

**ARLINGTON COUNTY REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION FORM**

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic District Name: Nelly Custis Elementary School
Historic Name: Nelly Custis Elementary School
Current Name: Melwood Horticultural Training Center

2. LOCATION OF PROPERTY

Street and Number: 750 23rd Street South
County, State, Zip Code: Arlington, VA. 22202

3. TYPE OF PROPERTY

- A. Ownership of Property: PRIVATE
- B. Category of Property: PRIVATE
- C. Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
_____	_____	Total

- D. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places
- | | | | |
|---|-----|-------|----|
| X | Yes | _____ | No |
|---|-----|-------|----|

4. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic Functions: EDUCATION: School

Current Functions: NONPROFIT: Community Training Facility

5. DESCRIPTION OF PROPERTY

Summary Description:

The Nelly Custis Elementary School (here on referenced as Nelly Custis School) building, located at 750 23rd Street South, is a Colonial Revival building constructed in 1924. The building served as a public elementary school for primarily the Aurora Highlands neighborhood until its closure by the Arlington County Public School Board in 1978. It was designed by Upman & Adams Architects, Washington, D.C., and built by the Frank Davis Company. Colonial Revival architecture—widely embraced from the late 19th through the mid-20th century—became a dominant style for civic and institutional buildings in the United States, as public structures such as schools, courthouses, libraries, and government offices favored its orderly proportions and monumental forms for the sense of stability, tradition, and democratic ideals they conveyed. The 1924 building was

expanded in 1931 with the construction of east and west wings, again in 1962 with a rear and west addition, and again in 1995 with an addition on the front elevation for a new entrance to the building (**Figure 1**). Further alterations that have affected the building's sense of design, materials, and workmanship include the infill of the original 1924 main entrance with windows and brick, the widening of original window openings and changes to fenestration patterns, the replacement of all the windows and doors, and interior alterations to accommodate the change in use.

Materials:

Foundations: Concrete structural system and brick foundation.

Walls: Brick and stone.

Roof: Flat.

Roof Materials: Asphalt-based rolled roofing with metal coping.

Windows: Aluminum-framed windows that consist of one-over-one and two-over-two windows with fixed upper panes and awning lower panes.

Doors: Double-leaf metal doors with small lites; single metal, utilitarian doors; modern automatic glass doors.

Setting

The building at 750 23rd Street South is located on a 1.73-acre parcel within the single-family, residential neighborhood of Aurora Highlands. Approximately 1,145 feet west of U.S. Route 1, the building is situated in an area of the neighborhood where there are typically one- to two-story houses with nearby commercial or institutional buildings having greater heights of three- to -four stories. The building is situated closer to the northeast corner, bounded by 23rd Street South to the north, South Grant Street to the east, 24th Street South to the south, and South Hayes Street to the west. Across the street from the building, on the north side of 23rd Street South, is a three-story commercial building constructed in 1983, a three-story commercial building constructed in 1970, and a two-story commercial building constructed in 2019. On the east side of South Grant Street is the Calvary United Methodist Church, constructed at an unknown date. Directly adjacent to the building to the south is the County-owned Nelly Custis Park and two, single-family buildings situated closer to the southwest. Adjacent to the building to the northwest is a one-story, commercial building constructed in 1960.

Landscape and Hardscape Description

Fronting the north side of the building is a grass lawn with multiple trees and shrubs. Towards the middle of the green lawn is a flagpole surrounded on both sides by young tree plantings, shrubs, and a stone bench. Along the façade (north elevation) of the building is a wide mulch border with large evergreen and seasonal trees. The mulch border continues along the east elevation of the building and extends to the edges of the northeast corner of the grass lawn. There are plantings and shrubs in this area of the property. Also located at the northeast corner of the lot is a bus stop shelter that consists of a three-sided metal enclosure on a concrete slab (**Figure 2**).

Near the northeast corner of the building is a large evergreen tree. Running along the north side of the grass lawn is a public sidewalk. Extending from the public sidewalk to the north elevation is a concrete walkway edged with a low brick wall topped with a painted metal handrail. This walkway provides access to the main entrance of the building on the north elevation. Near the public sidewalk and the front walkway are mulched areas with low plantings and shrubs. There is a low-grade, concrete ramp extending east-west from the concrete main walkway that accesses a parking lot to the west of the building. The ramp is edged by a low brick wall and topped with a painted metal handrail. Along the ramp are areas of mulch with low plantings and shrubs. At the end of the ramp is a detectable warning surface with raised dome tiles installed at the walkway prior to entering the parking lot on the property.

Along the east elevation of the building is a mulch border with low plantings and shrubs. There is a concrete walkway with a painted metal handrail that slopes north to south and accesses the public sidewalk that runs parallel to South Grant Street near the northeast corner of the building. Concrete steps at the end of the sidewalk provide access to the lower level of the building. Continuing along the east side of the building are concrete pavers that transition into asphalt and run along the south side of the building and a wood privacy fence that wraps around to the south side of the lot.

The asphalt parking lot to the west of the building is accessed from 23rd Street South via two curb cuts edged by grass, low plantings, shrubs and trees (**Figure 3**). The parking lot, which comprises most of the west side of the property, wraps around to the south elevation of the building. There is a mulched median strip between the two curb cuts that extends north to south in the parking lot which guides traffic from the entrance curb cut to the exit curb cut. Inside the mulched median strip, closer to 23rd Street South, is an east-west concrete sidewalk with detectable warning surfaces with raised dome tiles and trees. There is a mulch border with trees on the furthest west side of the parcel between the lot at 750 23rd Street South and 758 23rd Street South.

Architectural Description

The rectangular-plan building is situated in the eastern portion of the parcel and has an east-west orientation. The building includes a two-story 1924 section, two-story wings constructed in 1931 that flank the 1924 section, a one-story T-shaped 1962 addition on the west and south elevations, and a 1995 entrance addition constructed between the east elevation of the 1962 addition and the west elevation of the 1931 wing (**Figure 1**). The 1924 and 1931 sections are clad in a five-course American-bond brick veneer and have a flat roof with modern metal coping. Masonry details on the 1924 and 1931 sections include lower and upper limestone belt courses and a protruding brick belt course at the raised basement level. The 1924 section and 1931 wings, which make up the historic core of the building, are supported by a concrete structural system and brick foundation and have a partially exposed/raised basement level. The 1962 addition also features a

flat roof with modern metal coping and has a masonry structure clad in a stretcher-bond brick veneer.

North Elevation

The 1924 and 1931 section, the historic core of the building, faces north towards 23rd Street South (**Figure 4**). The two-story building consists of a raised basement and one main story. The building has a concrete structural system, a brick foundation, and is clad in a five-course American-bond brick veneer, features a lower and upper limestone belt course, as well as a protruding brick belt course at the raised basement level.

The north (façade) elevation has replacement, aluminum-framed one-over-one and two-over-two windows that consist of an upper fixed pane with an awning pane below it (**Figures 5**). Based on a historic 1932 photograph, both the 1924 section and 1931 wings appeared to originally have industrial steel windows that consisted of multiple panes with central pivot sashes (**Figure 30**). This type of window was suited for buildings that required fire-proof window construction that allowed for large amounts of light. The window locations at the raised basement story are arranged in the original location; however, based on the same 1932 photograph, brick infill was used to frame the replacement windows at this level as they are smaller in size than what was originally there. The brick sills and lintels for the lower-level windows are modern brick infill. Regarding the windows at the raised basement level, no original materials remain. Similar to the treatment of windows at the raised basement level, modern brick infill was used to accommodate replacement windows of a smaller size. Regarding the windows at the main story, the only remaining original material is the limestone sills.

