

Sent by email to csterling@cityofevanston.org and submitted with reference to such email via Commission's public comment platform

To be delivered in-person at Preservation Commission meeting on February 10, 2026

February 9, 2026

To the Members of the Evanston Preservation Commission and Mr. Sterling,

I write as a resident of Evanston, a parent of a current Haven student and a professional with several decades of legal, public health and environmental experience, including in land use and civil rights, regarding the proposed landmarking of the Willard Elementary School, 25PRES-0120, and of the Lincolnwood Elementary School, 25PRES-0125. I submit these comments as a follow-up to my comments of December 9, 2025 on the Willard proposal, with deep thanks to the Commission and staff for taking my comments at the hearing into account. Given that the Willard proposal is ahead of the Lincolnwood proposal; that much of the history of these two schools is shared/intertwined; and that I have had limited opportunity for review and bandwidth to dedicate to each/both schools, my comments focus primarily on the Willard proposal, but include some information/comments specific to Lincolnwood as well.

The draft report for the Willard proposal goes a long way in reflecting the complex and darker history of this school and the surrounding context and shared history. At the same time, additional work is needed on both the report and the proposed resolution to better ensure that we are doing this history justice as one community, and that both the City of Evanston and District 65 are fully complying with their legal duties and policies to advance equity and civil rights. The remainder of my comments take up first the report and its accounting of school and community history, and then the proposed resolution and landmarking itself; much of this history is also relevant to the Lincolnwood proposal.

Willard Draft Report (and Lincolnwood Proposal) - School and Community History

Recognizing the limited time for preparation of the report and the need to condense complex and rich history into a short summary, the draft report in its current form includes substantial passive voice, as well as areas of oversimplification, omission of important facts, and several factual errors. Moreover, it currently reads as two separate histories - the dominant narrative and the "Black history" happening at the same time as that dominant narrative. As a result, the draft report falls short of accurately conveying one shared Evanston history and the tensions and challenges within which we all continue to face today. I request that the Commission review the draft report with these concerns in mind and revise it as necessary to address them before making a decision on the proposal.

One of my deepest concerns is that the report does not reflect that the growth of North Evanston was not pre-ordained to occur as it did, and/or due to outside pressures only or primarily, nor were decisions made around the schools and neighborhoods unanimous as between residents and each other or residents and school district leadership. Rather, there was significant “induced growth” driven by residents with financial and other interests in North Evanston’s trajectory. There were also other positions and courses advocated and voted for by other residents and other decision-makers, including by district leadership itself - but not taken.

I have attempted to address many of these items in the attached mark-up of the draft Willard report, applying lessons that I learned in law school. These lessons include to abstain from using passive voice and to name actors and their actions; apply heightened attention to facts and evidence; use precision in concept and in words chosen to describe and link facts together; and write with deep-but-not-over-simplification. All of these lessons also apply to good history and policy/decision-making. As I had limited time to review the draft and align it with my research, I provide the mark-up by way of example of how this history might be assembled and told, as a suggestion and guide for the Commission and staff in deciding on next steps.

With respect to the Lincolnwood proposal in particular, I am providing a 1950 newspaper article by the wife of architect Dwight D. Perkins’ son, Lawrence Perkins, describing that the North End Improvement Association “founded, selected the site, and circulated the petition for... the building of the [original Lincolnwood] school.” I have additional research on the Lincolnwood school that I am working on assembling to share with the Commission and staff, along with the history already submitted to the Commission staff in the form of my letter to the District 65 Board on the alleged deed restriction on this site (which I request be incorporated as comments on the Lincolnwood proposal).

I have also tried to include references to Lincolnwood in my example mark-up of and comments on the draft Willard report where relevant, noting again that my attempt to do so may not be complete due to the limited time available to review the draft report. These references include that:

- Walter Mitchell owned the now-Perkins Woods property adjacent to the Lincolnwood school in 1913; his family company is named on the documents for moving the Sutton family home away from Willard in/around 1927.
- The North End Improvement Association heavily advocated for annexation of the land just west of Lincolnwood (as well as on which Willard was built) leading up to the successful annexation vote in 1916, and District 75 transferred 42 Black students out of Lincolnwood and/or Crandon schools in 1918 around the same time as it was incorporating residents of that newly-annexed land after they petitioned for inclusion into the school district.

- The District 75 resident vote to purchase and condemn property to build Haven in 1923 may have cleared Black families from Lincolnwood's attendance boundaries at that time, and otherwise set in motion displacement of Black families from Lincolnwood's attendance boundaries at later dates to eventually build Kingsley.

Decision on Proposal and Draft Resolution

Regarding the outcome and impact of the decision before the Commission, I strongly urge the Commission to recognize that such landmarking may have the effect of increasing the costs to the school district of taking steps that are prudent and necessary to stabilize the district's financial position and continue ensuring equity across the district. Such increased cost, should it arise and impede the District's decision-making, would be contrary to the intent of the City's policies and provisions that do not hold District 65 itself to preservation requirements if the District remains the property owner and user.

