

A  
Monument  
In Stone



### **Cover Illustration:**

Architect John Latenser's 1900 rendering shows a 250-foot tower instead of today's covered courtyard. To save money the tower was never built.

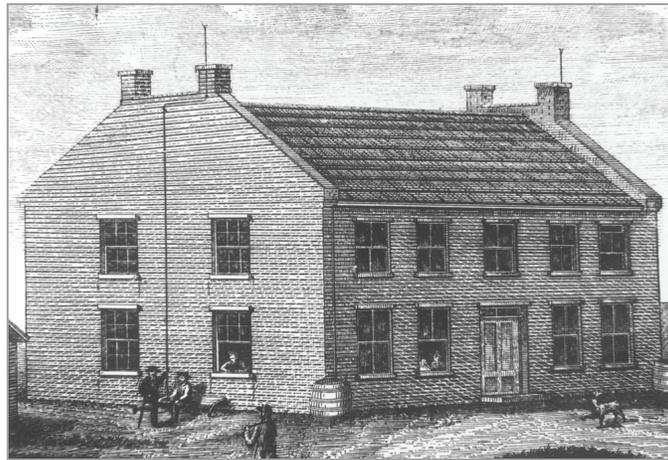
## The Central High School Building

1900-2009

by Orville D. Menard '51

*"Central stands high above the city, a proud monument in stone to the distinguished record of its loyal sons and daughters."*

The transition from a "rickety tumble down building to this magnificent stone structure, the pride of the west, standing high on Capitol Hill and overlooking the whole city of Omaha" began in 1901 and was completed in 1912. Renovations have taken place since that time, but a student who attended Central during the building's early years would immediately recognize it today. Designed by John Latenser, one of Omaha's foremost architects of the era, Central High School's home was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.



**First Territorial Capitol on 9<sup>th</sup> Between Capitol & Dodge**  
*From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, Owned by KM3TV and on  
Permanent Loan to The Durham Museum*

Howard Kennedy was appointed Omaha's first Superintendent of Schools in March, 1859, and came west from New York for a salary of \$1,000 a year. Hired to organize the public school system recently created by the Nebraska Territorial Legislature, Kennedy

started the Omaha public education system with a single twelve-grade school, including a high school department. The first session of Omaha's public school was held in November, 1859, in the territorial legislature's meeting house, a two-story, thirty by forty-five-foot brick and stucco building on 9th Street between Dodge and Capitol Avenue. Having no buildings of its own at the time, the city of Omaha initiated its new education system in the only brick building in town.

Its tenure there was short-lived and for several years the school was without a permanent home, wandering from one address to another. Between 1861 and 1872 students attended classes throughout downtown Omaha, with stops at locations on Douglas Street, Capitol Avenue, Chicago, and Jackson, usually between 13th to 16th Streets.

Nebraska statehood in 1867 moved the capital city to Lincoln, and the territorial capitol building that had been constructed on the high hill on the western edge of Omaha lost its purpose. By an act of the state legislature in 1869, Omaha acquired the capitol grounds and its buildings for the sole purpose of education. It was first thought that the territorial capitol building would at last provide enduring quarters for Omaha's public school. However, an inspector warned that it was inadequate in both its construction and materials. Accordingly, the old building was torn



**Old Building 1872**

*From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, Owned by  
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The Durham Museum*

down and replaced by one completed in 1872. In "storm and mud" students left their "rickety" building on 14th and Jackson to move to their new quarters on the hill.

Four red brick stories high, with two wings and a one hundred foot spire (wired for a July 4, 1876, demonstration of electric lights), the building stood as an impressive addition to the city's growing center. There was ample room for the high school department, which used only two of fifteen classrooms; therefore, the Board of Education decided the remainder would be used by the lower grades. But Omaha's growth soon brought with it more pupils and pressures for more adequate space. The Board responded by transferring lower classes to other locations and the Omaha High School became the sole tenant of the building.



**East and South Wings Completed**

*From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, Owned by KM3TV and on Permanent Loan to The Durham Museum*

Before long the student body became larger than its quarters could properly serve. In 1897, after controversy over renovating the old school building or replacing it, the School Board decided overcrowding and inadequate ventilation warranted constructing a new building. The cornerstone was laid in 1900, but the building was not com-

pleted until 1912. Throughout the years of construction, classes continued as students studied and workers toiled at the same site. Starting on the side facing the Missouri River to the east, the builders erected the new wing alongside the old one.