The central bay of the 1924 section was significantly altered with the removal of the school's original main entrance. Currently, there are two-over-two windows at both the raised basement level and main story, with extensive modern brick infill surrounding them (**Figure 6**). Underneath the roofline is the original upper limestone belt course and at the roofline is a stepped brick parapet, which remains the only indicator that the central bay used to function as the main entrance. The 1932 photograph additionally shows that the building originally had a recessed entrance flanked by limestone pilasters and was sheltered by a cantilevered canopy held by wire cables that fastened into the north façade (**Figure 30**). Above the entrance was a steel industrial window with multiple panes with a central pivot sash that had a limestone border. The original entrance led to a central interior corridor with stairs that provided access to both the raised basement level and main story. The removal of the main entrance, replacement windows, and brick infill occurred during a 1993 renovation project.

On the north (façade) elevation to the west of the 1931 west wing is a one-story, 1995 addition (**Figure 7**). The 1995 addition was constructed to serve as the main entrance to the building and replaced a previous one-story addition that connected the 1931 west wing to the 1962 addition. The foundation and structural system of the 1995 addition is unknown. The entrance has modern automatic glass doors flanked by aluminum fixed windows topped with transoms. Sheltering the

entrance is a steel-frame cantilevered roof system supported by brick columns. The roof of the 1995 addition consists of gabled skylights.

West of the 1995 addition on the north (façade) elevation is the one-story, 1962 addition (**Figure 8**). The north elevation of the 1962 addition consists of a masonry structure with a stretcher-bond brick veneer and a flat roof with modern metal coping. Although there is no fenestration on the north elevation, there is a lower brick belt course that wraps at the corners and above these are four blind windows edged by projecting bricks with concrete corners. There is modern signage on the north elevation that reads “Melwood Your Path Awaits” and fronting the northwest bay is a wood privacy fence surrounding mechanical equipment.

East Elevation

The east (side) elevation consists of the 1931 east wing and 1962 addition (**Figure 9**). Identical to the north elevation, the east elevation has the same concrete structural system, brick foundation, five-course American-bond brick veneer, lower and upper limestone belt course, rusticated brick at the raised basement, and flat roof with modern metal coping. There are long window openings in the center bay at the main story of the east elevation, with the southern window bay located in the 1931 east wing. The northern window bay on this elevation was added during the 1993 renovation. The east elevation consists of replacement two-over-two windows. Like the north elevation, and based on the 1932 photograph, brick infill was used to accommodate the replacement windows as they are different in shape and much larger. The brick sills and lintels are modern brick infill. There is an ancillary entrance near the southeast corner with replacement double-leaf metal doors, and its location is original. To the south of the 1931 east wing is the one-story, 1962 addition which has a masonry structure with a stretcher-bond brick veneer topped with a flat roof with modern metal coping (**Figure 10**). The east (side) elevation of the 1962 addition has a recessed ancillary entrance with double-leaf metal doors topped by transom lites (**Figure 11**).

South Elevation

The rear (south) elevation of the building consists primarily of the 1962 T-shaped one-story, flat-roof addition (**Figure 12**). The 1924/1931 main story is visible overtop of the one-story 1962 addition. The first story continues the characteristics of the 1962 addition, which consists of a masonry structure with a stretcher-bond brick veneer and a flat roof with modern metal coping. Fenestration includes ribbon windows and side-by-side ancillary entrances. The aluminum ribbon windows consist of an upper fixed window with an awning window below it. The ancillary entrances have single metal, utilitarian doors with glass transoms (**Figures 13 and 14**). Sheltering the windows and doors is a metal cantilevered overhang with wide metal coping. On the western-most portion of the southern elevation is the portion of the one-story 1962 addition which extends north-south from the west side of the rear elevation of the building (**Figure 15**). It is identical to the rear elevation, which includes a masonry structure with a stretcher-bond brick veneer and a flat roof with modern metal coping. This extension has east, south, and west

elevations since it protrudes out from the main line of the building. On the east (side) elevation of the extension there are double-leaf utilitarian doors topped by transoms. The entrance is sheltered by a cantilevered awning. Access is provided to this entrance via a concrete walkway with a metal railing. There are no other openings on the east elevation. On the south (rear) elevation of the extension, there is a single metal utilitarian door near the southeast corner and two, aluminum-framed two-over-two windows (**Figure 15**). A large, wide interior brick chimney pierces the flat roof.

The second story of the south (rear) elevation is the 1924/1931 historic core of the building (**Figure 14**), which continues to have the same concrete structural system, brick foundation, five-course American-bond brick veneer, upper limestone belt course, and flat roof with modern metal coping. There are double-hung aluminum replacement windows and a single metal, utilitarian door with glass transom lite. The original window fenestration pattern of the 1924/1931 historic core is unknown as there are no drawings or historic photographs of this elevation; however, the irregular placement of the existing window openings and door, along with the window and door replacements, contributes to the belief that the second story of the south (rear) elevation has been extensively altered.

West Elevation

The west (side) elevation consists of the 1962 T-shaped addition at the first story and the 1931 west wing at the second story. The 1962 addition is identical to the east and south elevations, having a masonry structure with a stretcher-bond brick veneer and a flat roof with modern metal coping (**Figure 16**). The west elevation is fronted by a brick loading dock that is sheltered by a cantilevered overhang with metal coping. Openings include a double, metal utilitarian door topped by metal vents, a single metal utilitarian door, a one-over-one aluminum double-hung window, a double metal utilitarian door, and multiple one-over-one aluminum sash windows. Near the northwest corner is a window opening that has been covered over with unknown material.

Above the 1962 addition of the building along this elevation is the second story of the 1931 west wing (**Figure 16**). The structural system and cladding matches that of the rest of the 1931 west wing. Fenestration on this portion of the west elevation includes three, aluminum-framed two-over-two windows arranged closer to the southwest bay. Above the windows is the continuous upper limestone belt course near the roof line as seen on other elevations.

Interior

Access to the building's interior is provided at the main entrance on the north façade along 23rd Street South, which leads into a small lobby illuminated by the gabled skylights above. From this space, two parallel east–west corridors extend across the building. The northern-most corridor cuts through the 1924/1931 portion of the building and is lined with rooms on either side of the corridor that serve as offices, restrooms, and training/recreation rooms. The corridor terminates

at a large lunchroom which occupies the raised basement level of the 1931 east wing addition. The southern-most corridor runs along the north side of the 1962 addition, linking all three construction phases—1924, 1931, and 1962—and providing entry to both shared rooms off the north corridor and large support spaces within the eastern portion of the 1962 addition. The west side of the 1962 addition, also reached from the southern corridor, contains storage and mechanical spaces. The first-floor (raised basement) interior no longer contains any historic material. The flooring, tile wainscoting, ceilings, lighting, and doors were replaced in the many renovations that have occurred over the past 60 years. There are two stairwells located at the east and west ends of the parallel corridor systems that access the second floor (main story). The second floor (main story) is in the 1924/1931 portion of the building and consists of a corridor with rooms on either side of the corridor that serve as offices, conference rooms, and training spaces. The floors, tile wainscoting, ceilings, and lighting on the second floor were also replaced during previous renovations. Some original millwork, wood doors, and corridor-door transoms remain on the second floor. Most of the interior integrity of the 1924/1931 portions of the original building is expressed through the corridor volume and overall composition and layout. Otherwise, interior physical integrity is limited.

6. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

A. Applicable Designation Criteria as described in Section 11.3.4.A of the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance:

The Nelly Custis School Building meets one of the eleven designation criteria as described in Section 11.3.4.A of the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance:

A. The property is listed or is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places;

(See Section J of this report for a detailed description of how this property meets the designation criteria).

