built by Kalamazoo Public Schools during the 1920s.

The list includes Woodward, Lincoln, Parkwood-Upjohn, El Sol, Edison and West Main, which are all still in use by KPS, and North Westnedge, McKinley, Harding, Wilson and Roosevelt, which all closed years ago.

The north wing of Milwood Elementary also was built in the 1920s, but didn't become part of KPS until the district's boundaries expanded in the 1950s, said Kalamazoo historian Lynn Houghton.

"Why so many new schools in the 1920s?" Houghton said in an email to MLive. "I can only think that we were dealing with a growing population ... plus the general affluence at the time."

In fact, the city's population growth helped to fuel the school building boom. The city of Kalamazoo doubled from 24,000 residents in 1900 to 48,500 in 1920, and the Edison neighborhood was among those that were growing fast.

"Washington was constructed to meet the demand of the growing neighborhood population," Houghton wrote in her email. "The fairgrounds (or National Driving Park as it was originally known) moved in the 1890s and developers such as Charles Hays bought the land on both sides of Portage Street, divided it and developed it so a number of those homes on Lay, Lane, Egleston and Stockbridge were built around the end of the 19th and into the early 20th centuries.

"Plus when you think about the impact of the paper mills which were across from Portage Street, including the Monarch and Bryant, there was a big need for a new school," she wrote.

Mike Pryson has lived his whole life in the neighborhood. He started kindergarten at Washington Elementary in 1938 and has lived across the street from the school for the past 40 years.

"It was great," he said about the neighborhood when he was growing up. "As far as I'm concerned, it hasn't changed that much."

As much as he appreciates the history of the old school, he says he is looking forward to construction of the new building.

"I think it will help appreciate the property values of the whole neighborhood," he said. "I can't wait."

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