

Meet the New Town Hall & Community Center (Housed in the Historic Davidson School)

We thank the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission's for this research.

How long has 251 South Street been a school?

In 1892, a Davidson family, the Sheltons, donated a lot on South Street for Davidson Academy - a school that opened in 1893.

History forged in fire?

On April 8, 1946, the Board of Education voted not to alter its insurance coverage for the 1946-1947 school year even though it was aware that the school's buildings were "not insured for more than 50% of the present value..." During an electrical storm on July 15, 1946, the Davidson Academy building burned severely. In October 1946, a delegation from Davidson, with J.C. Bailey as its spokesman, urged the Board of Education to: build a new building on the same site, open the new school building by 1947, purchase more land for the new building, and make the new building large enough to accommodate present and future needs. The Board directed the school superintendent to hire architect Louis Asbury for the project, to pursue the purchase of adjoining land, and to seek Federal Works Administration funding for the cost of the architect. By May 1947, a large Davidson delegation, frustrated with the slow pace of the project, requested the "immediate erection of a 'fire proof' building." On July 8, 1947, nearly one year after the Davidson Academy building had burned, the Board of Education approved spending \$245,690 on the new building.

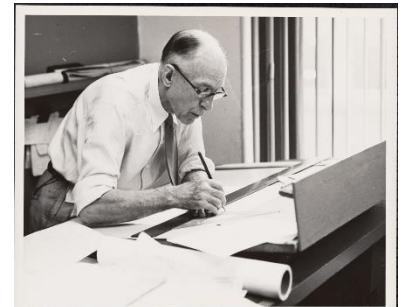


Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections: Davidson College

Was Louis Asbury a famous architect?

Born in Charlotte in 1877, Louis Asbury was arguably the most important local architect of his time. Educated at Trinity College (now Duke University) and M.I.T., Asbury studied architecture in Europe and then returned to Charlotte and became the first North Carolina member of the American Institute of Architects. He practiced in North Carolina from 1908 until his retirement in 1956. Asbury designed homes, commercial buildings, government and other institutional buildings. Among his notable surviving designs are the 20-story First National Bank Building (built in 1927 at 110-112 South Tryon Street in Charlotte), the Mecklenburg County Courthouse (built in 1928 at 700 East Trade Street in Charlotte), and the Myers Park United Methodist Church (built in 1929 at 1501 Queens Road in Charlotte).

Louis H. Asbury papers. MS0145. Special Collections & University Archives, J. Murrey Atkins Library, The University of NC at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC.



Is the historic Davidson school architecturally important?

In terms of public education buildings, the new Davidson School was a showplace, featuring a Modernist design with simple functional lines and industrially produced building materials, most especially the prominent aluminum windows across the front and rear elevations. The Davidson School represented a definite break with the past and served as a highly visible demonstration of progressive school design. In addition, Asbury's design addressed the citizens' desire for a fireproof building. Solid masonry walls supported steel trusses and concrete floors replaced the oiled wooden floors of the old building.

When did the historic Davidson school re-Open?

The original opening of the school was delayed due to a polio outbreak. When the school finally opened in early October 1948 many elements of the school were still unfinished, including the lighting and the seats for the auditorium. The building served grades 1-12.

But wasn't it an elementary school?

The Davidson School's high school students moved to the new North Mecklenburg High School in Huntersville when it opened in 1951. John M. Alexander Junior High School opened in 1960, and after a few transitional years, the Davidson School became the Davidson Elementary School. In 1994 a new elementary school (now Davidson K-8) was built farther south on South Street. The last schools housed at 251 South Street were the Davidson International Baccalaureate Middle School (a CMS school that closed in 2011) and a private school that leased the property from CMS and closed in 2018.

When did the historic preservation begin?

In November 2019, voters passed the town's second-ever municipal bond. The \$14 million project has two components:

- Renovation of the historic Davidson School at 251 South Street.
- Reconfiguring the previous town hall on Main Street to accommodate Public Safety, both the Davidson Police and Fire Departments.

Architectural elements in the new Town Hall & Community Center

- At the front, cast-stone bands run the length of the building and turn the corner, to run for a short distance on the Cathey Street side.
- Inside the entrance, the reception desk is made of wood that was once part of a walk-in cooler in the school's cafeteria.
- In the main hallway, lockers were removed to make the entrance wider.
- The original interior walls were built of plaster lath, and that has been maintained throughout the building as much as possible.
- Hallways feature terrazzo floors and glazed tile running up the walls. The most notable doors feature a round "porthole" window.
- The building's two stairwells demonstrate the fireproof design of the building since they include poured-in-place concrete stairways. A partial-height concrete handrail-wall borders the concrete steps and curves in a tight radius where the stairs switch back.

- The new Davidson Board of Commissioner's Chamber fits into an existing classroom, with 46 fixed seats and 9 seats at the dais. The 2nd Floor Community Room will be used for overflow attendance and live-streaming of meetings.
- On the second floor, original clerestory windows remain above the doors and are operable. New electrical conduit is surface-mounted because there are no original traces in the walls.
- One classroom has been preserved with original finishes, cleaned and painted. Countertops are new, but the original casework remains. Roll-down partitions remain and are still operable.
- At the Auditorium's main entrance, the doors are surrounded by molded cast-stone trim and are topped with large cast-stone panels with a shield emblem in the center. Each of the panels is topped with 12-paned metal sash windows.
- The most notable feature of the north side of the auditorium wing is the group of five tall triple-hung windows.
- There were originally 318 seats in the auditorium. The renovated auditorium has 300 seats. Eighteen seats were removed to accommodate a small audio/visual room.
- The auditorium's ceiling detail was replicated with gypsum rather than the original asbestos-embedded plaster.
- The doorway near the corner of South and Cathey Streets, as well as an original rear entrance that faces the gymnasium, are protected by concrete awnings.

As is typical in preservation projects, the addition on the east (rear) side of the building was designed to be clearly discernible from the historic portions of the building. This side does feature cast-stone bands and stone panels that reference those on the front of auditorium.