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## "The End of Jayem"

*[Old John Marshall High's Demolition Echoes in Collective Memory]*



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—EDDIE WILLARD, *John Marshall class of 1951*

## The End of Jayem

OLD JOHN MARSHALL HIGH'S DEMOLITION ECHOES IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY

**O**n June 13, 1960, the revered downtown John Marshall High School's line of graduating classes ended with a final march at the Mosque. A new school carrying the same name took its place on the North Side the following fall.

The original John Marshall was demolished a mere half-century and 42,000 day- and night-school students after its celebratory 1909 opening at Eighth and Marshall streets.

"It was a bad decision," says Eddie Willard, class of 1951 and head of the John Marshall Alumni Group's history committee. "It was a grand building; marble halls, marble stairs. The city could've modernized it, but they just didn't want to." "Jayem," as the old-school graduates referred to their

alma mater, came out of an early 20th-century movement to create modern public schools. Its inception also demonstrated the stirrings of a preservationist movement that saved Chief Justice John Marshall's house on the corner at Ninth.

The original efforts to save the house and build the school were later echoed in deliberations about demolishing Marshall High for the "City Center" project in the early 1960s, which built the new city hall and the federal and John Marshall courts buildings.

The original Marshall school was constructed during a period of growth in Richmond, but like almost every city institution, it reflected the city's deep divisions. Though a few blocks from a majority-black neighborhood, only whites attended or taught there.

Marshall soon reached capacity. By 1928, the George Wythe School across Marshall Street — first conceived as a junior high — instead became an annex for the high school. For a time, Marshall held classes in two shifts for its 2,975 pupils.

But the architectural DNA of the porticoed and pedimented Marshall contained fatal flaws revealed by time and shifting demands. Architect Charles K. Bryant, who also designed the Empire Theatre, didn't include a gymnasium. Instead, the Richmond Grays' Armory, on Seventh and Marshall streets,

was used for indoor athletics and served as headquarters for Marshall's storied cadet corps. (It was ultimately razed for the federal building.)

Built in the era of the streetcar, Marshall was showing its age by the 1950s, lacking dedi-

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cated parking and air conditioning. And after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, student integration became a national issue. Old Marshall stood at the intersection of a new society and utility.

School officials contemplated repurposing Marshall as a two-year junior college for approximately \$1 million, but City Center advocates stymied the idea. The J. Sergeant Reynolds Community College's construction between Seventh and Eighth streets caused the demolition of the Richmond Howitzers' and First Regiment Cavalry's armories.

Marshall senior Philip R. Taylor, a proud cadet-corps member and band drum major, addressed City Council in the fall of 1961. Taylor asserted, "A shady deal has been made with the federal officials that if they build their office building on a purchased lot, they could get the lot across the street for free."

The Wythe annex got remodeled for city offices, while the neglected old Marshall languished. Taylor said that the \$3 million replacement Marshall built on the North Side in 1980 had already exhibited cracks in its inner block walls and floors.

"See if you think it will stand another 49 years," he declared. "See if you think it will stand another nine years. Frankly, I think the building will be a shambles in four years."

Taylor, today a vicar of the Free Episcopal Church in eastern North Carolina, recalls, "We were under the impression that a private deal had been struck. We thought if we pushed our point loudly enough, somebody would admit it. Nobody, to my knowledge, ever did."

Walter Beverly, a beloved English teacher, led an anti-demolition rally in August 1961. Photographs show orderly but glum students sitting on the steps.

"It was a very different, and in some ways, strange time," Taylor says. "There wasn't a whole city fighting for Marshall's preservation. Instead, they built one of those flat-roofed monstrosities. But they're like that, all over the country."

In November 1961, the first swings of the 2,000-pound wrecker ball demonstrated the sturdiness of Marshall's brick and granite construction. The ball broke into several pieces. 📍