One by one workers progressively built the east, south, and west wings. When the three sides were completed, the central tower was dismantled and removed. Principal Kate McHugh insisted upon the removal of the old building's heating and ventilation plant, located in the center area of the old building. An open-air cruciform-shaped courtyard took its place becoming a distinguishing feature of the new Central High School building. The north and last side of the school was now assembled, enclosing and completing the striking landmark school on Capitol Hill.

Omaha High School became Central High School the same year the building was finished. In September, 1912, the School Board renamed the Commercial Department the Omaha High School of Commerce and moved it to another location. With two schools including "Omaha High" in their title, the word "Central" was added to identify the one in the new building. Students at the Omaha High School of Commerce gained their own new home in 1923 and a new name, Technical High School.



**New Building; Circa 1915**

*From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, Owned by KM3TV and on Permanent Loan to The Durham Museum*

Approaching Central High School on Capitol Avenue from the east, Omahans saw in front of them a large white limestone structure in the classical style of architecture with French Renaissance influence. Wide steps from Twentieth Street and then a walkway led to the main entrance stairs and six tall imposing Corinthian columns. Above them a stone triangular gable displayed five figures in relief, representing branches of knowledge: a reclining man with a drawing of a building on a tablet in hand; a painter and his easel was next, followed by a seated female holding a flaming torch, then a sculptor, hammer in hand, and finally an author on the far right holding a scroll. Once inside, a visitor or student was in the first of the four wings housing the school's offices and classrooms. Across the hallway to the right and left were stairways, one exclusively for males



**Lowering Dodge St.**

*From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, Owned by KM3TV and on Permanent Loan to The Durham Museum*

and the other reserved for females because the rest rooms opened on the landings.

The steep grades of Capitol Avenue and Dodge Street from the east meant problems for Omaha motorists trying to drive their World

War I era automobiles up the hills to Central. A massive earth-moving project in downtown Omaha was undertaken in 1920-21 to reduce Dodge Street's 11 per cent grade to 7 per cent from 17<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. According to a *Sunday World-Herald* story, the dirt removed if placed on a city block would produce a mass 150 feet high with vertical sides.

The project left the school high above street level. To restore accessibility, workers removed some five feet off the top of its grounds and sloped terraces to the new grade to accomplish the task. An esplanade around Central was landscaped with graceful walkways, steps, and parapets serving to this day as attractive and stately surroundings.

In the building's early years Central's basketball team played its games in a fourth floor gym, and thespians performed school plays on the first floor in a small auditorium with a stage and two dressing rooms. The Omaha School Board in 1925 approved the addition of a new gymnasium and auditorium to the north side of the school. Five years later both were completed and athletes, actors, and actresses had new homes. A cafeteria took the place of the former gymnasium on the fourth floor, and the auditorium space was converted into classrooms, numbers 145 and 245.

Early in 1945 there were Omahans who believed Central High's home was too old and too far from the city's population center to continue in use. Ten years later, the Omaha Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Harry Burke, declared Central's location in the heart of downtown hampered commercial development and "was standing in the way of progress." That same year there was brief discussion of turning the building into a museum, but nothing came of it.

In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that little was altered, inside or outside Central High, for nearly two decades. Removal of a large replica of the Liberty Bell in 1970, the greeter of arrivals through the east doors for many years, was the harbinger of renewal. Made by J.L. Brandeis Department Store for an advertising campaign, the bell was given to the Omaha School Board and placed at Central first with the intention it would be rotated among all the high schools. However, since the base was found to be too wide to fit through the doorways of other schools, Central became

sole possessor of the bell.

That same year School Superintendent Owen Knutzen declared that Central, "despite its age," would be around a long time. The announcement of renovations to begin the summer of 1970 promised a new lease on life for the aging structure. Repairs to the roof, replacement of plumbing, acquisition of new equipment for the cafeteria all were projected, along with installation of a radio station and an electronics laboratory.

Four years later an Omaha Fire Chief found numerous violations of the fire code. Among options discussed was closing the school. It was decided, however, to bring Central up to code, and in 1975 automatic fire doors were installed while classes continued. Construction noises and a "traffic mess" of hallways cluttered with steel, pipes, and wires shared the school with students and teachers.

Bricks replaced grass in the courtyard in 1977, and two years later Principal G.E. Moller dedicated a full-sized gymnasium that had been added to the north of the main building. Also in 1979, a towering smokestack that had stood to the west of Central for seventy years was destroyed. It was part of the boiler system used to heat the school, but a transfer of the task to the Northern Heating System a few blocks away bore with it the end of the landmark. Despite protests by its defenders, the sixteen-story, 160-foot structure was brought down in April, 1979, by a wrecking ball.