Moreover, especially in light of the history of discrimination and segregation in Evanston's schools and neighborhoods (as documented to date and as-yet to be documented), such increased cost may impede District 65's and/or the City's full and affirmative compliance with our state's and country's civil rights laws. These laws include, but are not limited, to the federal Civil Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and the Illinois Human Rights Act. The City's Equity Resolution also commits the Commission to eradicating the effects of such past practices, and so may be violated if landmarking inhibits the District and the City from appropriate and necessary decisions with respect to the Willard and Lincolnwood properties.

Given these concerns, I request that, to the extent such has not already been explored and implemented, the Commission include in the resolution and any implementing documents provisions (a) expressly recognizing the applicability of these laws to the District as owners of these school properties and to the City in its housing and economic development and related roles, and (b) providing for rescission of landmark status should such impediment to full and affirmative compliance with these laws and policies arise.

Respectfully submitted,
Meleah Geertsma

Setting:

Willard Elementary School is located in northwest Evanston on the corner of Park Place and Hurd Avenue with its primary (east) elevation fronting Hurd Avenue and secondary (west) elevation facing Central Park Avenue. The building has a monumental presence and its footprint and surrounding grounds are substantial in scale yet well integrated into the surrounding built fabric of R1 residential use, with the only limited B1, R4 and R5 uses along Central Street itself, including, the Central Street merchant district's western core.

Deleted: predominately

Deleted: The structure is two blocks north of

This portion of the city was the westernmost terminus of the streetcar system, which turned back at Central Street and Lincolnwood Drive (later extending west on Harrison). The merchant district in this location remains largely intact with many well-preserved traditional mixed-use structures, predominately between Hurd Street to the west and Bennett Avenue to the east. The neighborhood north of Central Street and west of Ewing Avenue was predominantly developed in the decade before streetcar service was terminated in 1935, although there were significant numbers of households, businesses and structures in this area prior to the 1920s. The surrounding R1 residential areas contain a diverse mix of exclusively single family housing types, sizes, and styles with generous lots. Large revival houses designed by local architects for original owner-occupants are interspersed with equally large and modest revival houses, bungalows, and other smaller vernacular typologies built by contractor-builders for speculation. Today, many of these smaller and more modest homes have been cleared and/or substantially expanded.

Commented [1]: I am not sure whether there are any multi-family houses in these areas; my many walks support no, though there are townhouse-style houses further out on the margins.

Much of northwest Evanston south of Central Street includes the surveyed and proposed Northwest Evanston Historic District. Although a historic district was never established, this area contains significant concentrations of individual landmarks – a testament to its architectural heritage and the wealth that contributed to construction and preservation of these buildings. Its significant built environment includes extensions of the street network within the original 1868 plat of the Village of North Evanston. This purposeful system of expansive parkways connects various commercial and institutional resources as well as small and large public parks and open spaces. At the same time, the City modified and/or built significant roadways in Northwest Evanston in the 1920s, including Lincolnwood Avenue north of Central and McCormick Boulevard. Both of these road projects involved condemnation of multiple properties, including properties owned and/or occupied by North Evanston's small number of Black residents and/or property owners at the time, along with absentee owners.

Commented [2]: Why not, out of curiosity?

Numerous large trees on the Willard property and within the surrounding neighborhoods are remnants of the area's predevelopment pastoral history, when oak and other tree species abounded. Many elm trees planted on the parkways at the time of development still arch gracefully over a number of streets. The site on which the school sits is thought to have been undeveloped prior to the school's construction, although due to inconsistencies/discrepancies in historic resources reviewed to date showing evidence of addresses, households, and structures on land annexed to Evanston in 1916 during this early period in Evanston's development, a firm conclusion is not possible at this time.

History:

The significance of a historic property can be judged and explained only when it is evaluated within its historic context. The first three decades of the 20th century ushered in fundamental shifts to the residential development pattern of Evanston, and consequently to its school system. Between 1910 and 1930, Evanston's population swelled from 25,000 people to nearly 65,000. Eight schools, including ETHS, would be constructed during this period. This time is also inexorably linked to a period in which the foundation of segregated schools and early forms of exclusionary real estate and lending practices in Evanston were laid, setting the groundwork and spatial footprint for more overt segregation like the 1940 Home Owners' Loan Corporation maps that today are synonymous with institutional redlining. For purposes of this report, those schools and associated residential areas within north and northwest Evanston are discussed.

