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HISTORIC PROFILE:

POWELL RECREATION CENTER

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HISTORIC PRESERVATION, DEVELOPMENT,
& DESIGN REVIEW COMMITTEE

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Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A
1380 Monroe Street NW #103
Washington, DC 20010

Powell Recreation Center

Overview

A playground, in some fashion, has existed in the area of Lamont Street and Hiatt Place, NW, since 1917. While it currently is operated with the name Powell Recreation Center, it historically operated with the name Johnson-Powell Playground and, in the *Complete Street Guide to Washington and Vicinity* (1947) is listed under the name Columbia Recreation Center. During the era when Washington's playgrounds were segregated, Johnson-Powell was a white playground. Like most of Washington's playgrounds, it integrated in 1954.

In its current state, there is little of historical interest at this site. In performing a cursory literature review,ⁱ the playground at Lamont Street and Hiatt Place is not listed among the city's existing or planned playgrounds in 1921 suggesting that the Johnson-Powell playgrounds were wholly on school property and operated as such during that period. No evidence has been discovered to date indicating that the playgrounds ever had a dedicated field house, wading pool, or other significant recreation infrastructure such as the facilities found at nearby Park View or Happy Hollow. Lastly, in examining the Department of Recreation's 1984 *Recreation's Heritage: A Preliminary Historic Resources Inventory*, the Powell Recreation Center is completely omitted.ⁱⁱ

Background

Use of the land at the intersection of Hiatt Place and Lamont Street, NW, for recreation purposes is closely tied to the District of Columbia's school system and use of the properties for educational purposes. By May 1916, the Johnson-Powell Parent-Teacher Association had organized several fund-raising events with the goal of establishing a playground for the two schools. A Johnson-Powell school playground appears to have been in place by the summer of 1917. By 1920, however, recreation at the schools was seriously threatened due to school overcrowding.

The Powell School, built in 1909 to the east of the intersection of Hiatt Place and Lamont, along with the Johnson School, built in 1895 on the southwest corner of the same intersection, were located in the heart of Washington's apartment-house district – covering the territory from Irving Street north to Spring Road, and from Fourteenth Street to Rock Creek Park – a section with a high concentration of apartment houses full of children. The high density of school age children in the area meant that by 1920 nearly all of the Powell School building was devoted to educational needs and not used in support of recreation. With even school offices pressed into service as classrooms, only two small rooms in the basement were still in use as playrooms. Outdoor playground space at both schools was also decreasing as both schools required portable classrooms to meet capacity needs.

In 1925, and upon the completion of the Bancroft School at Seventeenth and Newton streets, NW, Powell was converted from an elementary school to a junior high school. Elementary aged children were apportioned among the Ross, Hubbard, and neighboring schools. This eased demands upon the outdoor spaces of both the Johnson and Powell locations.



(Map from: Baist's real estate atlas of surveys of Washington, District of Columbia : complete in four volumes / compiled from official records, private plans, [and] actual surveys by G. Wm. Baist, Wm. E., & H.V. Baist, surveyors. - Plate 10 (1919))

The Johnson-Powell playgrounds were among the mid-city playgrounds Washington Citizens' associations listed as needing development in July 1942. Among the changes sought for Johnson-Powell was the closing of streets to traffic in the area between Lamont Street, Hiatt Place, and Fifteenth Street so as to link the two playground areas then in service. By August, Johnson-Powell was among 20 sites the District of Columbia Recreation Board submitted to the Federal Works Agency in their request for \$3,500,000 to develop them under the provision of the second Lanham Act. This request was approved that fall with funds dedicated for Powell Recreation Center totaling \$21,010. It is presumed that the closing of the 1500 block of Lamont Street dates to this time.

By 1952, both the Powell and Johnson schools had been reprogrammed for use as the Alexander Graham Bell Vocational High School which moved from their old location at Seventh and O Streets, NW. By 2003, the buildings were again found wanting. The two Bell buildings were declared the system's most decrepit. No other high school in the city lacked a cafeteria, gym, labs or an auditorium. Ground was broken on a new \$63 million educational campus in Columbia Heights near the corner of Sixteenth and Irving streets, NW, in May 2003. The new high school – the first in more than three decades – was dedicated in May 2006 along with the neighboring Lincoln Middle School.

Upon completion of the new Columbia Heights Education Campus, the old Powell school building was no longer necessary and razed – the Johnson school having been razed earlier as part of the construction of the new school. The site of the former Powell school is now the Bell High School soccer field. The current Powell Recreation Center site is to the north and west of the Johnson school site, much of which was incorporated into the current Lincoln Middle School site.

References:

“2 New Junior High Schools Planned, Ballou Announces.” *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1924, pg. 8.

“Bell Vocational School Will Be Rededicated.” *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1952, pg. M15.
Complete Street Guide to Washington and Vicinity. New York: Geographica Map Co., c1947.

Recreation’s Heritage: A Preliminary Historic Resources Inventory. Washington, D.C.: D.C. Department of Recreation, 1984.

“Donors Carry the Banner for urban School in Need: Students, Principal at Bell Inspire Outside Support.” *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2003, pg. DE10.

“Half-Million Is Asked for 20 Play Sites.” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 5, 1942, pg. 15.

“Lanham Act Projects Are Approved.” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 15, 1942, pg. B1.

“Playground Plans Cover Entire City.” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 14, 1921, pg. 2.

“Powell School Badly Crowded: No Recreation Space for Children, Investigation Shows.” *The Washington Herald*, Jan. 15, 1920, pg. 6.

“Recreation Board Gets Demand For Mid-City Playgrounds.” *The Washington Post*, July 15, 1942, pg. 17.

“Summer Playground Assured for School,” *The Washington Herald*, May 3, 1916, pg. 2.

“Week in Review.” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2006, pg. C04.

ⁱ Articles from *The Washington Star* have not yet been consulted. After review of the *Star*, this sketch will be updated as appropriate.

ⁱⁱ The author acknowledges the limitations of the Department of Recreation’s 1984 inventory.