In the early 1980s students once again shared their school with construction workers during a lengthy large-scale renovation. Windows and lights were replaced, the woodwork was refurbished, the electrical system was brought up-to-date, and carpeting, acoustical ceilings and interior painting gave the school a new look. Wooden lockers in the hallways, used for generations of Central students for their coats and books, were replaced by metal ones. The era of students going up and down stairways divided by gender came to a close.

A notable change came with the covering of the courtyard when a "lid" was placed over it. In May of 1980 the School Board voted to "Put Central Courtyard On Inside." A passive energy design of two translucent fiberglass panels, with insulation between them was soon installed. Steel beams for the "lid" were set in place by helicopter, and a small-scale superdome replaced the courtyard with the sky as a

roof.

Central also changed beyond the building as part of the project, following controversy over the school's desire to acquire land for expansion of athletic facilities. Joslyn Art Museum officials expressed concern about the proposal and sometimes acrimonious exchanges



**Covered Courtyard**

between representatives of Joslyn and the School Board threatened to halt the project. Negotiations involved not only Central and Joslyn, but also the city of Omaha and Creighton University. Finally the parties reached an agreement for exchange of two tracts of land and the closing of 22nd Street between Dodge and Davenport Streets. The Board of Education used eminent domain to acquire land along the latter. Joslyn Art Museum expanded to the east and Central gained land to the northwest to install a practice field. The field and its surrounding track were not, however, to be used for spectator sports and would be open for community use. Lights were installed for the benefit of evening joggers. After three years of making improvements and additions, the workers finished their job, and the faculty and students in the school year 1983-84 no longer studied in a construction zone.

As the centennial of the building approached, its exterior beauty was observable to all who passed Capitol Hill, but the interior was deteriorating. Largely invisible, the plumbing and electric wiring were

increasingly inadequate. Visible features, like the paint and woodwork, succumbed to some twenty-years of service since the last renovation. Moreover, renovations and additions had not been included to make Central tolerable during Omaha's hottest months.

Omaha Public School District Superintendent Norbert Schuerman



in 1995 introduced a proposal to the Omaha Public School Board to install air conditioning at Central. The Board approved the plan and Omaha's oldest high school was on its way to no longer having the distinction of being the only high school in the district without cool classrooms. Two years later, a group of about a dozen parents and alumni, including Warren Buffett's daughter, Susan A. Buffett, organized a group to put together a plan to air condition and renovate the school with public and private funding. They were unsuccessful in raising the required funding.

Need was demonstrated in 1998 when forty parents and alumni, along with twenty students, gave their time to spruce up hallways, stairwells, and the gymnasium with new coats of paint. A participating parent involved said that pride and the charm of the one hundred-year-old building beckoned them to the task.

In the early years of the twenty-first century three separate projects fortuitously blended to create an amazing transformation of the Omaha Central High School building and campus that enhanced the learning environment of its students. In 1999 voters in the Omaha Public School District passed a school bond issue of which \$16.8

million was allocated for work at Central. The renovation, initiated in 2001, was to include air conditioning, replacing the existing electrical system, and the installation of a building-wide system to facilitate existing and future technology (wiring to each classroom and office and raceways and server closets to connect all parts of the building, etc.). The 2005 “O-Book” proclaimed, “After many summers of suffering through classes where the temperature was sometimes hotter than outside, air conditioning finally came to the state’s largest high school. . . . Over the summer air conditioning was installed throughout the school.” Principal Jerry Bexten summarized the long-awaited achievement by saying: “It took a lot of planning and time to complete.”

In addition, the gymnasium, which was inadequate for basketball home games, was enlarged by an addition. Space became available for the construction of a modern kitchen next to the old gym, which became a cafeteria, and a three-story structure on the northeast corner (which enlarged the gym and added two large spaces below that became a weight room and a wrestling/aerobics room). Computer labs replaced the old fourth floor cafeteria.

As explained by CHS former principal, Jerry Bexten, several phases marked the transformation of the building: renovations of the basement, first and second floor classrooms; the library; the fourth floor art room; first floor administration; the courtyard; and third floor science rooms and labs. Teachers and students who had studied during this time in the “village” of portable classrooms on the former practice field and track, returned to their rejuvenated school for its second century. Alas, territorial limitations remain a grievous situation and some 2,500 students continue to compete for parking places, which means some arrive as early as 6:00 a.m. to claim a spot near their school.