In 1916 and following a campaign led in part by the North End Improvement Association, formed by residents of Northwest Evanston, the City annexed the land in the current Northwest portion of the Evanston North of the canal and West of roughly Hurd and Lincolnwood Avenues. Immediately after the residents of this newly annexed land petitioned for inclusion into North Evanston School District #75 in 1918, the District displaced 42 Black students from the Lincolnwood and Crandon schools to the Foster School. Only a year later, the residents of District 75 in 1919 voted to move forward with a new school for Northwest Evanston. As a result, Willard Elementary was commissioned by School District #75 in 1922. Its origins thus are found in the heart of this period of rapid change for the school system and unprecedented residential growth and development throughout the city, especially the parts of northwest Evanston, annexed in 1916. As the population grew within the School District's boundaries, the school system evolved. As a result of the expanded school system, development interest within northwest Evanston increased and the population as a whole continued to grow, - though North Evanston's Black population experienced the opposite trend, even as the overall Black population of Evanston grew exponentially during the same period. These two phenomena reacted to and pushed each other until the area was largely built-out and large scale development ceased, and patterns of deep residential segregation emblematic of the 1940s through 1960s and still seen today were set.

Prior to the building boom that occurred between World War I and the early years of the Great Depression, northwest Evanston had been sparsely populated. The area was served by the Crandon School (1874-1924), which had been located on the site of today's Independence Park, while northeast Evanston was served by Noyes School (1882-1975). As early as 1910, in anticipation of growth within northwest Evanston, the District and community began exploring growth opportunities to capitalize on new tax revenue and maximize efficiency and capacity. Decisions regarding school location and building new vs expanding existing structures were influenced by newly established neighborhood improvement associations, in particular the North End Improvement Association in the case of the Lincolnwood and Willard schools and the Lake Shore Neighborhood Club in the case of the Orrington school. As a result of those efforts,

Deleted: opening occurred toward the end

Deleted: including

Deleted: previously

Deleted: .

Deleted: .

Commented [3]: NEIA ID'd the Lincolnwood site and circulated the petition to move forward (1950.9.7 Perkins art on LW history). Walter Mitchell owned Perkins Woods land (1913.3.22); his family company Mitchell Bros. realty is on the relocation documents for the Sutton house.

including a joint effort by the NEIA and LSNC to petition the district and get out the vote to move forward with new schools. Orrington Elementary, designed by Raeder and Coffin, was constructed in 1912 and the original Lincolnwood Elementary School, designed by Perkins, Fellows & Hamilton, was constructed in 1914 (demolished in the early 1940s).

The Crandon School, which was in poor condition in and around 1910 when the push for Lincolnwood and Orrington geared up, was not large enough in its form at the time to accommodate additional growth in northwest Evanston. Lincolnwood Elementary was also unable to absorb additional capacity. Both schools were challenged by newly expanded attendance boundaries. Rather than rehabilitate and expand Crandon at its existing site, residents of District 75 north of the canal advocated to buy land and build new schools for Northwest Evanston, starting with Lincolnwood (vote of XX to XX in 1912) after coming together with residents of Northeast Evanston to support building Orrington, and then Willard (vote of XX to XX in 1919). In 1922 the District began construction of Willard and closed Crandon when the new school opened for the following school year. The Crandon property was later cleared and conveyed to the City through a land swap between it and the City-owned Spencer Park east of Perkins Woods, culminating another priority of the North End Improvement Association to build new parks for North Evanston. The City had previously purchased Perkins Woods from Walter Mitchell of Mitchell Bros. realty company.

Residents of D75 voted on the site for a new intermediate school for north Evanston in 1923, after rejecting several other alternatives that entailed locating the new intermediate school at existing buildings and sites, including the original Haven school at Church and Benson and the Noyes School. Haven Middle School, one of the country's first intermediate schools, was completed shortly afterward in 1927. Foster School, the present location of Family Focus, was originally constructed between 1905 and 1908 but saw a large addition in 1925.

Following Evanston's rich heritage of high-quality school architecture, Willard was designed by prominent local architect and school board member Henry Raeder who had completed the design and construction of Orrington School a decade prior. The new school was named posthumously in honor of prominent national and local social reformer Frances Willard.

Also during this period, Evanston enacted early land use reforms. These included regulation of apartment construction (1901), new height restrictions, and minimum lot and room sizes (1915). City leaders also established "restricted residential districts" (1916) and a zoning commission (1919) and adopted the state's and Midwest regions first comprehensive zoning ordinance (1921) – one of the earliest in the nation.

The planning and eventual construction of Willard, not unlike other schools, increased development pressures and leveraged rapid changes in land values and market conditions within its surroundings. Real estate listings in the Willard assignment area regularly listed proximity to the new school as a selling point. Unlike other parts of the city however, northwest Evanston neighborhoods -- including those around Willard Elementary -- developed rapidly and cohesively under the City's new land use controls and early examples of zoning. And unlike

Deleted: the School District would ultimately look to build a new school in northwest Evanston on the site of today's Willard School.

