Morristown College: A Legacy and a Vision for the 21st Century
A Heritage Development Prospectus

By the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area
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The Property and its Significance

Standing on a prominent hill overlooking the city of Morristown, the county seat of Hamblen County, is one of Tennessee’s most powerful physical statements of how the American Civil War transformed the people and places of Appalachia. The site of Morristown College, at 417 North James Street, was part of the battlefield during the 1864 Battle of Morristown and then became part of Federal occupation camp in the last months of the war and the subsequent Reconstruction. The site also had been the prior location of slave market and one of the school’s first professors was Andrew Fulton who had been sold at that market as a youngster. The school began with the efforts of missionary Almyra H. Stearns, who established a Freedmen’s Bureau grammar school in an old Baptist church that both Confederates and Federals had used as a military hospital during the war.

The original 1881 college building remains a prominent landmark.

In 1881, members of the Holston Conference of the Methodist Church, under the leadership of Rev. Judson S. Hill, formally established Morristown College (then known as Morristown Seminary) to serve the needs of African American high school and college students and began operations in the old frame building. Stearns remained as principal of the elementary school while Rev. Hill and his wife Laura Yard Hill began to establish the high school and college programs. Hill and other founders wanted to ensure that the gains and opportunities of freedom for African Americans had a place to be nurtured and passed on to the future. Hill served as college president for decades and helped to mould the school into a successful educational and cultural institution.

c. 1881 house on campus, Morristown College
By 1897 the school's population had grown substantially as had the number of faculty and the quality of the buildings on campus. The church then renamed the school the Morristown Normal College. Four years later, the name changed again to Morristown Normal and Industrial College. Rev. Hill proved to be an effective administrator and fund-raiser, gaining donations from Andrew Carnegie, the McCormick family of Chicago (International Harvester) and the Kellogg family of Battle Creek, Michigan (General Mills). For over one hundred years, Morristown College carried out its responsibilities, graduating generations of African American leaders, including ministers, college presidents, educators, businessmen, scientists, educators, attorneys, and Civil Rights activists.

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Interior listed Morristown College in the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district of 300 acres with ten buildings. By that time, the school was only one of two existing two-year colleges of higher education in Appalachia. Fred McMahan (1895-1980), a prominent African American builder from Sevierville, designed many of the twentieth century buildings in a Classical Revival style that was popular on southern college campuses in the middle decades of the twentieth century. At the time of the National Register listing, Morristown College was struggling as many private denominational schools found it difficult to compete with a new higher education system of community schools and regional universities. In 1989, Knoxville College, another historic African American institution in Knoxville, assumed control of the Morristown campus and operated it as a junior college. But the doors of Morristown College closed before the end of the century, and the campus has since rather quickly suffered a fate of neglect and vandalism. What was once a landmark of hope, optimism, and achievement has become, literally, a shell of its former self, a place without a purpose.
The Opportunities

To fulfill its mandate of "telling the whole story of America's greatest challenge, 1860-1875," the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area has identified no other place in Morristown as significant as the 300 historic acres of Morristown College. Not only was an important Civil War battle fought over this land, freedmen, federal officials, and religious leaders labored in faith from the late 1860s to early 1880s to create a lasting institution at this spot, leaving a true legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction years. Moreover, the property is associated with the story of slavery and the slave trade in East Tennessee. Combine those historical associations with the outstanding historic buildings of the campus and the result is a property of great potential for renewal and rebirth.

The following recommendations are designed to galvanize new interest in, and opportunities for, the adaptive reuse of the Morristown College property. Nothing meaningful can be accomplished unless a public-private partnership is willing to recognize the symbolic importance of this campus for not only African Americans in Morristown but also for those who support the legacies of historic faith-based initiatives to create better lives in Appalachia. The partners who become involved in this process should openly explore all possibilities. It is difficult to see that the campus can ever become a place for higher education again but certainly a new future can be chartered that transforms the buildings and property into a vibrant part of Morristown and Hamblen County.

1. Let the Past Speak Strongly to the Present, and Future

We recommend that the local newspaper feature stories about the history and regional significance of Almyra Stearns, Rev. Judson Hill, and Morristown College as a way of reminding everyone of the proud past associated with this now neglected property. The Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area and the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University, working with local partners, would be willing to donate its services to hold a meeting, symposium, or some other sort of public event in order to bring media and public attention to the property's history and potential. MTSU can develop a powerpoint presentation useful not only for that public event but also for presentation to various business, civic, and faith-based institutions in the area to emphasize the property's significance and potential. These meetings will be the best way to generate new ideas for adaptive reuse, identify potential partners, and to publicize the value of the heritage development of the campus.

2. Enhanced efforts to Stop Vandalism

Working with the Morristown Police Department, increased patrols around the school property may deter additional vandalism. Broken windows and unsecured entrances need to be boarded up and locked as soon as possible.