Totally separate from the bond issue, representatives from the Joslyn Art Museum, led by Mike Yanney, approached the Omaha Public Schools and Creighton University in the early 2000’s with a proposal that included purchasing property from Creighton that lay north of Davenport Street, swapping that property for the Central practice field and track, and building a stadium for Central on the former Creighton property. A gift from Susan T. Buffett of \$5 million got the project off the ground. The non-profit Heritage Foun-

dation raised the remaining money and the construction on Seemann Stadium began. It was a “win-win-win” proposal enabling Joslyn to expand its campus and parking; it presented Creighton with significant funds; and it provided Central with a tremendous addition to its campus for athletic development and a student drop-off point. No taxpayer dollars were expended to build the \$12.5 million stadium.

Seemann Stadium is the most visible product of the renovation. Having no gridiron of their own, since the 1960s Central and South High athletes shared Norris Middle School’s football field for their games. The stadium was officially dedicated in August 2005, as the loudspeaker played “Downtown.” Mr. And Mrs. Seemann attended the dedication as did Susie Buffett, U.S. Senator Ben Nelson, Congressman Tom Osborne, Mayor Mike Fahey, Mike Yanney, and many others involved in the project.

Donors Lee Seemann and his wife Willa, for whom the stadium is named, were introduced. A highly decorated World War II veteran and retired businessman, the eighty-eight year old Seemann, who played center on the 1938 CHS football team, recalled a field without yardage markers, and he didn’t think it was a hundred yards long. When first approached about naming the new structure “The Lee and Willa Seemann Stadium,” he said that was “too long,” plus he preferred to make their donation “quietly.” He relented with the condition “you make it Central High on the top, then down below put Seemann Stadium. I suppose that would be all right.” The Eagles played their opening game in the new Seemann Stadium on Friday, September 2, 2005, against North High School. Central Alum Ahman Green of the Green Bay Packers football team watched the game and declared, “This is an awesome place to play.” Central won the game.

In front of the stadium, the “Victory Eagle,” a bronze 1,700-pound sculpture, nine feet tall with a fourteen-foot wingspan, greets fans of the purple and white. Embodying the dignity and power of the quest for the knowledge, “Victory Eagle” perches on a rock with the grace of an athlete and the resolve of a scholar.

During the time the renovation of the school was occurring and the construction of the stadium was progressing, a third program was

undertaken. The Susan A. Buffett Foundation made a grant of just under \$3 million to Central, and Pam Buffett also made a contribution. Several additional improvements to the school resulted. The largest allocation allowed the construction of a gym lobby of sufficient size to accommodate crowds attending events in the expanded gymnasium. The lobby was dedicated in January 2006, at the first home varsity basketball game played at Central in approximately forty years. Had this gift not occurred at this time, the gym lobby might never have been built because it would have required demolishing parts of the new stadium. Fortunately, the timing of the gift allowed efficient coordination of the two projects.



**Victory Eagle, a bronze, 1,700-pound sculpture**

Remaining funds from the Susan A. Buffett Foundation were used to upgrade the auditorium, including new theatre curtains, lighting, and sound improvements. A number of departmental “wish lists” were fulfilled. Chemistry and physics classrooms received total makeovers to bring them into the twenty-first century. State-of-the-

art listening labs were installed in each foreign language classroom. Several departments received new computers, LCD projectors, and other equipment for student and staff use. Because every department received something, the “wish list” gift affected every part of the school and every student.

During its 100-year existence, the “Monument in Stone” stood in shadows and darkness during the nighttime hours. With funds provided by the Omaha Central High School Foundation, on April 25, 2008, Central High School opened its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration by illuminating its “Monument in Stone” in the beauty of new lights on twelve-foot poles along the walkways, and the east, south, and west facades. The stairs leading to the east entrance rise between refurbished original light poles with new fixtures and flood lamps to show the way. Lights similar to the ones along the walkways have replaced the outdated ones in the enclosed courtyard. In daylight’s brightness or evening’s softness, the building is a glowing reminder of Omaha Central High School’s heritage and its role in educating its students for their future.

Between 1901 and 2001 Central High School’s building has undergone many modifications, but its essence and fundamentals endure, just like its excellent academic programs. The Central High School building, one of Omaha’s most distinguished and well-known structures continues to dominate Capitol Hill, its classical lines timeless and symbolic of its education mission. Those who teach and learn there are nurtured by the heritage of their architectural surroundings, the rooms and hallways their intangible partners in upholding Central High School’s tradition of academic excellence.

“The Eagle has landed.”