B. Statement of Significance:

The Nelly Custis School was built in 1924, with subsequent additions in 1931, 1962, and 1995, and functioned as a public school primarily for the Aurora Highlands neighborhood until 1978. The property, which was originally part of the Custis family's Abingdon estate, was subdivided in the late nineteenth century into smaller tracts that later formed Aurora Highlands, which was platted in 1896. Constructed during Arlington County's major 1920s school expansion — which was driven by rapid population growth and strengthened by the 1922 consolidation of the County's three magisterial districts under Superintendent Fletcher Kemp — the school embodied the County's continued investment in modern educational facilities. The

building was designed by Frank Upman and Percy C. Adams in the Colonial Revival style, which was popular between the 1890s and the 1950s and became one of the most widely used architectural styles for public buildings in the United States. During Arlington’s gradual desegregation process, initiated in the County 1959, Nelly Custis was among the last elementary schools to integrate, doing so between 1971 and 1972. Declining enrollment led to the school’s closure in 1978, after which the building housed the Sheltered Occupational Center of Northern Virginia for nearly four decades until the Melwood Horticultural Training Center, Inc., purchased it in 2018 for their programmatic use. The Nelly Custis School is associated with the early-20th century development of public education in Arlington County.

C. Period of Significance: 1924 – 1978

D. Significant Dates: 1924; 1931; 1962; 1995.

E. Significant Persons:

Original Architects – Upman & Adams Architects, Washington, D.C.:

The building was designed by Frank Upman and Percy C. Adams of Upman & Adams Architects, Washington, D.C. Frank Upman was born on December 11, 1872, in Rochester, Minnesota.¹ He received his architectural training at the Chicago School of Architecture and the Art Institute. He came to the Washington, D.C., area in 1897 and began working at the local office of Chicago architect Henry Ives Cobb. Upman first established a firm in 1904 with Clarence Harding, and the Central Y.M.C.A Building at 1736 G Street, NW, the Woodward Building at 15th and H Streets, NW, and the Woodward Apartments at 2311 Connecticut Avenue, NW, are among their works. During World War I, Upman spent 17 months in France and England serving in the Construction Division of the U.S. Army’s Air Service.

Percy C. Adams was born in Randolph, New York, on April 4, 1869.² Adams graduated from Cornell University in 1893 with a degree in architecture.³ He began practicing architecture in 1893 in Buffalo, New York.⁴ Like Upman, Adams also moved to the nation’s capital in 1897, working in the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury.⁵

¹ Bushong, William, et al., “A Centennial History of the Washington Chapter, 1887-1987,” American Institute of Architects, p. 170.

² Listing for Percy C. Adams in “Who’s Who in Architecture,” *American Art Annual*, 1924, p. 360.

³ Cornell Alumni News, 1 April 1915, Available online at: ecommons.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/3532/14/017_27.pdf. (Accessed December 2025).

⁴ “Percy C. Adams, 84, Schools Architect 58 Years, Dies,” *The Washington Star*, 9 September 1953, page unknown.

⁵ EHT Tracerics, “National Register Nomination for the Chevy Chase Theater (5612 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, DC), 1996, section 8.

Both Upman and Adams were members of the American Institute of Architects.⁶ Upman and Adams began their partnership in 1923, which lasted until Upman’s death in 1948.⁷ Although the exact circumstances are unknown, it is believed that Arlington County had some type of relationship with the firm; they were privy to contracts for the design of public schools throughout the County and by 1930, Adams was credited with “designing practically all the schools in Arlington, Virginia.”⁸ Among their collaborations in Arlington included: the Spanish-influenced commercial Jesse Building at 1423-1427 North Courthouse Road (1927), the Washington-Lee High School (1925), and the addition at the Wilson School (1925). Besides their individual commissions throughout Washington, D.C., and other D.C. projects completed with their previous partners, they collaborated on the Chevy Chase Theater (1922), 2424 Massachusetts Avenue, NW (construction date unknown), 1244-1250 9th Street, NW (construction date unknown), and several post offices and hospitals.⁹ In 1925, they created the Allied Architects of Washington with Nathan Wyeth and Gilbert Rodier to submit designs for government architectural projects. Among their most famous submissions selected was their 1929 design for the Longworth House Office Building (New Jersey and Independence Avenues, SE).

Upman practiced architecture in the Washington, D.C., area for more than four decades. In addition to being the architect and a founding member of the Washington Golf Club, Upman lived in Arlington for many years.¹⁰ He died on December 8, 1948, at the age of 75, at his summer home in Blowing Rock, North Carolina.

Adams remained in practice for 58 years before retiring at age 82.¹¹ Among his professional achievements were his designs for the inauguration stands at the White House for President Wilson’s second inauguration and his collaboration on the design of more than 35 schools in Arlington and Prince George’s County, Maryland. Adams died on September 8, 1953, at the age of 84, in Washington, D.C.

F. Cultural/Social Affiliation: Public School

G. Architect: Upman & Adams Architects, Washington, D.C. (1924)

Builder: Frank Davis Company (1924)

⁶ “Percy C. Adams, 84.” See also “Frank Upman, Noted District Architect, Dies.”

⁷ “National Register Nomination for the Chevy Chase Theater.” But according to Adams’ obituary, his partnership with Upman began as early as 1917 and lasted until 1945.

⁸ Sara Amy Leach, “Arlington’s Lawyer’s Row: The People and the Place of a Lost Courthouse Tradition,” *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 9, No. 4, October 1992, p. 42. Leach asserts that the Upman and Adams partnership began as early as 1917.

⁹ “National Register Nomination for the Chevy Chase Theater.”

¹⁰ “Frank Upman, Noted District Architect, Dies,” *The Washington Post*, 10 December 1948, p. B2. His address of record at the time of his death was 2049 North Glebe Road. In 1938, he resided at 2125 North Glebe Road [see *Who’s Who in the Nation’s Capital, 1938-1939*, p. 850].

¹¹ “Percy C. Adams, 84.”

H. Narrative

Pre-Colonization: Pre-1607

Prior to English colonization, the land that encompasses Arlington County was the border between many indigenous societies with some using it as a seasonal or permanent residence. Most tribes in the greater Chesapeake Bay region belonged to one of three paramount chiefdoms at the time, although there were tribes that maintained their relative independence, such as the Chickahominy. These three chiefdoms were the Powhatan, the Nanticoke, and the Piscataway. Tribes in these three chiefdoms spoke related languages from a language family known as Algonquian. There were also tribes in the area, such as the Monacan and Susquehannock, who had allegiances elsewhere and spoke languages from the Siouan and Iroquoian language families. Smaller tribes and bands in what are now Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia included, but are not limited to: the Nacotchtank, Patowomeck, Tauxenent, Patuxent, Piscataway, Rappahannock, Mattaponi, Wicocomoco, Pamunkey, Pocomoke, Accohannock, Choptank, Chickahominy, Nanticoke, and Nansemond.¹²

Colonial Period and the Civil War: 1669-1865

In 1669, the land to the north and south of the Four Mile Run along the Potomac River was included in the tract conveyed to John Alexander. The land remained in the Alexander family until a section was sold to Nathaniel Chapman, founding member of the Ohio Company of Virginia, which was a land speculation company which aimed to settle land near the Ohio River, and husband of Constantina Pearson, who was John Alexander's sister-in-law.¹³ During the early nineteenth century, historical maps show that the land now occupied by the Nelly Custis School was part of the Custis family's extensive farmland of the Abingdon estate which stretched from the area that is now Arlington National Cemetery to the north and to the Barcroft neighborhood to the west.¹⁴ The Abingdon estate was owned by John Park Custis, the son of Daniel Park Custis and Martha Washington and stepson of George Washington. Located along the Potomac River near what is now Ronald Reagan National Airport, Abingdon was ideally located between Mount Vernon, the Washingtons' home estate, and Mount Airy, the family home of Eleanor Calvert. John Park Custis married Eleanor Calvert and they had three surviving daughters, Elizabeth (Eliza) Parke Custis, Martha Park Custis Peter, Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis, and a son, George Washington Parke Custis, all of which were raised at Abingdon.¹⁵

During the Civil War (1861 – 1865), the U.S. Army constructed Fort Scott in September of 1861 roughly 0.5 mile to the south of what would become the Nelly Custis School property. This work was part of the third phase of fortification construction for the defense of Washington, D.C., with connecting roads extending east and northeast toward the Alexandria Turnpike

¹² Lutz, Lara and Martin D. Gallivan, Randolph E. Turner III, David A. Brown, Thane Harpole, and Danielle Moretti-Langholtz. *Virginia Indians at Werowocomoco: A National Park Handbook*. United States of America: The Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2015.