3. Translate Public Engagement into a Plan of Action

Public dialogue means nothing unless it leads to firm commitments for action and steps toward solutions are carried out. We recommend that once community and regional interest is secured, and solid recommendations for redevelopment are identified, the property owners of Morristown College and the interested public parties either directly fund a feasibility study for the adaptive reuse of the campus or that they approach public agencies for support of such a study. The feasibility study should contain, at least, these elements:
a. an identification of the interested parties and possible partners
b. an assessment of the current state of repair of the property
c. an assessment of the adaptive reuse potential of the remaining historic buildings
d. an assessment of the best ideas for the adaptive reuse of the property
e. identified sources of public and private funding with an assessment of business and political support for the project
f. a recommended public awareness and fund raising plan
g. a recommended plan of action

The Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area can provide indirect and direct assistance to this project. Its Professional Services and Outreach program provides technical assistance and support for planning projects involving heritage area resources (such as Morristown College). The heritage area’s Collaborative Partnerships program provides matching funding (1 to 1 basis) with public and private partners for planning documents and feasibility studies. For more information, see [www.histpres.mtsu.edu/~tncivwar](http://www.histpres.mtsu.edu/~tncivwar).

This prospectus is in no way designed to push or recommend the services of the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area but clearly the heritage area can be of assistance, if the potential partners have need of its services, in both interpretation, research, assessment, and planning for the project.

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Appendix: Case Studies

RECYCLING THE PAST TO ENRICH THE PRESENT:

ADAPTIVE REUSE AND REHABILITATION OF AMERICA’S HISTORIC SCHOOLS

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For generations of Americans, historic schools occupy a revered place in hearts and histories; these buildings are indelibly interwoven into memories of childhood, community, and a collective past. But far beyond imparting simple nostalgic value, many historic older school buildings have potential to provide tremendous benefits and uses to communities that far exceed their obvious architectural, social, and aesthetic qualities. Unfortunately, despite greater success in recent years in educating the public in the benefits of historic preservation, a majority of school administrators, local policy makers, and citizens maintain deep-rooted misconceptions regarding successful new uses for older, historic school facilities. One such misunderstanding stems from a pervasive belief that older schools are structurally unsound and inferior to new construction, which severely limits the potential of historic school adaptive reuse. Through increased awareness and education about older school construction and renovation, it is possible to refute this common misconception that threatens to negate historic schools as economically, socially, and historically significant and viable community resources through adaptive reuse as community centers, affordable housing, offices, and public administrative offices.

Adaptive reuse is loosely defined as “a process that adapts buildings for new uses while retaining their historic features.”\(^1\) Although there are cases when damage through lack of maintenance and neglect is extensive and serious issues including lead-based paint and asbestos

make renovation too expensive, these situations are rare; in most cases, a historic school can be
renovated and reused in a cost-effective manner.\(^2\) If properly rehabiliated, as discussed by the
National Trust and Heritage Ohio in “A Primer for School Preservation Advocates,” “a major
renovation would renew the systems to last another 50-70 years with no more maintenance than
new buildings require.”\(^3\) Such a lifespan ensures that these historic structures should last as long,
if not longer, than newly constructed facilities.

Historic school buildings are occasionally unable to meet their state’s strict size and
structural requirements required for operating schools; however, these early twentieth century
schools remain in excellent condition, provide a central location in the heart of the community,
and therefore offer tremendous opportunities for adaptive reuse. While it is also common to hear
discussions bemoaning today’s impermanent, generic, and substandard architecture and building
practices, proponents of historic school renovation and reuse continue to grapple with educating
the public about historic, older schools’ high quality construction, materials and adaptability. As
noted in the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s recent publication “Smart Growth
Schools: A Fact Sheet,”

> "Many people involved in making school facility decisions have little, if any, experience
> with the rehabilitation of older buildings. They simply cannot visualize how an older
> building that is structurally sound could be renovated to meet 21\(^{st}\)-century life safety,
> accessibility, and educational program standards."\(^4\)

As a result, viable options for historic school buildings that may not meet the necessary
requirements for continued school use but still retain excellent potential for alternative uses are
rarely taken into account, and these historic buildings are slated for demolition rather than reuse.

Unfortunately, many historic school buildings also remain unutilized because perceived
experts in architecture and construction are rarely educated about the potential for rehabilitation.
Typically, architects, engineers, and contractors hired to evaluate older school facilities have
neither an interest nor formal training in restoration and reuse, being primarily trained in the
precepts of new construction. Kentucky’s State Historic Preservation Office notes that “most
architects are trained to understand new construction and thus believe older schools to be inferior
structures of a time long past.”\(^5\) When determining a historic school’s value and structural
integrity, The National Trust for Historic Preservation emphasizes that

> “More often than not, school districts hire architects and professionals who know a lot

\(^2\) For additional information regarding cost-effective renovation and rehabilitation, please see the National
Trust’s publications on Historic Schools Issues and Initiatives at [www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/index.html](http://www.nationaltrust.org/issues/schools/index.html) and the National Park Service’s resources for rehabilitation at [www.cr.nps.gov/buildings.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/buildings.htm).


