A Modern School for the 1920s

Frank Wetherell Designs Oskaloosa's Lincoln School

by Jean Florman

Each fall across Iowa, school doors swing open to welcome thousands of returning students. In Oskaloosa, the doors of Lincoln Elementary School extend an especially exuberant "welcome back." Colorful strings of alphabet letters and numbers outline two doorways, and tucked under the arch, a pair of creamy white owls peer down from their perch, promising wisdom to youngsters who cross the threshold (*left*). Rising dramatically above the roof line, profiles of Abraham Lincoln (*see cover*), a girl, and a boy scout the horizon for any straggling scholars. These charming terra cotta features temper the serious business of education.

Designed by Iowa architect Frank E. Wetherell in 1921-1922, Lincoln School reflected the latest theories of education and school architecture, and was among the first "modern" single-story schools in Iowa. Its modern trappings included electric lights, a telephone system connecting all rooms, and an electric bell. (Traditional school bells were losing favor, and already in 1911 a respected educator had ridiculed schoolhouse belfries as "useless, impertinent, and expensive" architectural features.)

The furnishings also were modern. "Each youngster has a separate combination seat and desk," the *Oskaloosa Daily Herald* noted in April 1922 when the school opened. Adjustable and movable, one-piece desks meant that every student, regardless of size, could have a desk that fit, and that teachers could arrange their classrooms with ease and flexibility.

Most important, the floor plan addressed modern concerns of safety, ventilation, and lighting. Frank Wetherell designed Lincoln School with wide corridors, several exits, and tall, arched windows. "All class rooms open directly out