¹³ Abbott, Dorothea E. "Arlington's Summer Hill Plantation." Arlington Historical Society, 1983.

¹⁴ "The Custis Family, Abingdon Plantation," The Historical Marker Database, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=8380> (accessed February 15, 2026).

¹⁵ Ibid.

(modern-day Richmond Highway/U.S. Route 1).¹⁶ While the immediate garrison of Fort Scott was smaller than that of other Arlington-area forts (one company, or roughly 100 soldiers), the land between Fort Scott and the Abingdon estate was heavily encamped and traveled by larger organizations of U.S. Army soldiers, including a cavalry camp somewhere in the vicinity of the Fort. While no specific buildings or camps are known to have existed on or near what would become the Nelly Custis School property, the area was likely part of the extensive U.S. Army presence in the area from 1861 to 1865 (**Figures 17-18**). In July of 1865, Fort Scott was part of the first group of Washington, D.C. fortifications to be formally decommissioned.

Early Development of the Aurora Highlands Neighborhood: 1896-1930

Later in the nineteenth century, the large land holdings of the Custis estate were reduced into smaller land tracts and would become parts of other modest-sized estates, such as the Frank Hume and Edward D. Cane estates. The consolidation of these smaller, modestly sized estates eventually formed the neighborhood of Aurora Highlands, one of the earliest platted communities in Arlington County, Virginia. Created by the Addison Heights Company in 1896, the Aurora Highlands neighborhood was divided into three subdivisions—Addison Heights, Aurora Hills, and Virginia Highlands—respectfully, and buildings were constructed after the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁷ The Virginia Highlands section would be the future location of the Nelly Custis School that primarily served the Aurora Highlands neighborhood. The president of the Addison Heights Company, Walter Addison, first platted Addison Heights in February 1896 from land that was purchased from the Hume Estate the year prior. The area surrounding Addison Heights was largely considered rural but there were manufacturing areas related to the building trades to the north and east. Nearby were multiple brick companies to the north and east, such as the Washington Hydraulic Press Brick Company, the Alfred Richards Brick Company, and the Morrison Brick Company; to the south were the estates of Frank Hume and Edward D. Crane; and to the west were several estates ranging in size from 40 to 60 acres. Frank Hume had originally set aside 146 acres in 1902 in a trust for a residential subdivision named Hume Heights, but it was never laid out or officially platted. In 1913, the area was sold by Frank Hume's son, Robert Hume, to John Morris, and in 1914 he conveyed the property to his son, Henry C. Morris.

Born in 1876 in Washington, D.C., Henry C. Morris was active in real estate ventures between 1910 – 1920 before transitioning into the mining industry.¹⁸ Morris established the Aurora Hills Homes Company in 1915 and as the president of his company, he acted as an operative builder who would purchase land, subdivide building lots, and oversee the construction of the houses in the residential subdivisions he established. In 1915, Morris created the Aurora Hills subdivision located in the Jefferson Magisterial District of Alexandria County (Arlington), the southern portion of what is now Aurora Highlands, and developed different sections of the neighborhood in phases. The development occurred in three phases with the first phase, Section One,

¹⁶ Barnard, John Gross. *A Report on the Defenses of Washington, to the Chief of Engineers, U. S. Army*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871.

¹⁷ Aurora Highlands National Register Nomination Form, 2008, National Register of Historic Places, Reference Number 08001018, p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 87.

constructed between 1915 and 1926. The boundaries of Section One were 23rd Street South, South Eads Street, 26th Street South, and South Ives Street and would be the general area of the future location of the Nelly Custis School. The same year Morris established Aurora Hills, he dedicated the streets of the subdivision as public streets.¹⁹ Morris would go on to sell most of the lots to speculative developers during the 1920s.²⁰

Developers of early Arlington subdivisions, like Aurora Hills, utilized newspaper advertisements to showcase their neighborhoods to potential buyers. Aurora Hills was described as “convenient to Washington, but with all advantages of the country” and Morris, who lived in a Dutch Colonial Revival-style house at 515 26th Street South, described his house in the advertisements as being a “typical suburban home, exemplifying development at Aurora Hills, Va.” Other descriptions of Aurora Hills portrayed the development as having fully detached houses on large lots that were prime for gardens, ornamental landscaping, and areas for parking, all of which were conveniently located along major transportation routes.²¹

The third and final portion of Aurora Highlands was the neighborhood of Virginia Highlands, which was established in 1928, but not officially platted until 1930, and located northeast of Addison Heights and Aurora Hills. By 1935, the unified subdivisions making up Aurora Hills were largely developed with approximately 400 single dwellings, two churches, two schools, and 11 commercial buildings. Many residents worked for the federal government as both white- and blue-collar workers.

Aurora Highlands: Public and Community Services: 1920-1930s

To more fully understand the development of the Nelly Custis School, it is necessary to place it within the broader historical context of community services in Arlington County. When the Nelly Custis School was established in 1924, this was during a time when community amenities were at their early stages of development for the Aurora Highlands neighborhood. The construction of a new public school was necessary seeing that the only public school in the area, the Hume School, was built in 1891 and located on South Arlington Road about 0.6 miles away from the site of the Nelly Custis School. During the 1920s and 1930s, other community services and social facilities were provided for the neighborhood. In the same year that the Nelly Custis School was built, the first volunteer fire department was organized. Their firehouse was in a temporary building in the 800 block of 23rd Street South but was later relocated in 1928 when the Virginia Highlands subdivision was platted. The Aurora Hills Branch Library of Arlington County was founded in 1926 by the Jefferson Women’s Club and was later operated by the Aurora Hills Garden Club and the Nelly Custis Elementary School Parent-Teacher Association. The Aurora Hills Branch Library moved into a former commercial building located at 23rd Street South and South Eads Street, which was purchased by the County Board of Supervisors in 1930, until 1978 when the library moved to 735 18th Street South, which was constructed as a

¹⁹ Arlington County Land Records, Deed Book 146, Page 300, March 16, 1915.

²⁰ Aurora Highlands National Register Nomination Form, 2008, National Register of Historic Places Reference Number 08001018, p. 8.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 87.

shared facility for the neighborhood recreation center, the fire department, and the visitor’s center.

Additionally, various religious institutions established themselves in the community early on, usually by having religious services in homes before constructing permanent places of worship, such as the Calvary Methodist Protestant Church (1929) (later it would become the Calvary Methodist Church in 1939 upon the Methodist unification) and the Mount Vernon Baptist Church (1941). Residents would organize the Aurora Hills Civic Association in 1925 to service the social and community needs of the neighborhood, such as advocating for the improvement of the water and sewer systems, street paving, streetlamps, and better access to public schools.

