

# **Alexander Baker School History & Floor Plans**

**Prepared for the  
MN Housing Partnership  
Site Visit @ KOOTASCA Community Action Office  
Grand Rapids, MN  
November 7, 2018**

**Prepared by:  
Backus Community Center &  
KOOTASCA Community Action**

# **Alexander Baker School**

## **Chronology/Projects**

- **1912-1914 – AB Construction**
- **1914-1991 – School in active use**
- **1978 – Original 6 over 9 windows replaced with aluminum**
- **1996 – Hail damage to roof & repairs made**
- **1999 – AB School (& Backus J.H.) place on Preservation Alliance of MN's list of "10 Most Endangered Historic Buildings"**
- **2002 – Citizens for Backus/AB, Inc. purchases both AB & Backus Buildings for \$800**
- **2004 – AB School and Backus J.H. Placed on the National Register of Historic Places**
- **2005 – Maxfield Market Analysis of AB Housing**
- **2008 – Approximately 14,000 s.f. roof replaced - \$180,00**
- **2016 – Test conducted for hazardous materials**
- **2017 – Asbestos removal from third floor classroom. Other areas already encapsulated or secure**
- **2017 – Original 1912 Boiler Refractories re-built - \$68,000 w/ estimated life extended 20-30 years.**
- **2018 – Site visit by Preservation Alliance of MN staff – Historic Tax Credits discussed**
- **2018 – Community Partners Research, Inc. completes draft of county-wide housing study. Recommendation to pursue the rehabilitation and re-use of the AB School as affordable housing**
- **2018 – Backus submits a Historical & Cultural grant to the MN Historical Society to fund a "Conditions Assessment" of the AB School**

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**Description**

The Alexander Baker (1914) and E. W. Backus (1936) Schools are located on the south side of Highway 11/71 in International Falls, Minnesota. The property, encompassing blocks 43 and 44, is one-quarter mile south of the Rainy River, part of the boundary between the United States and Canada. The buildings are situated on a one-acre lot on the western edge of the downtown commercial area, one block west of the Koochiching County courthouse (NRHP, 1977).

The property is bounded by U.S. 71 on the north, on the east by Ninth Avenue, and on the south by Fifth Street. A two-story brick building, formerly the Forestland School, is located approximately one hundred feet due west of the Baker and Backus Schools. It is now used for offices for community organizations. To the south, there is a residential area with the Saint Thomas Catholic Church to the east across Ninth Avenue West.

The Baker and Backus Schools, although built more than twenty years apart using different architectural styles, retain a visual unity due to their massing and use of a similar brick exterior finish. Both buildings employed a U-shaped plan, with a primary rectangular block of three stories, running roughly east-west, and three story wings on either end, running roughly north-south. There is no access between the two schools' wings, with a clear demarcation on the outside of roughly fifty feet.

The two buildings share a common wall with the south side of the Baker School connected to the Backus School's combined auditorium and gymnasium (which also serves as the stage), constructed in 1936. Primary access between the two buildings is through a single entry door at the rear of the gymnasium/stage area.

**Alexander Baker School**

Built in 1914, the Alexander Baker School plan is U-shaped with a central long rectangular block and two rectangular wings. The building is three stories with a full basement with a concrete foundation and a steel framework sheathed in a dark brown brick. The original structure had 38,472 square feet. The cornice is raised with modillions and dentils. At the center of the north elevation, a slight parapet displays the name of the school etched in stone. The roof is flat with built-up asphalt sheathing. There is a large brick chimney in the rear of the original building (but now the center).

The first (ground) floor shows horizontal banding in the brick work. There are two primary entrances, located on the ground level of the north elevation in the corners between the main block and the wings. Entrance is gained through metal-framed double personnel doors and a fixed plate glass transom. The doorway entry projects slightly, embellished with a mosaic pattern and capped with a stone cornice with stolid modillions.

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The two top stories are visually demarcated from the first floor with a stone belt course. These stories show rows of five windows on each of the extending wings, with the center block showing two rows of four grouped windows with paired windows in the center. In the central block, there is a superb series of mosaics, depicting scenes of Native American life. Neither newspaper accounts nor architectural plans reveal the creator of these mosaics.

Based on evidence from historic photographs, the windows were originally wood-framed, double hung windows with six over nine glazing. These have been replaced with fixed panels above and casement type metal frame windows below.

The east and west elevations have simple fenestration, capped by the continuation of the cornice and belt course above the first floor windows. The center sections of these elevations are slightly recessed with a strip of five windows on each floor. On the west elevation, there is a single metal-framed entry door on the ground level, plus a one-story bay.

*Interior Features*

The Baker School interior plan is U-shaped with a central long rectangular block and two rectangular wings on either end. The first floor has a long corridor with entrances to classrooms and offices, situated on the exterior wall. A central doorway connects to the gymnasium/ auditorium that links the Baker and Backus Schools. The second and third floors are similar, with a long central corridor and classrooms on the outside edge. Many of these rooms retain original wood floors, coat rooms, and built-in cabinets. Particularly interesting are the concrete stairways with metal ornamental work, the library room on the second floor with original shelves and rolling ladder, and a fireplace on the ground floor — in a room first used for domestic science classes — with its mosaic terra cotta finish.