Commented [4]: This is not correct - Crandon stayed open until 1927, so there were several years during which both Willard and Crandon were open, and Crandon had far more Black students than the new Willard. During 1924 for example per the Bruner table, Crandon had nearly 4x as many Black students as Willard.

So Crandon closed after (a) the 1918 Black student transfers, (b) the vote to purchase and clear the Haven/(Kingsley) site if necessary, which displaced Black residents from the Crandon-Willard boundary, and (c) condemnation proceedings were locked in for the Lincolnwood Ave expansion north, which involved clearing of Bauer Place. Effectively, the residents/District kept Crandon open until dozens of Black students were moved out of Northwest Evanston.

Deleted: A

Deleted: was chosen

Commented [5]: Reference should be made to Willard's positions on race given the period in Evanston's history in which the dominant North Evanston residents chose this name for the school, including the conflict between Willard and Ida B. Wells. Here is one resource, which includes an interview with Willard herself. <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/willard-and-wells/the-voice-interview>

Deleted: .

many of Evanston's schools, which were informed by and inserted within existing residential fabric, Willard School became directly associated with the development patterns and physical forms that followed its construction. The surrounding neighborhood has evolved in tandem with its school and as such, it has become one of northwest Evanston's longest serving community institutions with significant cultural and social associations.

ADDITIONAL WORK NEEDED ON THE BELOW SECTION TO FURTHER INTEGRATE HISTORIES INTO ONE (RAN OUT OF TIME).

In 1918, despite community protest, the School District transferred 42 Black students from the Lincolnwood and Crandon attendance boundaries to Foster School to create additional capacity to accommodate the geography of the expanding district. Foster at the time was a diverse school, but was becoming steadily segregated. More direct displacement pressures on the sparsely populated neighborhood adjacent to Willard were spurred not by construction of the school, but by City-initiated capital improvement and land clearance projects. This included condemnation of property and displacement of existing Black residents along the former Bauer Place, directly east of Willard School. Some of these properties were condemned by the City and subsequently demolished or relocated in order to extend Lincolnwood Drive north between Hurd Street and Isabella Street.

While Willard was under construction, the residents of District 75 in 1923 voted 54 to 39 to purchase land and site a new intermediate school at Lincoln and Prairie, after community members rejected alternatives to house the intermediate school at the existing Noyes School or at the existing Haven school (then located at Church and Benson). This vote put in motion the widespread condemnation of property and land clearance which displaced all Black residents of the land on which Haven Middle School and Kingsley Elementary School now stands by 1950. According to directories from the early 1920s, upwards of 20 Black households lived on this land, by far the largest concentration of Black households in North Evanston north of Foster Street. These residents included members of the Rouse family, and the North Shore Iroquois League that Eva Rouse co-founded held several meetings at homes on this land in the year that the vote to build Haven occurred. The effect of this land clearance was not only to displace the residents from their homes, but to displace Black children from the Crandon (and so Willard) and Lincolnwood attendance boundaries, as the North portion of the land was assigned to Crandon and the South portion to Lincolnwood.

Between 1920 and 1930, over 1,400 new homes were built in northwest Evanston. During this same period, Evanston's Black community grew significantly but was increasingly concentrated in the Fifth Ward through displacement pressures and exclusionary real estate practices. This began to shape the city's historical patterns of residential segregation seen to this day. In fact, of those 1,400 new homes built in northwest Evanston, none were sold to a Black household.

Deleted: This time is also inexorably linked to a period in which the foundation of segregated schools and early forms of exclusionary real estate and lending practices in Evanston were laid.

Deleted: During the same period, construction of Haven Middle School and today's Kingsley Elementary School was accompanied by

Deleted: a large number of

Deleted: .

Neighborhood schools are directly influenced by their associated housing patterns and growth trends. Due to this, many neighborhood schools across Evanston became segregated during this period due to direct and indirect displacement pressures and the housing and housing practices surrounding them. By 1940, Foster School in the Fifth Ward, was a de facto segregated school, being comprised almost entirely of Black students. In 1958, when the Foster School burned, black students were bused for the first time to Willard Elementary (and other schools in addition to the 1956 Fleetwood Jourdain Community Center). These students were not incorporated into the existing classrooms or integrated with other non-Black students. Instead, they held class in gyms, libraries, and auditoriums when they weren't otherwise in use. These students would return to a newly constructed Foster School in 1961.

These practices predated later desegregation efforts that would see many Black students return to Willard, first as part of a voluntary transfer program to alleviate overcrowding at Foster and Dewey Schools in 1963 and later under a formal desegregation plan adopted in 1964. Under this plan, Foster School would close as a neighborhood school but remain open as a magnet school for another decade. As a second part of the desegregation plan, all the children who had previously attended Foster School and a majority of the children who had previously attended Dewey School were reassigned to one of seven predominately white schools – including Willard. Approximately 450 Black children per year were bused to school under this plan. Over the next five decades, Willard, along with other schools, would play a role in the District's planned desegregation and would become associated as a community resource not only for its immediate neighborhood, but complexly, for neighborhoods that saw their own school removed from its surrounding built and social fabric.