Arlington County Public Schools: 1796-1922

To better understand the history of the Nelly Custis School, a fuller context of public-school history in Arlington County is essential. The first legislation in the Commonwealth for free schools passed in 1796 to allow such institutions to be permissible. In 1846, the Virginia General Assembly passed an act providing for a system of primary schools. Compliance was not compulsory, and few counties adopted such a plan. Public schools were under construction by 1848 within the city limits of Alexandria, but prior to 1870 no records exist of public schools outside of the city limits in what is now Arlington County.²² By 1849, an election was held where citizens voted to provide student aid for a free public school system regardless of economic background. Although these measures were taken to establish a public school system, a majority of children still received an education primarily either through private school or tutorship. The year 1870 was important for the establishment of the County’s school system, as it was the year in which the General Assembly adopted a plan for a free public school system in Alexandria County.²³ The implementation of this system occurred in all counties of the Commonwealth by 1876 at the latest.

The first public school in the County is believed to have been the Columbia School on Columbia Pike at Walter Reed Drive which opened in 1870 or 1871, with the Walker School at Balls Cross Roads and the Arlington School for Negro Children at Freedmen’s Village established soon after.²⁴ The growth of the public school system moved slowly in the late 1800s, which was attributed to the County’s small population, and therefore limited student enrollment, in what was mostly a rural area. By 1900, the County had 11 public schools and by the end of the first World War, the County was in a state of transition from being predominantly rural and

²² Andrew Marshall, “Building History of Hume School,” *Arlington Historical Magazine*. Arlington Historical Society, 2022.

²³ Lois Synderman and the Couture/Denig Partnership, *Historic Resources Survey: 18 Early-Mid Twentieth Century School Buildings: Arlington County, Virginia*, Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development, December 1991, p. 7.

²⁴ “National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form – Clarendon School.” United States Department of the Interior National Park Service, 1999. Accessed through https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR_to_transfer/PDFNoms/000-0453_Clarendon_School_1999_Final_Nomination.pdf.

agricultural to suburban, which required the public school system to build more school buildings, to expand existing buildings, and to reexamine the curriculum.²⁵

In 1870, Arlington (then known as Alexandria County) was divided into three magisterial school districts: Jefferson, Arlington, and Washington.²⁶ Students that attended the schools in the Jefferson District attended high school provided by the City of Alexandria, as the southern section of Arlington County was largely rural and had random residential housing.²⁷ The Jefferson District was a smaller district compared to the Arlington and the Washington Districts. The Jefferson District included the Aurora Heights neighborhood during this time and had Mount Vernon and Hume Schools for white children, and Scott and Jefferson Schools for Black children.

During the early 1910s, the school system in Arlington County only provided children with an eighth-grade education and continued this way until 1917 when the Mount Vernon School offered the first high school level education. That same year was when Fletcher Kemp became the first school superintendent of Arlington County, and he would serve in this role until 1949. Kemp was a native Virginian who served as a principal for multiple schools in Virginia before becoming the superintendent of Arlington County Public Schools in 1917 which at the time included sixteen schools, seventy-nine teachers, and 3,600 students.²⁸ Kemp's impact on the Arlington public school system included his advocacy for the creation of the school health department, advocating successfully for free textbooks, installing school playgrounds, and establishing important programs such as summer and night schools and the R.O.T.C program.

In 1920, the average daily attendance in the public schools was 2,022 and by 1929, it had more than doubled to 4,568.²⁹ It was this growth that prompted Arlington County to survey the school system and consider if new school buildings should be constructed, if upgrades to existing school buildings were necessary to meet standard requirements, and if courses of study needed to be evaluated. The expansion of the school system via new construction in the 1920s mirrored the growth in other areas of the County, prompted by the expansion of the federal government after World War I. The survey study resulted in a ten-year plan to add new schools, improve existing school buildings, and revise the curriculum for elementary, junior, and senior high school.³⁰ The County constructed eleven new school buildings that decade. On September 1, 1922, the Virginia General Assembly replaced the three-magisterial district school board system for Arlington,

²⁵ Lois Synderman and the Couture/Denig Partnership, *Historic Resources Survey: 18 Early-Mid Twentieth Century School Buildings: Arlington County, Virginia*, Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development, December 1991, p. 26.

²⁶ Seymour B. Stiss, *School Buildings in Arlington: 1922-1979*, The Arlington Historical Magazine, Arlington Historical Society, October 1979, Vol 6, No.3.

²⁷ EHT Traceries, *Phase I Architectural Survey Report of Arlington County, Virginia*, August 1996, p. 82.

²⁸ Vertical File, Arlington County Public Schools, Nelly Custis Elementary School Folder, Arlington County Center for Local History, Kemp Fletcher. Dictionary of Virginia Biography.

²⁹ "National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form – Clarendon School." United States Department of the Interior National Park Service, 1999. Accessed through https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/VLR_to_transfer/PDFNoms/000-0453_Clarendon_School_1999_Final_Nomination.pdf.

³⁰ Fletcher Kemp, *The History of Public Education in Arlington County, Virginia, 1870-1936*, American University, Washington, D.C., 1937, p. 56.

Washington, and Jefferson, with a single school board system under one shared superintendent. Superintendent Kemp saw Arlington County’s transition from the three-district school board system into one single school district under the leadership of the Arlington County School Board.

Nelly Custis School Property and Building: 1921-1978

In 1921, Morris sold lots 1 – 4 and 17 – 20 of Block 11 in Section One of the Aurora Hills Subdivision to the Jefferson Magisterial District School Board #1 of Arlington County, which would be the future location of the Nelly Custis School.³¹ The deed referenced the first Arlington County Public School Superintendent Fletcher Kemp, as he may have played a role in the execution of the deed, such as a witness, notary public, or conveyer facilitating the transaction. The deed required that improvements to the property were required to cost between \$3,500 and \$6,000 depending on the structure’s location on the lot.

The property was subject to numerous restrictive deed covenants governing its use and appearance, including racial restrictions. These included limits on allowable fences and hedges, required building setbacks, a ban on agricultural livestock and related structures, and prohibitions on manufacturing, the sale of liquor, open sewage systems, and any activity considered injurious or offensive to neighboring properties. Owners were required to connect to the existing water and sewer system, and the grantors retained the right to install and maintain utility poles and equipment along the rear or side lot lines. The covenants were set to expire on January 1, 1940, except for the racial restriction barring ownership or use by anyone not of the Caucasian race, which was intended to remain in effect perpetually. Racial restrictive covenants against non-white people were common in new emerging single-family housing subdivisions in Arlington County and throughout Virginia. These racially discriminatory housing agreements effectively ended after the landmark Supreme Court decision *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) ruled that state courts could not enforce them under the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause, and after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 made such private agreements illegal.

In July 1922, Superintendent Kemp identified the needs within the Jefferson District, including the need for a new school building with two classrooms in the neighborhood of Virginia Highlands at an estimated cost of \$12,000.³² The architects that designed the Nelly Custis School were Frank Upman and Percy C. Adams.³³ After collaborating on Washington, D.C.–area projects in the early 1920s, such as on the Rixey Mansion (now Marymount University; 1920) (**Figure 19**), Chevy Chase Theater (now Avalon Theatre; 1922) and several post offices and hospitals, Frank Upman and Percy Adams founded their own firm, Upman & Adams, in 1923, focusing on residential, commercial, and school design. Upman & Adams are credited as having designed many of the Arlington County Public School buildings during the 1920s. As early as January 1923, Frank Upman lobbied the County School Board to make him their appointed

³¹ Arlington County Land Records, “Arlington County School Board to Arlington County Board,” Liber 186, p. 516.