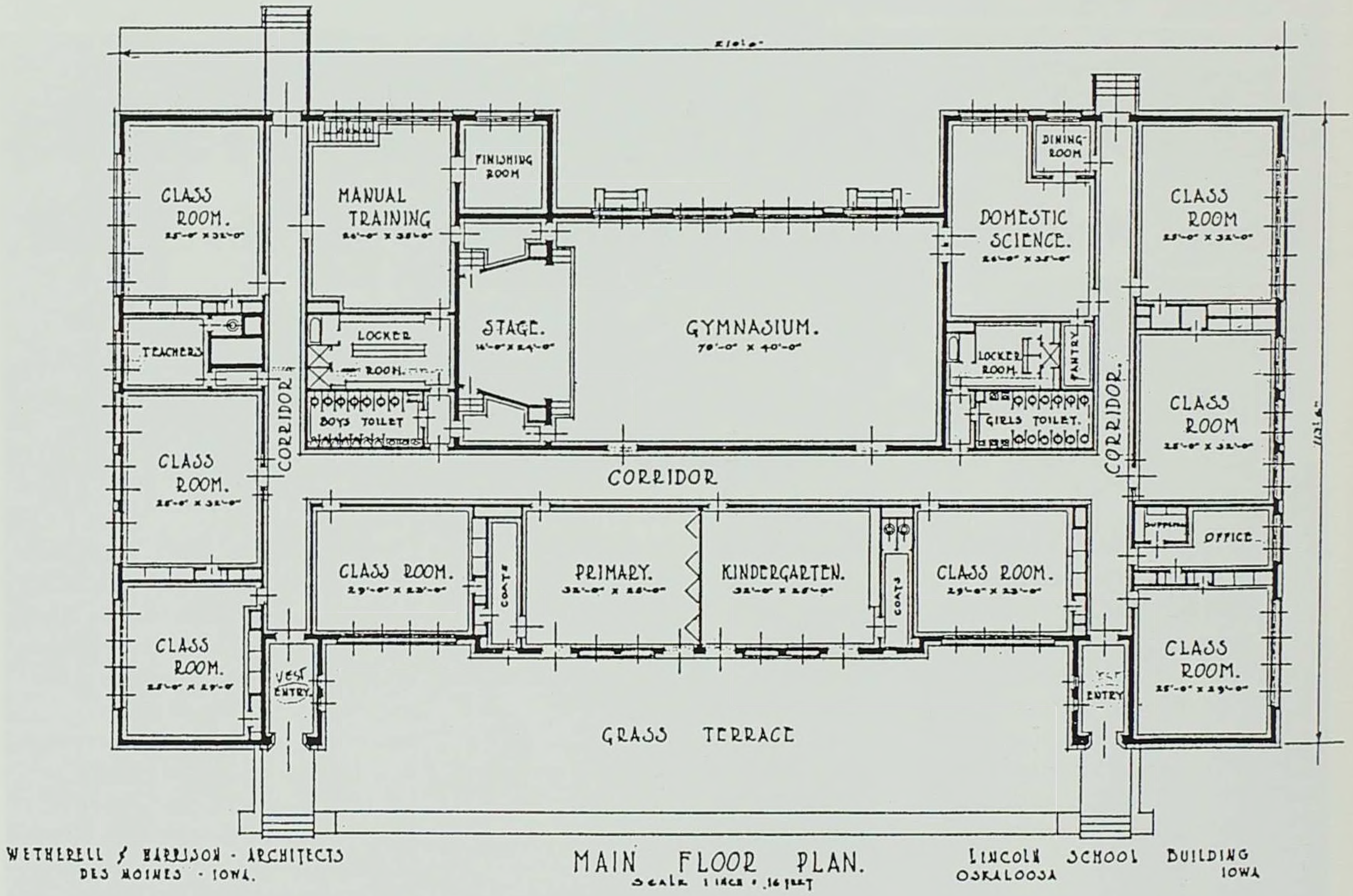
The Stories Behind the Sites

Historic places are often reluctant to reveal their pasts. The historical facts must be gleaned from architectural drawings and property records, pried out of rotting doorsills and weak flooring, coaxed out of people's memories and photo albums, sifted out of local lore and legend. Then they must be dovetailed back into the sense of time and place to derive their real meaning, dimension, and significance.

Yet for those of us who long to understand the past, to inhabit it in our imaginations, preserving historic places and resurrecting their stories offer a wonderful bonus: we can amble around the buildings, pace off the sites, climb the steps, breathe the atmosphere. Through historic places, we can get that much closer to the everyday drama of the past because we can walk onto the stage.

In this issue, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* continues its occasional series showcasing Iowa's historic structures and places. Iowa has roughly 5,000 structures on the National Register of Historic Places and many more that are judged eligible. Behind every one of those places is a story of why that site is significant to our local, state, or national history.

—The Editor



Wetherell's floor plan reflected modern concerns in the 1920s: classrooms open to natural light, multiple exits in case of fire, and a combination gymnasium-auditorium, intended for both school programs and community events.

upon fire proof halls and a half dozen exits are easily accessible," the *Daily Herald* commented. "The rooms all face the street and avenues surrounding the school grounds, and are well lighted."

School architects were discarding the traditional square or rectangular block of contiguous classrooms in favor of more linear layouts (often in the form of an H, T, or L). One benefit was the ease of building later additions, which could branch off as wings and bring in more natural light. Many educators also were calling for kindergarten classrooms to connect directly with the outdoors, and Wetherell achieved this with large French doors opening onto a grass terrace.

Wetherell's floor plan also embodied the spirit of 1920s progressive education. The manual training room and domestic science room reflected the latest notions of training children in the social and practical arts as well as intellectual skills. The gymnasium, flanked by locker rooms with showers, underscored the emphasis on the body as well as the mind. The gymnasium also doubled as an auditorium, with a stage on one end and a capacity of 500. Auditoriums were another feature of modern schools, envisioned, as one educator explained, as "the integrating center of the school" and "the center of training in self-expression, self-control, appreciation, and social relations."

Lincoln School's combination gymnasium-auditorium and the entire floor plan addressed another concern of American educators—the role of a school in a community and in a democratic society. "One of the great problems

of a democracy is to develop that community of spirit which binds the entire population into a genuine social body," wrote Charles L. Robbins, education professor at the State University of Iowa and author of *The School as a Social Institution* (1918). Robbins argued for school buildings to be used as a "harmonizing or socializing force," bridging differences in religion, class, and politics, and encouraging interdependence over individualism.

Like other educators, Robbins advocated the use of urban school buildings for adult education, recreation, and social and cultural events during non-school hours. It made good economic sense and good civic sense. The *Daily Herald* agreed: "The new building will count for the better training of boys and girls and the making of better citizens and a better town."

