

Middle School Center Stairway

Did You Know...

Before much needed renovations began to the Middle School in the 1980s, it was quickly determined that most, if not all, of the classrooms and learning spaces had to be completely reimaged and updated. When the Middle School began classes in the fall of 1968, the building was basically the same as it was when it was a combined middle and high school. The classrooms, auditorium, gymnasium, and the Annex were unchanged. When the architects completed their work, they recommended building a completely new 6th grade wing, elimination of the old Annex (which was only supposed to be temporary when built in the early 1960s), construction of a new gym/auditorium, new cafeteria in the old gymnasium space, a new enlarged library in the old auditorium, and completely rebuilt and reconfigured classrooms and laboratory spaces. The main point of controversy in the redesign was what to do with the center stairway. Virtually everyone wanted to have some 'tie' to the original high school. The main problem was the stairway. It no longer met New York State Education requirements for school hallways. The stair treads were granite which could become slippery when wet. The height of the stairs didn't meet the new standards, and the railings were also deemed non-compliant. As a result, the architects had to obtain variances. One change was to the height of the railings...they had to be increased for safety reasons. The other was to put in a center railing. The wide original stairs didn't comply with the current regulations. Modern no-slip treads were also installed over the original granite.



The entrance doors had to be replaced also, but it was recommended that replacements should try to mimic the originals as closely as possible. Everything else could remain. When you examine the staircase and old main entrance, many elements of the original high school remain.

There is the builder's plaque on the left hand side of the entrance and there is an American Legion plaque on the right side with metal reclaimed from the battleship Maine. One of the lesser known features of the staircase is the twin pineapple finials on the bottom newell posts of the main staircase. Another plaque on the stairway leading to the upper floor is a memorial plaque to teacher and assistant principal Helen Ablett, placed there by the class of 1955.



A feature of the lower level of the staircase, at the entrance to the current cafeteria (former gym) is a trophy display case that was donated by the class of 1952.



Pineapples are a sign of welcome and have been welcoming students now for over 100 years. The features of the pineapples have been worn away, testimony to the thousands of students who have gripped them while swinging themselves around to head up the stairs. Bits of the once brass paint is now visible. One of the lesser known features of the main staircase is the words "USA Carnegie Steel" on the right hand side of the stair frame. This is barely visible now due to the many, many coats of paint applied over the years.



We were also able to preserve some of the original blueprints of the building from 1919. These can be seen in the display case at the entrance to the current Middle School Library.

It is fortunate that many of the architectural details of the center hallway were left intact.... and we hope that all past, current, and future students in the Middle School will appreciate the foresight in saving this important part of the educational history of the Cohoes City School District.

Steve Lackmann Class of '69