³² “Arlington Needs 16 Classrooms,” *The Evening Star*, July 9, 1922, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 10, 2026).

³³ “Frank Upman,” The AIA Historical Directory of American Architects, <https://aiahistoricaldirectory.atlassian.net/wiki/spaces/AHDAA/pages/37887707/ahd1045892> (accessed January 4, 2026).

architect. The County School Board rejected his request but instead showed an interest in going under individual contracts with Upman, which occurred for a period until August 1923 when a contract for his services was set to expire.³⁴

The County School Board continued to use the services of Upman & Adams throughout the 1920s, as Upman & Adams were first credited with Arlington County Public School projects in 1924, the same year the Nelly Custis School was constructed. In July 1924, after bonds were authorized for funding, the County School Board began taking bids for builders of multiple schools in Arlington County, including a new high school and two elementary schools for the Jefferson district, specifically for Barcroft, Virginia Highlands (part of today's Aurora Highlands), and Nauck (now Green Valley). In an article published in *The Evening Star* newspaper, it was noted that these bids needed to be based on plans prepared by Washington, D.C. architects, Upman & Adams, for all three school buildings (**Figure 20**).³⁵ This is the only direct reference to Upman & Adams as the architects of the Nelly Custis School. Seeing that Upman & Adams are repeatedly referenced as the preferred architects for the County's school system during the 1920s, and given the confirmed documentation showing they designed multiple County schools during that period, it is highly likely that they also designed the Nelly Custis School. Furthermore, the building's characteristics—its two-story form, horizontal massing with a central entrance, and use of the Colonial Revival style—align closely with Upman & Adams' documented school designs from the same decade. The absence of any evidence attributing the building to another architect further strengthens the conclusion that Upman & Adams were responsible for the design of the Nelly Custis School.

Upman & Adams designed the school in the Colonial Revival style, which became popular in the United States between the 1890s and 1950s and was known as a style that was subdued, dignified, and monumental in scale. Between 1924 and 1926, Upman & Adams worked on numerous Arlington County Public School buildings, including the John W. Barcroft Elementary School (625 South Wakefield Street; 1924) (**Figure 21**), the original Washington-Lee High School (1300 North Quincy Street; 1924; reconstructed 2006) (**Figure 22**), the 1925 addition at the Fort Myer Heights School (later known as Woodrow Wilson Elementary School; 1601 Wilson Boulevard; 1908; demolished 2017) (**Figure 23**), and the Robert E. Lee Elementary School (currently the Lee Arts Community Center at 5722 Langston Boulevard; 1926) (**Figure 24**).³⁶ Upman & Adams also would go on to design the Jesse Building (1927; demolished 1990) located at 1423-1427 North Courthouse Road and their most famous project, the Longworth House Office Building (1933) (**Figure 25**), the second of three office buildings constructed for the U.S. House of Representatives.³⁷

³⁴Snyderman, Lois, and the Couture/Denig Partnership, *Historic Resources Survey: 18 Early–Mid Twentieth Century School Buildings, Arlington County, Virginia*. Arlington, VA: Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development, December 1991, p. 29.

³⁵“Arlington County,” *The Evening Star*, July 6, 1924 (accessed February 9, 2026).

³⁶Arlington County's Historic Preservation Program, “Wilson School Elementary School”, p. 8, 2009, https://www.arlingtonva.us/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/projects/documents/wraps_localhistoricdistrictdesignation_wilsonschoool_2009.pdf (accessed December 12, 2025).

³⁷“Longworth House Office Building”, Architect of the Capitol, <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/house-office-buildings/longworth> (accessed December 3, 2025).

The builder of the Nelly Custis School was the Frank Davis Company, as they were awarded a contract to build elementary schools in Virginia Highlands at a cost of \$16,387 and the Barcroft School for \$26,312 in July 1924.³⁸ By August of 1924, Superintendent Kemp indicated that construction had begun on the elementary school at Virginia Highlands.³⁹ The first mention of school's name appeared in September 1924, when the Virginia Highland Citizens' Association proposed honoring Eleanor Park 'Nelly' Custis—granddaughter of Martha Custis Washington, step-granddaughter of President George Washington—who was born at the nearby Abingdon Plantation.⁴⁰ School Superintendent Kemp announced in November 1924 the name of the new elementary school building was to be the Nelly Custis School, which was approved by the County School Board.⁴¹ The Nelly Custis School was constructed for white students, as this was when the Arlington County Public School system was segregated. The nearest public school for Black students was the Jefferson School, located at 1624 13th Road, which was originally constructed in 1870.⁴² The original Jefferson School was demolished and a new building was constructed in 1915. This new building was also designed by Frank Upman (it is unknown if Percy Adams was involved with this project) and is currently the Hoffman-Boston Elementary School in the Arlington View neighborhood.⁴³

After only four months of construction, on December 8, 1924, there was a community celebration of 150 people in attendance for the opening of the new Nelly Custis School building (**Figures 26 and 27**). The celebration included various community groups, the Chairman of the Arlington County School Board, Clyde C. Lamond, Superintendent Kemp, and the school staff, which were teachers Miss Virginia Storck and Miss M. Reynolds, and caretaker Miss M. Florine.⁴⁴ Superintendent Kemp stated during the celebration that the school was to open that day and classes would begin at the usual hour. By June 1925, the Arlington County Public School building program had fourteen buildings completed or under construction. The funds to build these schools were raised through the sale of school bonds and the issuance of school board notes.⁴⁵

During the 1930s, five existing school buildings received additions, and six new school buildings were constructed (**Figures 28 and 29**). The Nelly Custis School building was one of those five buildings to receive an addition (**Figure 30**). Four new classrooms were added at a cost of

³⁸ "County School Contracts Awarded," *The Washington Times Herald*, July 22, 1924, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 10, 2026).

³⁹ "Arlington Co. School Bids Ready," *The Washington Times Herald*, August 1, 1924, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 10, 2026).

⁴⁰ "500 VA. Women," *The Washington Times Herald*, September 29, 1924, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 10, 2026).

⁴¹ "Arlington Co. will Vote on Road Bonds," *The Washington Times Herald*, November 21, 1924, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 10, 2026).

⁴² Arlington County, "A Guide to the African American Heritage of Arlington County, Virginia," (Arlington County, Va.: Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development, Historic Preservation Program, 2016).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Garrison Road Dedication Planned," *The Washington Times Herald*, December 8, 1924, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed January 10, 2026).

⁴⁵ Dorothy Ellis Lee, "A History of Arlington County, Virginia," (The Dietz Press, Inc., 1946), p.131.

\$22,500 in 1931.⁴⁶ The four classrooms were added to the Nelly Custis School building through identical wings that consisted of two-stories with flat roofs, constructed of brick laid in five-course common bond, and continued many of the details found on the main 1924 building, including the rusticated courses at the basement story and limestone belt courses. During the 1940s there was a modest increase in school infrastructure in the County with the construction of five new school buildings and nine additions (**Figures 31**). A limited supply of building materials during World War II is believed to be the reason for the slower growth.

