

A Brief History of the Murphey School, 1923-1959



Murphey School, 17 Oct 1939. Composite image from panning shot in H. Lee Waters film (State Archives of North Carolina). Accessed 7/24/2023. <https://openorangenc.org/buildings/murphy-murphey-school>

In nineteenth century Orange County, NC, there were few educational opportunities for the majority of North Carolinians, especially the least wealthy. Schools were typically one- or two-room log or frame buildings. Little was done to improve the situation until 1868 when the new North Carolina constitution mandated free public education for all children. However, until the Compulsory Attendance Act of 1913, only about half of school-age children attended regularly. The Act required children between the ages of eight and twelve to attend school four months out of the year.

The Murphey School, named in honor of Archibald D. Murpheyⁱ (the “Father of Public Education” in North Carolina), opened in 1923 as a consolidated school. Consolidation was a great equalizer between rural and city schools; it resulted in larger schools created by combining many smaller schools so that a higher volume of students could be classified into distinct grades.

There were three to four teachers at the Murphey School for grades one through seven; one of the teachers served as principal. They resided in a teacherage (also constructed in 1923). There were 182 students in the 1934-34 school year, but only about 70 by 1948. As of 1947, the Murphey School had the lowest student-to-teacher ratio in the county because increasing numbers of students attended school in Hillsboro. Consequently, the school board transferred the seventh grade to Hillsborough School.

The Murphey School finally closed in 1959, with its students transferred to the elementary schools in Hillsborough. The school building was leased to the Mt. Herman Baptist Church for one year. Then in 1963, the Underwood family purchased the property at public auction. It has various uses (including a nightclub), but then sat vacant until it was purchased by the current owner, Jay Miller, in March of 2008.

The Murphey School Building

Rural school buildings played a major role in their communities, serving as a source of civic pride and as a common gathering place. “The very building itself should therefore, be an object of inspiration and pleasant memories; and while the pupils may forget many a lesson taught them within its walls, they should never forget the school and its environment.”ⁱⁱ

With consolidation came new standards for school buildings, including durable and permanent construction materials, steam heat, indoor plumbing, and standardized plans and designs. The Murphey School reflected these statewide trends. It is a one-story brick rectangle with a central hallway flanked by six primary rooms. The front entrance opens directly into what could have been a classroom. Built in the Spanish Revival style with Classical Revival style elements, the school is well preserved, with original features such as the imitation terra cotta tile roof and the wrought iron hardware. The school building is remarkably intact with very few changes to the original materials and architectural features.

Each room contains an original wooden door of five horizontal panels and either a metal or glass doorknob. Each room also contains one casement window of eight lights each on the interior wall that open to the hallway for ventilation purposes. Most of the rooms still have a unique original ceiling treatment of a narrow egg-and-dart paper crown molding and a decorative ceiling pattern made of painted paper.

The Classical Revival auditorium, funded through a Works Progress Administration (WPA) grant, was added on the west side in 1936. The auditorium remains intact, containing nearly all its original materials, windows and architectural features, including the prominent Doric portico and arched windows.

*In 1817, Archibald D. Murphey published a report on education in NC which recommended a publicly financed system of education, but it wasn't until 1839, seven years after Murphey's death that legislation created school districts throughout the state, allowing for taxing within those districts in order to construct school houses.

ⁱ For more about Archibald Debow Murphey, consult the NCPedia at <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/murphey-archibald-debow>

ⁱⁱ Julius Arp, *Rural Education and the Consolidated School*, World Books, Yonkers on Hudson, 1918.