Many Evanston schools, including Willard Elementary, are associated with the context that includes Evanston's historically important, albeit uncomfortable, history of racial segregation, and later desegregation efforts. However, mere association with historic events or trends does not qualify for landmark designation under related criteria. Importantly, Willard Elementary is not known to be associated with a single event or a pattern of events that is uniquely illustrated or communicated by its identity or can otherwise be identified as highly significant to this broader history and context.

The EVANSTON REVIEW

Sept. 7, 1950
Schools, Pub. - Elem. Lincolnwood
OF EVANSTON AFFAIRS

Lincolnwood School-Community Center

By MRS. LAWRENCE B. PERKINS
Member, the Dedication Committee

Lincolnwood, Evanston's newest school building, opens its doors to the community Sept. 11 just 110 years after our first school bravely began to educate Evanston's children on the little one-acre lot deeded for "educational and burial purposes" on Ridge road in 1840. That first little school was built by private subscription and the expense of its maintenance was shared by the parents according to the number of pupils each family sent. It was a comfortable little house by 1840 standards and boasted a blackboard. The teacher boarded with the parents and received her pay from the school treasurer, who also sold burial lots. Between that schoolhouse and the beautiful new Lincolnwood school stands a century of proud progress in American education. In much of that progress Evanston has been a pioneer.

Lincolnwood from its beginning has been one of the pioneers. When its site was purchased in 1910, there were just two paved streets in the north end, Harrison and Central streets. The street car line ended at Bennett avenue. The prairie lay beyond, green fields and woods. There was one voting precinct for all the section west of the drainage canal. The Sixth ward

extended to the lake and north of Noyes street. There was one eight-room school house on Central street--the Crandon school. Its doors were locked firmly when the last pupil departed for the day.

The north end needed a new school and it needed a neighborhood center. The "school as a social center" was a very new idea, and the new Lincolnwood school, dedicated in 1914, was built to meet that new neighborhood ideal. The North End Improvement association, which Dr. W. A. Coolidge, Frank C. O'Boyle and Charles M. Cartwright founded, selected the site and circulated the petition for larger playgrounds--another new idea--and for the building of the school. The building cost \$14,636. (Around 1920 an addition was added which cost \$125,000 more). In February, 1914, an excited throng of children marched over from the Crandon school to greet their new principal, Miss Mary Moore. Lincolnwood had opened its doors to North Evanston.

Those doors have always stayed open. In the early days when other school buildings were unused in the evening, Lincolnwood was open many nights for dances, plays and lectures.

(Continued on page 28)

The Fountain Comes Back!

By taking action to restore the historic Centennial fountain and give it a beautiful and appropriate setting, the city council has responded to the wishes of a great many Evanstonians and has proved its understanding of the tradition and the character of this town. Besides this consideration, the council by its resolution adopted last week is keeping faith with the public. When the fountain was dismantled in 1946 to permit the streamlining and modernization of Fountain square, there was a clear understanding on all sides that it would be restored as soon as practical and installed in some fitting public place.

For nearly three-quarters of a century the fountain was the symbol and trademark of Evanston, a familiar physical and spiritual landmark to people from all over the globe.

Through changing years it remained unchanged, a quaint reminder, it is true, of an era that was past. But it told visitors at a glance, better than volumes of words could do, the solid steadfastness of this community, and in it Evanstonians through seven decades saw the heart of their city, the assurance of its integrity. When it was removed, a vacuum was created that could not be filled by any modern structure.

The council is acting wisely. It has well chosen the new site--in the Merrick Rose garden, near the new Municipal building. By 75-year custom it belongs close to the city hall. To be

Transfer of Pupils, Causes Vigorous Protest in Evanston

The transfer of 42 pupils from the North Evanston schools to the Foster school last Thursday, March 21, caused an indignant protest from residents of the Fifth ward of Evanston, in which the latter school is located. Mrs. H. W. Whitehead (white), of the local school board, declared the North Shore institute was overcrowded and conditions caused the hegra.

Citizens were stirred to action when Thomas Elliott, president of the Fifth Ward Improvement Association, declared that the move of these pupils was unnecessary, and that such a move by the school authorities warranted the attention of the residents of Evanston and a thorough investigation. "If they are not trying to get rid of the Negro pupils," he said, "it certainly is a curious coincidence that the entire overflow was 100 per cent black." He charged that the Evanstonians were becoming "too aristocratic." A petition has been drafted to create sentiment against the discrimination, and has the co-operation of the best civic interests.