The increase in construction of public-school buildings and continual updating of the County's existing infrastructure reflects the population growth that occurred in Arlington during the 1950s (**Figure 32**). Twenty-one new school buildings and 30 existing school buildings were expanded or renovated during that period. In 1952, Arlington County voters decided on a bond issue for \$8,280,000 designed to meet the growing needs of its school infrastructure.⁴⁷ At that time, Nelly Custis School was described as having ten classrooms with an enrollment of 362 students that was anticipated to go down to 280 students once other nearby school construction projects were completed. By 1956, additional school bonds were voted on by residents and Nelly Custis School was supposed to be one of nine schools identified for additions and renovations that could address the need for new multi-purpose rooms, improved lighting, and a new heating system.⁴⁸ While funding for larger renovation and expansion projects at Nelly Custis School was still being considered, in 1957, the Arlington County School Board installed an 8,000-gallon oil tank to heat the school.⁴⁹ Although student enrollment in 1959 for Nelly Custis School was recorded at 292 students, it would not receive funding for an expansion until after 1960 when it was included in the rationale for a bond issue being considered by voters for \$7,580,000 for County school improvements.⁵⁰ While modest modernization projects were occurring at the Nelly Custis School, extensive changes to the Arlington County Public School system in the late 1950s and early 1960s arose with the desegregation of schools. This began in Arlington with the enrollment of four Black students at Stratford Junior High in 1959. Desegregation of the public school system in Arlington continued in phases, with the integration of secondary schools occurring from 1963 – 1964 and elementary schools from 1965 – 1972. The Nelly Custis School, along with Jamestown, James Madison, and Woodmont, were the last schools to desegregate in Arlington County during the school year of 1971 – 1972.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Fletcher Kemp, "The History of Public Education in Arlington County, Virginia, 1870-1936", (American University, 1937), p. 61.

⁴⁷ "Bonds Approved, Arlington Plans More Schools," *The Evening Star*, May 28, 1952, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed December 6, 2025).

⁴⁸ T. Edward Rutter, "The Superintendent's View of the Proposed Bond Issue", *Better Schools for Arlington*. February 1956.

⁴⁹ Arlington County Historical House Card Collection, "750 23rd Street South," accessed November 2, 2025.

⁵⁰ Arlington County School Board, "Estimated Number of Students 1959,"; Arlington County School Board, "Bond Referendum for County and School Improvements," May 17, 1960, p. 3.

⁵¹ Seymour B. Stiss, "School Buildings in Arlington: 1922-1979," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, February 1979, Arlington County Historical Society, 9; Alison Bauer Campbell, "The Road to Integration: Arlington Public Schools 1959-1971," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, April 1996, Arlington County Historical Society, p. 36.

In 1962, the Nelly Custis School property was expanded when the County purchased lots 16 and 5 from Annie Laurie Sweeney and the Calabrese and Houser families, respectfully().⁵² During that same year, the County completed a major renovation project at Nelly Custis School that included the construction of the east and rear additions, improvements to storm and sanitary drains, the replacement of existing utility equipment and systems such as plumbing, lighting, fire safety improvements, and power systems, the replacement of interior finishes like flooring, bathroom tile, toilets, and wainscoting, the replacement of both single and double exterior exit doors, the replacement of interior doors, and the installation of aluminum windows.⁵³ The one-story, east and rear additions were designed by H.D. Nottingham & Associates, the builder was Wayne Construction Co., and the project cost was approximately \$284,000.⁵⁴ Prior to this expansion, Nelly Custis School had been renting kindergarten space from the nearby Calvary Methodist Church located at 23rd and South Grant Street to host two kindergarten classes for 34 students and one teacher.⁵⁵ During the major renovation project, the 350 students of Nelly Custis School attended classes at the Calvary Methodist Church and the John Marshall school building on North Glebe Road until the school reopened in May 1963.⁵⁶

The late 1960s saw a shift in the County’s school infrastructure as the County School Board began to address a declining student population through school consolidation and the moving of students to newer school buildings that could accommodate the remaining student population. This meant a slowdown in new construction during the late 1960s, as there were only three new school buildings constructed. The building program of the 1970s included the construction of seven new buildings but primarily focused on additions or renovations to twelve existing facilities. Between 1969 and 1974, the County continued to expand the property of Nelly Custis School with the purchase of lots 8 and 14 from Margerye W. Prytherch, and lots 6, 7, and 15 from the Doris S. Houser, Margaret Dozier, and the Consultant Group Inc., respectively.⁵⁷ It is believed that the expansion of the property was for more open space.

During the early 1970s, declining student enrollment forced the County School Board to make difficult decisions about whether to continue investing in its existing infrastructure or to consolidate resources by moving students to newer facilities—a trend that placed numerous schools, including Nelly Custis School, at risk of closure. Residents and parents tried to protect the Nelly Custis School from these threats by proposing a joint-use arrangement that would

⁵² Arlington County Land Records, 1963: “Sweeney to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1467, p. 392.; Arlington County Land Records, “Calabrese to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1482, p. 176; Arlington County Land Records, “Houser to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1823, p. 535.

⁵³ Arlington County Building Permit, “Plans 22325,” July 5, 1962.

⁵⁴ “Arlington School Board Elects Stockard as Chief,” *Evening Star*, July 31, 1962, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed December 6, 2025).

⁵⁵ Arlington County Public Schools, “Department of Research, Kindergarten Report III,” January 14, 1960.

⁵⁶ “Nellie Custis Enters Renovated Building,” *Northern Virginia Sun*, May 23, 1963, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed December 6, 2025).

⁵⁷ Arlington County Land Records, “Prytherch to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1707, p. 354; Arlington County Land Records, “Wilkins to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1716, p. 206; Arlington County Land Records, “Consultant Group, Inc., to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1727, p. 606; Arlington County Land Records, “Dozier to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1819, p. 111; Arlington County Land Records, “Houser to Arlington County School Board,” Liber 1877, p. 307.

incorporate the Aurora Hills Branch Library into the school building. In 1971, the County School Board approved \$374,000 for the purposes of an addition at Nelly Custis School to include both school and library services for the community, as the Aurora Hills Public Library was considered undersized and was identified for redevelopment along with the Columbia Pike library branch. At the time, the Crystal City population was growing and the construction of luxury high-rises highlighted the need to accommodate and expand public services.⁵⁸ Although this approach of combining community services was supported by both school and library officials, the difficulties of needing to coordinate both the school and library needs via specific professional staff and hours of operation proved to be difficult. When it came time for the County School Board to consider advertising for construction bids to add the public library to Nelly Custis School in 1973, the Board ultimately decided not to proceed because of limited support for the proposal.⁵⁹ Instead, the County decided to construct the Aurora Hills Branch Library at 18th and South Hayes Street for the joint purpose as a fire station, recreation center, and a library.

Although there were questions about the future of Nelly Custis School, the Arlington County School Board continued to make improvements to the building in the 1970s. In 1975, the Arlington County School Board undertook additional improvements to the building — including the addition of new lighting, a new air-conditioning system, the insertion of ceiling tiles, and the sealing of the windows — at a cost of approximately \$146,568.⁶⁰ Despite the multiple property expansions and improvements to the Nelly Custis School, on December 6, 1978, the Arlington County School Board voted to close the school due to declining enrollment. It was one of three elementary schools, Fairlington and Fort Myer were also closed, with the latter closing in June 1980 due to an existing lease with the Army.⁶¹ Students from the Nelly Custis School and Fairlington were transferred to Abingdon Elementary. Although the Nelly Custis School’s Parent Teacher Association had advocated that students from Fort Myer be bused to the Nelly Custis School, their proposal was opposed by School Superintendent Larry Cuban because the building was inadequate in size and located two miles away.⁶²

New Use of the Nelly Custis School Building: 1979-2018

On September 13, 1979, the County School Board unanimously approved the conveyance of the school building and property to the County Board and later unanimously approved the acquisition of the property from the County School Board on October 13, 1979.⁶³ While the ownership of the Nelly Custis School was in transition, the Sheltered Occupational Center of Northern Virginia, Inc. (SOC) began to utilize the building as an educational and occupational training center for people with disabilities.⁶⁴ The SOC owned a 6,800-square-foot printing

⁵⁸ “School-County Libraries Planned”, *Northern Virginia Sun*, July 17, 1971, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed December 6, 2025).