Between 1919/20 and 1923/24, use of U.S. schools as social, recreational, and community centers jumped 55 percent, and architects designed schools accordingly. "The 'socialized schoolhouse,' as it is frequently called," wrote architect Wilbur T. Mills in 1918, "is so arranged that its auditorium, library, toilets, and gymnasiums can be cut off from the rest of the building and opened to the public without allowing access to classrooms or offices."

Oskaloosa and architect Frank Wetherell clearly had a "socialized schoolhouse" in mind. When Lincoln School opened in April 1922, the *Daily Herald* described it as a "splendid new building and the new 'community center,' for such the building will be."

The newspaper continued: "The auditorium-gymnasium fills the center portion of the building, and will be the First ward's community center. Here the kiddies will indulge in their indoor sports, the youngsters stage their plays and

PHOTO BY MOLLY MYERS NAUMANN

Built to replace a school described by Oskaloosa's townspeople as "dingy, unsafe, and unsanitary," Lincoln School, at 911 B Avenue West, opened on April 3, 1922. Some 300 students assembled in the auditorium for opening ceremonies, the *Daily Herald* reported. "They gave the flag salute with much feeling and devotion. Then followed the singing of 'The Star Spangled Banner' as only school children know how to sing it, and they gave three lusty cheers for the new school building."

PHOTO BY MOLLY MYERS NAUMANN

Terra cotta profiles of two students (above and right) punctuate the roof line of Lincoln School. Social thinkers believed that the architectural character of a modern school should express "the spirit of education," as one educator put it, and create "an atmosphere of invitation to participate in the learning process."

entertainments, the old folks hold their public rallies." The gymnasium connected "with the domestic science rooms on the east, an ideal arrangement to permit the serving of banquets, luncheons and dinners with little extra effort."

Frank Wetherell designed Lincoln School with an eye to form as well as function. His use of lavish terra cotta ornamentation added a healthy dash of style and wit to the brick building.

"Wetherell's terra cotta designs incorporated delightful motifs and happy colors," says architectural historian Molly Myers Naumann. "Green, rose, blue—they remind me of a bouquet of flowers fresh-picked from a spring garden."

Once glazed and fired, Naumann explains, terra cotta elements can maintain their rich colors and architectural integrity for decades—as they have on Lincoln School for the last 76 years.

Although use of the ancient material dates back to antiquity, terra cotta became particularly popular in the 1870s among Chicago architects. They used it for ornamentation because of its diverse design possibilities, and for cladding multistoried buildings because of its fireproof qualities. Architect Louis Sullivan and his followers in the Prairie School movement especially favored terra cotta. Some of Iowa's finest examples include the Poweshiek National Bank (1913-1915) and the Masonic Temple (1917), both in Grinnell; the Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City (1915-1918); and certainly Lincoln School in Oskaloosa.

Terra cotta (Latin for "burnt earth") can be molded or carved into almost any shape and glazed in a rainbow of colors. Although it can mimic stone, terra cotta weighs half as much, and individual motifs are easily and inexpensively replicated from the original casts. Terra cotta also lends itself to the demands of various architectural styles. Its highly decorative possibilities satisfied the aesthetic needs of Neoclassical devotees, whereas its naturalistic texture and colors complemented the organic sensibilities of Prairie School proponents. Architects and builders could order standard terra cotta elements from manufacturers' catalogs or oversee the creation of custom-designed pieces.

"A real surge in the manufacture of terra cotta occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries," says Ralph Christian, architectural historian at the State Historical Society of Iowa. "The development of terra cotta and tile technology—especially in Ohio—parallels the rise of the petroleum

PHOTO BY MOLLY MYERS NAUMANN

A Lincoln Fervor

In Oskaloosa's Lincoln School, modern education and school architecture also dovetailed with the national push early in the century to "Americanize" millions of new immigrants by reinforcing and celebrating traditional American values and patriotism. The upheaval and uncertainty of World War I and the Red Scare fueled the fires of patriotism even more. Looking for national symbols of stalwart saviors during crisis, Americans turned to historic figures like Abraham Lincoln.