Sent by email to publiccomment@cityofevanston.org¹ and csterling@cityofevanston.org
Hand delivered at Preservation Commission meeting on December 9, 2025

December 9, 2025

To the Members of the Evanston Preservation Commission and Mr. Sterling,

I write as a resident of Evanston, a parent of a current Haven student and a professional with several decades of legal, public health and environmental experience, including in land use and civil rights, regarding the proposed landmarking of the Willard Elementary School, 25PRES-0120, to **request that the Commission investigate and consider the full history of the Willard site, school building and surrounding neighborhood in preparing its report and decision on whether and how to landmark the school, given that Willard was constructed in 1922 and opened in 1924 during a period of Evanston's and our country's history in which the foundation of segregated schools and exclusionary zoning was laid.**

The basis for this request consists of evidence that the early establishment of the Willard school community was connected to the relocation of Black residents and/or their homes from the area around Willard to the 5th Ward, as well as evidence indicating that the planning, site acquisition and construction of Willard Elementary School itself may have directly involved displacement of Black residents. Nor is the below a complete accounting of the available evidence. Much has been said by the applicant and other proponents of the proposal about the architect, building style and features, and positive characteristics of the neighborhood surrounding Willard. However, notably missing from this account is mention of the more troubling aspects of Evanston's history in the 1920s to 1930s when Willard was built and the community around it largely established in its current form and character.²

This omission is despite an extensive amount of work done on this topic leading up to and in support of Evanston's reparation policy, for example as laid out in a 2021 report entitled "Evanston Policies and Practices Directly Affecting the African American Community," authored by Dino Robinson of the Shorefront Legacy Center and Jenny Thompson of the

¹ The Commission's website encourages public comment, including written public comment, and notes that "all comments and suggestions on any topic are welcome," see <https://www.cityofevanston.org/government/public-comment-guide>.

² I was not aware of and so did not attend the Commission's meeting on December 2, when this proposal was taken up, nor am I familiar with the Commission's process in general, including what tends to be taken up by the Commission and its staff versus what is in the record from the proponent. Based on the news coverage in the Roundtable, I assume this history was not discussed at the meeting. <https://evanstonroundtable.com/2025/12/02/preservation-commission-takes-steps-toward-designating-willard-a-local-landmark/>.

Evanston History Center and as carried on today by Shorefront and First Repair.³ If we are to honor the buildings that defined and continue to define our history and culture as the Commission's criteria lay out, we must ensure that we are honoring the full history and not omitting or glossing over more complicated, challenging and deeply disturbing aspects that are so integral to our identity as an Evanston community today.

As an individual with limited time and resources to explore this history myself, it is my hope that the Commission and its staff will do so to fulfill their duties to serve the Evanston community and our shared history. At the same time, I offer my assistance as a Volunteer to Assist Committee Members, pursuant to Article 1, Sec. 2 of the Commission's Rules & Procedures, consistent with my other obligations and if such assistance would be of help to the Commission and staff in fully considering the Willard landmark proposal. I also recommend that the Commission seek out the advice and guidance of local historians, community members and advocates who have focused on exploring and documenting the Black history of Evanston, again consistent with their priorities and obligations, several of whom have helped me directly and for whose work to honor and preserve this history I am deeply grateful.

Finally, I encourage the residents who have brought forward the proposal to learn about this important history, if they are not already aware of it, and encourage the Commission to aid them in this learning, pursuant to the Commission's outreach and education powers and duties pursuant to Evanston Code Section 2-8-3(G)(8) and other relevant code provisions.

Historic Evidence Regarding Development of Willard School

A primary source of evidence for my request consists of the history regarding 2715 Hurd Avenue directly across the street from Willard, which was publicly documented in the news as part of Evanston's reparations activities in the past several years. As set forth in a news piece by WGN, Carlis B. Sutton's grandfather built the house that used to sit on this plot.⁴ But around 1927, just a few years after Willard opened, "they told people they could have the house, but they couldn't have the land" and so "what [Sutton's grandfather] worked hard for and built was just ripped off the map," with the home relocated to the 5th Ward. Steven Rogers, a prominent figure in the business world and neighbor of the home site and Willard, subsequently bought the 2715 Hurd property and adjacent church with intentions of creating a memorial.⁵ I understand, including

³ Available at https://rsaevanston.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Evanston-Policies-Affecting-the-AA-Comm_Shorefront.pdf; <https://shorefrontlegacy.org/>; <https://www.firstrepair.org/>.

⁴ "Evanston first in U.S. to offer Black residents reparations using marijuana tax money," WGN9, March 23, 2021, available at <https://wgntv.com/news/evanston-first-in-us-to-offer-black-residents-reparations-using-marijuana-tax-money/>.

⁵ "Memorial planned to mark forced relocation of black facilities from Evanston's northwest side," Evanston RoundTable, January 6, 2023, available at <https://evanstonroundtable.com/2023/01/06/memorial-planned-to-mark-forced-relocation-of-black-families-from-evanstons-northwest-side/>.

from discussion with Carlis Sutton and Laurice Bell of Shorefront, that oral histories and other evidence also document the relocation of several other Black families from the same area around the same time.

