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Fisk University Historic District

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Fisk University Historic District

The Fisk University Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, honoring the University's long history and its architectural legacy from the late nineteenth century, including such landmarks as Jubilee Hall, the Carnegie Academic Building, the Fisk Memorial Chapel, and the Van Vechten Art Gallery. At the time of its nomination, some forty buildings were listed as contributing to the historic district, many of them former Victorian-era residences that were being used by the university as offices, classrooms, or faculty residences by the second half of the twentieth century.

A recent survey of the Fisk campus reveals that fewer than half of those forty buildings are extant on the Fisk campus today. Many of the single-family residences acquired by the university in the first half of the twentieth century have been demolished for campus expansions or due to the deteriorated condition of the buildings.

At the same time, many of the buildings considered non-contributing to the historic district in the 1970s are worthy of a reassessment for their historic and architectural significance to the university and to the city. At least ten of these twentieth-century buildings should now be considered as contributing to the Fisk University Historic District, and eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. While many of these buildings do not possess the architectural

distinction of the Victorian-era buildings on campus, they are representative of the architectural style of the period in which they were built, and as such, are significant in their own right, for what they represent in both American architectural history as well as the important events surrounding Fisk and the Nashville community during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the student activists important to the Civil Rights Movement as it grew in Nashville studied and lived in these buildings, creating a community that would change the racial climate in Nashville and across the nation.

Burrus Hall (1945): named for the Burrus brothers, two members of the first graduating class of Fisk University. Designed by McKissack and McKissack, Burrus Hall has served as the music building, as a men's dormitory, and as faculty apartments. The two-story brick building is L-shaped with stone framed entry doors facing both Meharry Boulevard and 16th Avenue North.

Henderson A. Johnson Gymnasium (1950): named for an outstanding student-athlete at Fisk who later served as a coach and physical education instructor. Henderson Johnson Gymnasium was designed by the prominent African-American architectural firm McKissack and McKissack to replace the Victorian gymnasium that had been rehabilitated into the Van Vechten Art Gallery.

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Park Johnson Hall (1954): Park Hall was constructed in 1954 and named in honor of sociologist and educator Dr. Robert E. Park. Dr. Charles S. Johnson's name was added to the building following his sudden death in 1956. This three-story contemporary academic building was designed by McKissack and McKissack, and features the Fisk University seal in terrazzo in the entry hall.

DuBois Hall (1959): constructed as a dormitory for male students, DuBois Hall was designed by Godwin and Beckett Architects from Atlanta. It is named in honor of prominent Fisk alumnus, W.E.B. DuBois. Following a 2008 renovation, DuBois Hall now houses the departments of computer sciences, mathematics, physics and natural sciences in addition and the University's radio station.

Spence Hall (1959): Godwin and Beckett Architects designed Spence Hall as a modern student union building for Fisk. This three-story rectangular brick building was named for Adam K. Spence, classical language professor, minister, and the first academic dean at Fisk.

Crosthwaite Hall (1962): dedicated in October 1963 in honor of Fisk alumnae, faculty member, and registrar Minnie Lou Crosthwaite, this four-story brick L-shaped contemporary building was designed by Godwin and Beckett Architects. Crosthwaite Hall serves as a residence hall for women students.

President's House (1962): Constructed during the tenure of Fisk President Stephen Wright, the President's House is an exceptional Nashville example of mid-century modern residential architecture.

Creswell Residence (1964): *Jet* magazine congratulated Fisk comptroller Isaiah Creswell and his wife, Pearl Creswell, curator at the Van Vechten Gallery, on the completion of their "ultra modern glass and redwood residence" in 1964. This one-story residence features a pierced masonry screen wall along the façade, and is a unique Nashville example of mid-century modern residential architecture. The Creswell Residence is a privately-owned residence on the Fisk campus.

New Livingstone Hall (1966): replaced the 1880s building named for the missionary to Africa, David Livingstone. Old Livingstone Hall was destroyed by fire in the 1960s. Godwin and Beckett Architects from Atlanta designed this four-story brick L-shaped contemporary building, which now serves a men's dormitory.

Fisk University Library (1968-70): The Fisk University Library is one of the most striking of Fisk's modern landmarks. Godwin and Beckett Architects designed the modern library building, which features a concrete colonnade surrounding the building. The library has been named in honor of John Hope and Aurelia Franklin.

Shane Hall (1972): Shane Hall was named in honor of Fisk alumna and registrar Mary D. Shane. This five-story brick and concrete residence hall is a striking example of the modern pinwheel design architecture, and was designed by Anderson, Beckwith, and Haible, Architects, a leading firm in modern campus design.

Tara Mitchell Mielnik, Ph.D.