The 1909 centennial of Lincoln's birth had already sparked a "Lincoln fervor" that would last well into the century. "The first Lincoln penny was minted that year," architectural historian Ralph Christian says, "and Americans fanned a renaissance of interest in the president's life and contributions. He was seen as a good role model for children, and the stories of Lincoln reading by candlelight and walking to school barefoot were told again and again in homes and classrooms."

In the eleven years (1911-1922) between the planning and completion of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., Americans bestowed the name "Lincoln" on countless endeavors. While the transcontinental Lincoln Highway proved to be the most far-reaching project to honor the Great Emancipator, hundreds of others also proudly bore his name—from "Lincoln Logs" (invented by architect Frank Lloyd Wright's son), to Oskaloosa's Lincoln School and its terra cotta profile of the president (*see cover*).

— Jean Florman

PHOTO BY MOLLY MYERS NAUMANN

Like beads on a ribbon, alphabet letters and numbers ornament an entrance to Lincoln School.

and natural gas industries in this country. Before the use of natural gas could provide a steady high heat, terra cotta tended to be too soft to be widely used on commercial and other public architecture."

Abundant in clay, petroleum, and natural gas, Ohio soon became a major producer of high-quality pottery and terra cotta. Ohio was also the birthplace of Lincoln School architect Frank Wetherell. Frank was born in Malta in 1869, where his father, Henry, was a contractor and builder. It is possible, Christian says, that when Henry Wetherell moved his family to Iowa in 1875, he brought with him knowledge of the beauty and benefits of terra cotta as a building material.

The terra cotta medallions that Frank Wetherell incorporated into the Lincoln School design are particularly impressive and creative examples: profiles of Abraham Lincoln and two students rise above groupings of cipher books, globes, and other educational motifs. At once "elegant and whimsical," Naumann remarks, "terra cotta provided Wetherell the vehicle to add richness to a functional structure."

Wetherell always considered himself a native son of Oskaloosa. He studied civil engineering at the State University of Iowa, in Iowa City, but his interest in design soon lured him to architecture, and after completing his studies, he returned to Oskaloosa to launch his architectural career.

Two years later, he and his wife, Amy, moved to Peoria, Illinois; he practiced there for four years and then returned to Oskaloosa. Today the south-central Iowa community still boasts 44 structures attributed to him—one of the best collections of Wetherell designs in the state.

Wetherell's first commissions were residential. Many of his early house designs were a simplified Queen Anne style, with multiple hip roofs, gable wings, and wrap-around porches. By the turn of the century, he was experimenting with the simplified facades, broad gable roof lines, and gambrel roofs of the popular Shingle style.

Soon, the successful young architect was tackling public and commercial work in Oskaloosa, designing storefronts, the St. James Episcopal Church, and the town's Carnegie Library. Then in 1905, Wetherell moved to Des Moines, where he quickly joined forces with the well-established architectural firm of Oliver O. Smith.

"Wetherell had had many residential commissions in Oskaloosa," Naumann says, "but he must have been looking for a larger audience for his talents."

Naumann, who researched Wetherell and nominated Lincoln School to the National Register of Historic Places, lists just a few Des Moines structures designed by his firm: St. Joseph's Academy, the Merchant's Transfer Building (now Younkers), and a handful of buildings on the State Fairgrounds. As a member of the Des Moines Boulevard Commission, he also helped plan civic improvements like Keosauqua Way as part of the national City Beautiful Movement.

Elsewhere in Iowa, Wetherell's credits included a number of

COURTESY OF JOHN WETHERELL

Iowa architect Frank Wetherell, several years after he designed Lincoln School in Oskaloosa.

Where to find a Wetherell

Frank Wetherell's architectural legacy lives on throughout Iowa today, perhaps in your own community. Here's a brief list of where you'll find some of his work.