Also grounding my request for a full investigation of the history of Willard Elementary School's planning, establishment and early years is a 1924 report by David Kenneth Bruner to the Dean of Northwestern University entitled "A General Survey of the Negro Population of Evanston."⁶ This report, completed in the same year that Willard was built, contains a map of Evanston entitled "Distribution of Negro Population by School District."⁷ This map depicts the area where Willard now stands as having the North-South streets Elm and Oak running through it, as well as the East-West streets Thayer and Park running continuously from Reese to Central Park. In other words, the map appears to represent the Willard site prior to its dedication and development as a school. The four blocks of Thayer Street between Central Park and it appears Bennett - including blocks that were to become the Willard site - are shaded, indicating Black residents lived on those blocks.

Additional evidence supports that official action to relocate Black residents out of the current-day 6th and 7th Wards and into the 5th Ward was practiced in the period around when Willard was approved by voters, sited, and built. For example, as cited in the reparations report described above, the Chicago Defender in 1918 highlighted the transfer of 42 Black students from "the North Evanston schools" (ostensibly Crandon, Orrington, Lincolnwood and/or Noyes at the time) to the Foster school.⁸ Whether to build Willard was on the school election ballot the very next year, along with an addition to the Lincolnwood School and purchase of new land next to the Noyes School.⁹

Given this evidence, I request that the Commission explore the following questions in considering the landmarking of Willard Elementary School:

⁶ **Attachment 1**, cover page of Bruner report, credit to and available at the [Shorefront Legacy Center](#).

⁷ **Attachment 2**, from Bruner report, marked "Map of Evanston" and "Distribution of Negro Population by School District." (I can follow up with a more complete image of this map, if helpful.)

⁸ **Attachment 3**, "Transfer of Pupils, Causes Vigorous Protest in Evanston," the Chicago Defender, March 30, 1918.

⁹ **Attachment 4**, "School Election This Afternoon," the Evanston News-Index, November 29, 1919. The article notes that the voting locations for District 75 had moved since the 1911 vote to build Lincolnwood, from Haven and the Crandon School in 1911 to Dewey, the Crandon School, and the girls' gymnasium at Church and Sherman. See **Attachment 5**, the Evanston Daily News, July 8, 1912 (describing locations for voting on a new North Evanston school at the Lincolnwood site as divided into two areas, with voters "living north of the drainage canal" voting at the Central Street school building and those "living south of the drainage canal and north of Greenleaf" voting at Haven school). Due to the size of the image files for these news articles, I am not attaching them to my email, but all can be obtained via the Evanston Library's Evanston Historical Newspapers online database, available to library account holders at <https://epl.org/resource/#azindex-letter-E>, and I am happy to provide individual image files upon request. I am providing hardcopies along with the hardcopy of this letter that I plan to deliver at the December 9 meeting.

- (1) Did anyone live on the site consisting of the parcel from current-day Park Place to Isabella and Hurd to Central Park around the time when the land was acquired for the construction of the Willard School in the 1910s to 1920s? If so, who were these residents and in what homes/at what addresses did they live? Were official actions taken to move them, and if so what was the nature of those actions? Were unofficial actions taken to move them, and if so what was the nature of those actions?
- (2) The same questions, but applied to the land around the site that may have been adjusted to accommodate new street patterns in conjunction with the establishment of the Willard school.
- (3) Who lived in the community around the Willard Elementary School, or within the school attendance boundaries, in roughly 1920 to 1930 or 1940? Were any of those residents Black? If so and if they had children, were their children enrolled at Willard? If not, why not? If so, how were those children treated at Willard? Did they themselves or their homes relocate during the period from about 1920 to 1940? If so, why and on what terms?
- (4) For homes around the Willard school built in roughly 1920 to 1930 or 1940, what structures, if any, predated those homes on those sites? What happened to those structures and the people who lived or worked in them? How were the new homes priced and marketed? Who bought those homes and at what price?
- (5) For the period from Willard's construction through the 1950s, did any students attend Willard who lived outside of the school's attendance boundaries? If so, who were these students, where did they live, and why were they allowed to attend Willard?

With thanks for your service and your attention to these matters,

Meleah Geertsma, J.D., M.P.H.

PROPERTY OF STANFORD

The following is a list of the names of the persons who have been identified as members of the Negro population of Evanston, Illinois, in the year 1924. The names are given in alphabetical order of the surnames.

A GENERAL SURVEY

OF

THE NEGRO POPULATION OF EVANSTON

The following is a list of the names of the persons who have been identified as members of the Negro population of Evanston, Illinois, in the year 1924. The names are given in alphabetical order of the surnames.