⁵⁹ Sherman Pratt, “Arlington County Virginia: A Modern History,” (Sherman W. Pratt, 1997), p. 273.

⁶⁰ Arlington County Building Permit, “Application 4785,” July 27, 1972. Arlington County Building Permit, “Application and Plans, 9613,” February 13, 1975.

⁶¹ “Arlington Board Votes to Shut Three Schools.” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1978, <https://www.newspapers.com> (accessed December 5, 2025).

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Arlington County Land Records, “Arlington County School Board to Arlington County Board,” Liber 2003, p. 38.

⁶⁴ Arlington County Use Permit, “Use Permit #U-2314-81-3,” October 20, 1981.

facility in the Ballston neighborhood but was seeking a larger space — such as the Nelly Custis School Building — because the existing facility in Ballston no longer met building code requirements.⁶⁵ As the County was simultaneously seeking property near the Ballston Metrorail Station, this created an opportunity for the SOC to trade its Ballston printing facility for Nelly Custis School, along with a use permit and \$350,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant funds for renovation. The SOC also contributed \$200,000 for renovation purposes. The County ended up retaining a 0.8-acre landscaped park to serve as a buffer between Nelly Custis School and nearby residential properties, which became the Nelly Custis Park. This park is still maintained by the County today.

Improvements to the Nelly Custis School began as early as 1980 when SOC extended the existing loading dock.⁶⁶ In 1981, the SOC relocated three bathrooms, installed three new exterior doors, created a new entrance opening and installed one double door entrance.⁶⁷ Approved in October 1981, the SOC renovated the existing building and on December 7, 1982, the County Board completed the deed of exchange for all of parcel A that contained approximately 75,496 square feet and parcel B that contained approximately 6,805 square feet for the park.⁶⁸

The deed also described the uses for both parcel A and B. Parcel A contained an easement for a voting area for county, state, and national elections, required convenient access to telephone services, and the easement was set to expire on December 31, 1983. Another easement restricted the uses of parcel B for a public park and open space purposes.⁶⁹ In 1983, the SOC began operations after completing a major renovation of the Nelly Custis School that included an entrance addition that infilled between the 1962 addition and 1924/1931 building.⁷⁰ For nearly forty years, the SOC utilized the building and provided employment and support services for people with disabilities. In 2018, Melwood, a non-profit organization, purchased the property and continued the mission of providing community-based support services to people with disabilities and their families.⁷¹ ⁷² Melwood is the current owner of the property and continues to utilize the building for its mission.

⁶⁵ Daniel Carlson, “Reusing America’s Schools: A Guide for Local Officials, Developers, Neighborhood Residents, Planners, and Preservationists,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, (The Preservation Press, 1990), 60-61.

⁶⁶ Arlington County Building Permit, “Application 2419,” December 10, 1980.

⁶⁷ Ibid, “Application 3511,” July 6, 1981.

⁶⁸ Arlington County Historical House Card Collection, “750 23rd Street South,” accessed November 2, 2025. Arlington County Land Records, “Arlington County School Board to Arlington County Board,” Liber 2085, pgs. 1413, December 7, 1982.

⁶⁹ Arlington County Land Records, “Arlington County School Board to Arlington County Board,” Liber 2085, pgs. 1413, December 7, 1982.

⁷⁰ Daniel Carlson, “Reusing America’s Schools: A Guide for Local Officials, Developers, Neighborhood Residents, Planners, and Preservationists,” National Trust for Historic Preservation, (The Preservation Press, 1990), 60-61.

⁷¹ Arlington County Land Records, “Sheltered Occupational Center of Northern Virginia, Inc. to Melwood Horticultural Training Center,” Deed Document ID# #20180100010803, June 25, 2018.

⁷² “Who We Are,” *Melwood*, <https://melwood.org> (accessed December 12, 2025).

I. Areas Exempt from Designation: There are no areas exempt from designation.

J. Designation Criteria:

The Nelly Custis School meets Designation Criteria A as listed in Section 11.3.4.A.4 of the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance.

The Nelly Custis School Building meets one of the eleven designation criteria as described in Section 11.3.4.A of the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance:

A. The property is listed or is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places;

The Nelly Custis School is already listed as a contributing resource in the Aurora Highlands National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) Historic District.

K. Conclusion

The Historic Preservation Program (HPP) staff identified the building’s potential period of significance as 1924 – 1978, spanning the building’s construction through its final year as a public school. However, the HPP determined that the building does not retain enough architectural integrity from this period to convey its historic significance. The National Park Service defines historic integrity as a property’s ability to convey its significance through seven key aspects, which are location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and a property must retain several, and usually most of the aspects in order to have architectural integrity and significance. The Nelly Custis School remains in its original site and continues to anchor the residential setting of Aurora Highlands, thereby retaining integrity of location, setting, and feeling. However, because it no longer functions as a public school and now serves a non-profit mission, it no longer conveys its historic association. In addition, extensive alterations — including the 1962 addition that changed the original building form and the alterations during the 1990s which included the removal of the main entrance, the modification of window openings, the replacement of all windows and doors, and the alteration of the interior — have significantly diminished the building’s integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. Therefore, the Nelly Custis School only has three of the seven key aspects of historic integrity.

Although the building was designed by the architectural firm Upman & Adams, a notable architectural firm, there are other surviving examples of their work within the County’s public-school system—such as Barcroft Elementary School, the Lee Arts Community Center, and possibly the Hoffman-Boston Elementary School—that retain a higher degree of architectural integrity. The HPP acknowledges that many public-school buildings can continue to convey their historic and architectural significance even when they have

undergone alterations or expansions, as demonstrated by the Dorothy Hamm Middle School, historically known as Stratford Junior High School. However, the cumulative alterations made to the Nelly Custis School over time have substantially diminished its architectural integrity. For these reasons, the HPP cannot support the property as eligible under Criterion F as described in Section §11.3.4.A of the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance as a work of a master architect or master builder.

The building is indisputably a contributing resource within the Aurora Highlands NRHP Historic District, and for these reasons, the HPP supports the property as eligible under Criterion A as described in Section §11.3.4.A of the Arlington County Zoning Ordinance because it is a property listed or is eligible for inclusion in the NRHP. However, historic districts typically apply a different integrity threshold, as their significance derives from the overall concentration and relationship of contributing resources rather than the integrity of an individual building. In contrast, if the Nelly Custis School were evaluated as a standalone property, HPP staff believes that its extensive alterations have compromised its architectural integrity to a degree that would render it ineligible for individual listing in the NRHP.

Although the Nelly Custis School building remains an element of the Aurora Highlands neighborhood and Arlington’s broader heritage, it does not retain sufficient architectural integrity of association design, materials, and workmanship related to its period of historic significance. For these reasons, HPP staff do not recommend the property for Local Historic District (LHD) designation.

7. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage of Property: 75,496 square feet / 1.73-acre parcel

RPC Number: 36-039-015

Verbal Boundary Description: The Nelly Custis School is located at 750 23rd Street South, Arlington, Virginia. The proposed Local Historic District consists of the entire legal property boundary containing RPC #36-039-015.

Boundary Justification: The proposed Local Historic District boundary includes all of the property associated with the historically significant dwelling.

8. PROPERTY OWNERS (SEE ABOVE LIST OF RPC NUMBERS)

Melwood Horticultural Training Center, INC.

9. FORM PREPARED BY

Names/Titles: Lorin Farris, Arlington County Historic Preservation Section Supervisor; Mical Durak, Principal Planner; John McNair, Historic Preservation Specialist

10. MAJOR SOURCES CONSULTED

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