* Masonic Temple in Grinnell
* Decatur County Courthouse in Leon
* Keokuk County Courthouse in Sigourney
* Public libraries in Bedford, Bloomfield, Boone, Cherokee, Eldon, and Osceola
* St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Des Moines
* Masonic Home Lodge in Des Moines

schools, libraries, fraternal lodges, and YMCAs. He also provided designs for houses, churches, and a camp store for Buxton, Iowa, a coal-mining community established by Consolidation Coal Company in 1900. And he continued to design projects for his hometown, including Oskaloosa's fire station and city hall, the City Park bandstand, the stone gateway to Forest Cemetery, and Lincoln Elementary School.

Through the years, Smith & Wetherell underwent several permutations, and today the architectural firm is known as Wetherell, Ericsson, Leusink. Frank Wetherell ended his active practice in 1931, although he still went to the office each day for another decade. On October 6, 1931, he died in Des Moines.

One of the shining lights of early 20th-century Iowa architecture" is how historian Ralph Christian describes Frank Wetherell. Des Moines architect John Wetherell has a more personal view. He recalls his grandfather as a dignified Renaissance man who built his own retirement home in the Ozarks, tended a formidable vegetable garden, and nurtured home-grown grapes into wine.

"My grandfather's buildings came right from his creative mind," says Wetherell, who, like his grandfather and father before him, is a partner in the Wetherell firm. "Although he used bits and pieces of elements from various classical architectural orders, his work was never cookie-cutter. His architecture is a unique and enduring presence in Iowa."

Like Wetherell's other architectural gems that dot the Iowa landscape, Lincoln School in Oskaloosa memorializes his eye for both form and function. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991, the school is recognized today as a representative example of Wetherell's larger body of work, of exceptionally rich architectural detailing, and of American notions of the "modern school" in the early 20th century.❖

Writer Jean Florman is the author of "Moments in Iowa History" (broadcast daily on KUNI Public Radio during Iowa's sesquicentennial and now in book form) and KUNI's current series, "From Moldboards to Motherboards: Technology in 20th-Century Iowa." This article developed from the work of Molly Myers Naumann, who researched Lincoln School and Frank Wetherell in 1991 for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.

PHOTO BY MOLLY MYERS NAUMANN

Wetherell's signature on Lincoln School, in terra cotta.

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based on the National Register of Historic Places site inventory for Lincoln School, and the Multiple Property Documentation Form "Architectural and Historical Resources of Oskaloosa, Iowa: The Works of Frank E. Wetherell." Both were prepared by Molly Myers Naumann in 1991. The author interviewed Naumann, Ralph Christian, and John Wetherell. The *Oskaloosa Daily Herald* covered Lincoln School's opening on April 3 and 20, and July 8, 1922.

Floor plans and photographs of three Des Moines schools (Hubbell, Brooks, and Byrne Rice) designed by Wetherell & Gage appear in William C. Bruce, *Grade School Buildings*, vol. 1 (Milwaukee, 1914). On modern schools, see the following: Ernest J. Ashbaugh, "Survey of the School Buildings of Muscatine," *State University of Iowa Extension Division Bulletin*, No. 41 (Sept. 1918); May Ayres, Jesse F. Williams, Thomas D. Wood, *Healthful Schools: How to Build, Equip, and Maintain Them* (New York, 1918); Fletcher B. Dresslar, *American Schoolhouses*, US Bureau of Education (Washington, DC, 1911); Harry A. Greene, "A School Building Program for Indianola, Iowa," *University of Iowa Extension Bulletin*, No. 101 (March 1, 1924); Wilbur T. Mills, *American School Building Standards* (Columbus, OH, 1915); Charles L. Robbins, *The School as a Social Institution* (Boston, 1918); Charles Lyle Spain, Arthur B. Moehlman, and Fred Watson Frostic, *The Public Elementary School Plant* (New York, 1930); George D. Strayer and N. L. Engelhardt, *Standards for Elementary School Buildings* (New York, 1933), and idem, *School Building Problems* (New York, 1927). Several examples of schools as community centers appear in the periodical *The Nation's Schools* during 1928.

On Louis Sullivan and terra cotta, see Larry Millett, *The Curve of the Arch: The Story of Louis Sullivan's Owatonna Bank* (St. Paul, 1985); and Ronald E. Schmitt, "Sullivanesque Architecture and Terra Cotta," in John S. Garner, ed., *The Midwest in American Architecture* (Chicago, 1991).

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