By

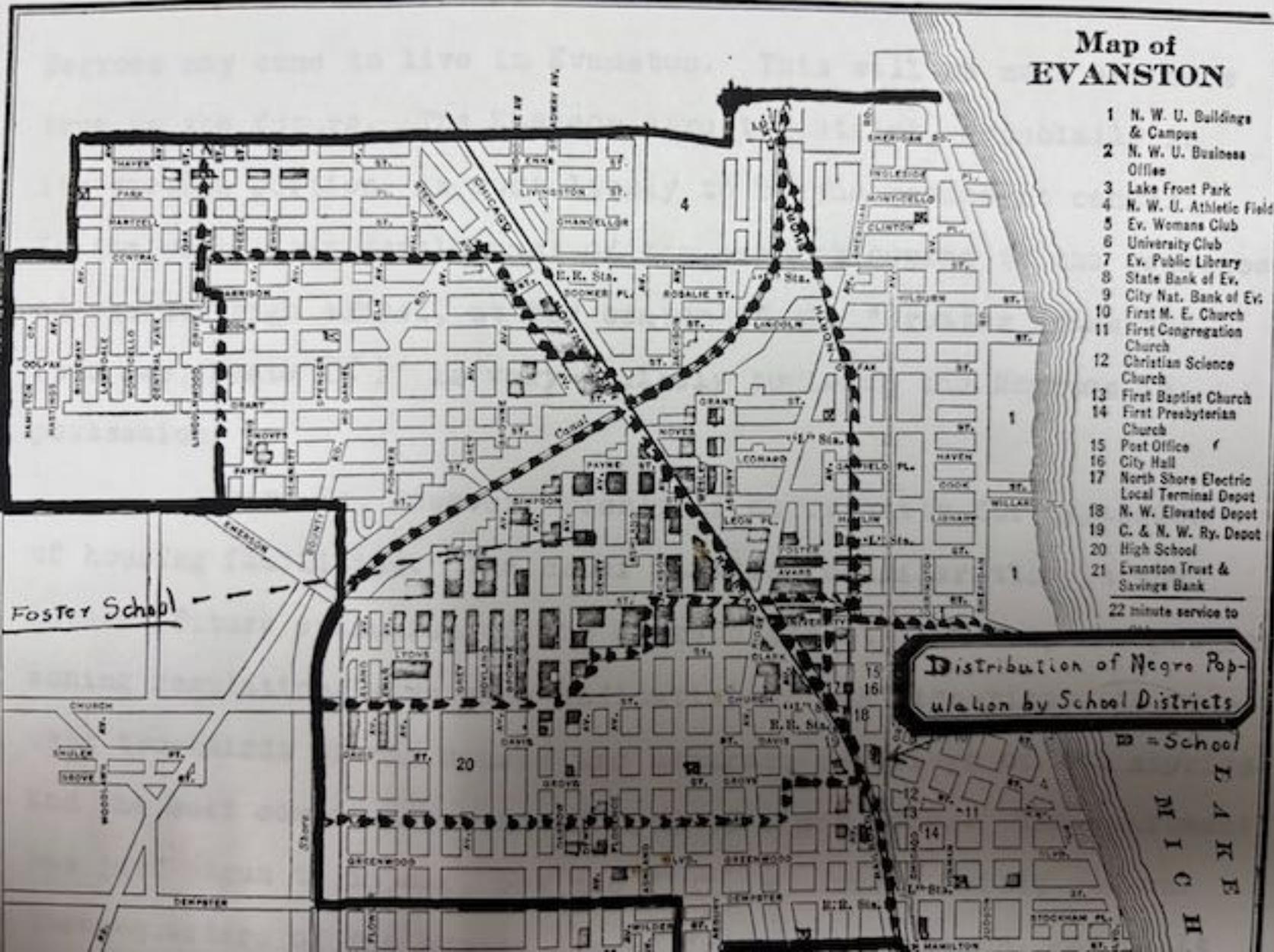
David Kenneth Bruner, B.A.

Filed with the Dean

May 17, 1924

Map of EVANSTON

- 1 N. W. U. Buildings & Campus
- 2 N. W. U. Business Office
- 3 Lake Front Park
- 4 N. W. U. Athletic Field
- 5 Ev. Womens Club
- 6 University Club
- 7 Ev. Public Library
- 8 State Bank of Ev.
- 9 City Nat. Bank of Ev.
- 10 First M. E. Church
- 11 First Congregation Church
- 12 Christian Science Church
- 13 First Baptist Church
- 14 First Presbyterian Church
- 15 Post Office
- 16 City Hall
- 17 North Shore Electric Local Terminal Depot
- 18 N. W. Elevated Depot
- 19 C. & N. W. Ry. Depot
- 20 High School
- 21 Evanston Trust & Savings Bank
- 22 minute service to



Distribution of Negro Population by School Districts

18 = School
 L
 A
 K
 E
 S
 H
 I
 M
 I
 O
 H

Foster School