\(^5\) No author given, “Kentucky Historic Schools Initiative: Why are Kentucky’s Historic Schools Buildings Threatened?” Kentucky Heritage Council (State Historic Preservation Office), accessed 8/26/2003, available from website [www.state.ky.us/agencies/khc/school.link_why.htm](http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/khc/school.link_why.htm), Internet.
more about designing new buildings than renovating older ones. Not all architects have training, experience, or an interest in the subspecialty of historic rehabilitation. Many architects are unfamiliar with, or biased against, renovation options.\textsuperscript{6} As a result, historic school evaluations, in theory designed to truly evaluate older school buildings for continued reuse, tend to be “very superficial,”\textsuperscript{7} and rarely provide an adequate analysis for historic school adaptive reuse. However, in-depth feasibility studies to evaluate a historic school building’s condition, when conducted by professionals with experience in preservation and rehabilitation, offer a much more accurate view of its continued potential.

Although this commonly held belief regarding inferior older school construction persists, historic school buildings, when properly maintained, frequently represent outstanding examples of well-built, unique, and enduring construction that can be and have been renovated and adapted for a number of different uses. Preservationist Heather MacIntosh, writing for Historic Seattle’s website, notes that many of her city’s best schools “were built in the 1920s, during a period of national school reform that called for greater light and ventilation in classrooms, and recreational outdoor spaces for better physical fitness.”\textsuperscript{8} During the Progressive era, a number of schools were built across the country to reflect the time’s educational philosophies, resulting in solidly built, well-designed, visually distinctive schools.\textsuperscript{9} Similarly, during the 1930s New Deal era, the Public Works Administration was responsible for an extensive school building program, resulting in thousands of solidly built, modern facilities across the nation.\textsuperscript{10} Because of their excellent construction, many of these enduring structures have survived, and their flexibility and durability makes them prime candidates for adaptive reuse.

In addition to solidly built construction, older, historic school buildings from the early twentieth century also contain unique and striking architectural features that contribute to their overall character, design, and value. Common features in late nineteenth and early twentieth century school buildings include “large and handsome windows, a common feature of older schools rarely available today,” ornate millwork, decorative tiles, plaster carvings, hardwood flooring, rich brick and limestone exteriors, and high, vaulted ceilings that contribute to an open, adaptable, well-lit atmosphere.\textsuperscript{11} When former school buildings are rehabilitated for other

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purposes, such as offices, apartments, or community centers, these features make these distinctive buildings even more desirable.

Economic statistics and heart-felt personal stories offer a great deal of support and justification for rehabilitating and reusing historic school buildings; however, the greatest evidence supporting this type of program’s success lies in the built environment itself. Historic school buildings across the country have been renovated and adapted into well-functioning structures that contribute to the economic, social, and aesthetic success of the communities that house them. Upon retirement from school service, these buildings flourish as offices, community centers, affordable and luxury apartments, senior citizen housing, and administrative complexes, allowing them to remain vital contributors to thriving towns and cities.

Lebanon, Tennessee is home to one of the state’s most interesting and attractive historic school sites that has adapted to its ever-changing and growing city. The former Castle Heights Military Academy, founded in 1902, was a military secondary school until its eventual closure in 1986, when city residents realized the potential of several of its historic school buildings. The campus’s Main Building now serves as the City of Lebanon’s City Hall, and the Mitchell House houses the offices for the well-known Cracker Barrel Foundation. The former President’s home is now a popular restaurant known as Rademacher’s Chop House.  

An excellent example of both rehabilitation and adaptive reuse is demonstrated in Murfreesboro, TN’s historic Bradley Academy. Built in 1917 as a school for African-Americans, the school later fell into disuse and disrepair. In 1990, the Bradley Academy Historical Association with assistance from the MTSU’s Center for Historic Preservation, reclaimed the building from the city and renovated it into a multi-purpose community center and museum. This historic building now serves as a museum, a meeting facility, and an education center, while standing as one of the few remaining sites that survived urban renewal to demonstrate Murfreesboro’s rich African-American heritage.

In Boston, Massachusetts, affordable housing has remained a serious issue for decades. As the city’s schools aged, 27 facilities were closed during the 1980s. Rather than demolishing these still-viable buildings, the city converted 12 of the schools into low to moderate income housing facilities, providing an additional 472 units. Boston’s city government also partnered with a number of private firms to renovate schools into disabled, senior citizen, assisted living, and luxury apartments.

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Adaptive reuse of historic schools is not limited to urban areas. In Tennessee’s primarily rural Clay County, an all-black historic community rallied to save their small historic school building. The community hosted a homecoming to raise funds to transform and restore their 75-year-old school building, which now serves as a community center and meeting hall.\textsuperscript{15}

For decades, schools have occupied prominent locations in America’s towns, minds, and memories. Many of the nation’s historic schools, although growing older, remain structurally sound and visually pleasing examples of collective heritage, values, and style. Although some historic school buildings no longer meet state-mandated requirements for active school facilities, their solid construction, distinctive decorative features, flexibility, and central locations within their communities make them outstanding candidates for continued use as offices, community centers, apartments, and almost anything else that individuals with knowledge of renovation and a little imagination can conceive. Adaptive reuse for older, historic schools allows these excellent examples of architecture and design to continue to effectively serve their communities in new and imaginative ways for generations.

\textbf{Bibliography}