**E. W. Backus Junior High School**

The E. W. Backus Junior High School, located to the south of the Baker School, was built in 1936-37 and reflects many elements of the Art Deco style of architecture. The original structure had 72,801 square feet. The primary (long) elevation faces south to Fifth Street.

The center section on this elevation is slightly recessed with buff-colored, smooth concrete and stone finishes, and three grooved half columns that give the front a strong vertical emphasis. Above the third floor windows, there is a course with a chevron geometric pattern. Below the third floor, the wall has vertical grooves capped by a floral ornament. The Deco-theme is continued with ornamentation around the windows. Just below the cornice, the name of the school is inscribed in Deco-style lettering. First floor windows have a wide floral pattern lintel. The cornice is an unadorned buff-colored smooth finished concrete with a flat roof using built-up asphalt sheathing.

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Windows on the two wings, facing south to Fifth Street, are paired with metal frames, casement style openings on the lower level and a solid panel above. Historic photographs show rectangular wood framed, double hung windows, in sets of three — a larger window in the center flanked by two smaller windows.

There are two primary entrances located up steps from the ground level on either side of the primary block, slightly extending from the main block. The surrounds are concrete and stone with a floral ornamental pattern above the glass double personnel doors with plate glass above the doors.

The east and west elevations have simple fenestration, with twelve rectangular windows on each floor. There is a concrete belt course between the first and second floors, plus a course below the first floor windows. The course above the third floor windows continues the chevron pattern found on the main south elevation. On the east, there is a metal-framed double personnel door on the ground level and a concrete ramp to provide vehicular access to the basement boiler room and storage areas.

*Interior Features*

The Backus School is a fine example of the Art Deco style, beginning with the entrances toward Fifth Street. Stepping up a shallow set of stairs, one encounters ticket booths with decorative metal grates opening to ticket booths. The east-west hallway has marble wall panels and a terrazzo floor extends between the entrances, retaining its original light fixtures. The auditorium features a sloping main floor with an expansive second floor balcony. Many of the original Art Deco interior finishes are intact, including lighting fixtures, geometric wall decorative finishes, metal ornament and grates, and wood trim with vertical banding. Along the side walls, the original plaques or mottos remain, with themes of “character, peace, education, religion, Americanization, and music,” as described in the *International Falls Press* coverage of the dedicatory program.

The basic interior floor plan, without the auditorium, is U-shaped. On the first floor, the corridor provides access to office space on the south (outside wall) and to the auditorium on the north. On the second and third floors, these east-west corridors are lined with metal lockers. On the second and third floors, the halls lead to four large classrooms on each floor. Many rooms retain their original wood cabinets and floors. Particularly interesting are the basement level locker rooms that retain their original cage lockers. The basement also has a large band room with a small stage, suitable for more intimate performances than the large auditorium.

**Integrity**

The buildings retain their integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Alterations have been minimal. In 1949, the school district built a small, one-story addition

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was built in the space between the Baker and Backus wings on the east side. The windows are the primary exterior alteration to the property's historic materials and workmanship. In 1978, the school district installed metal frames and panels in both buildings. In 1995, a sprinkler system was installed in Backus. There was extensive hail damage to the roof of the Alexander Baker School in 1996. Leakage is evident with water damage to some ceilings.

In 2002, following a public debate about the future of the building, the school district sold the school to a non-profit community organization, Citizens for Backus/ AB. Its auditorium, the largest in a hundred mile radius, hosts concerts and other performances, with several organizations leasing space within the former E. W. Backus School.

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**Alexander Baker School**

In February 1912, the citizens passed a school bond issue for \$125,000 by a vote of 123 to 14, after which the school board hired the architectural firm of Bell, Tyrie and Chapman to design the building. The partnership was relatively new. Charles Emlen Bell was born in 1858 in McLean County, Illinois. After practicing for several years in Council Bluffs, Iowa, he established his reputation with the design of the Montana state capitol in 1898 and the South Dakota state capitol in 1904. By 1904, he opened an office in Minneapolis. His work included courthouses for Martin County, (Fairmont) Minnesota, Cass County, (Fargo) North Dakota, and Brown County, (Green Bay) Wisconsin, all listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Bell designed the Koochiching County Courthouse, completed in 1909, so that his work was familiar to local residents.<sup>6</sup>

In 1909, he took on two partners, William W. Tyrie and George Chapman. Both came from New York state and graduated from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. They practiced together in Ogdensburg, New York, for a few years until Chapman left for Minnesota. In 1908, Tyrie followed his friend to the Twin Cities. Architect William Gray Purcell described the pair as "a couple of bright, energetic fellows, wise in business ways, experienced in architects' conventions."<sup>7</sup>

The partnership with Bell lasted only a few years, although two of their buildings, the Brookings County, (Brookings) South Dakota, Courthouse and the Brookings School, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1913, before the completion of the Baker School, the partners went separate ways. Tyrie and Chapman went on to gain a reputation as major designers of educational buildings in Minnesota and South Dakota, including schools in Saint Cloud, Chisholm, New Ulm, and Aurora, Minnesota.

Their knowledge of school construction played a vital role in the firm's success. The state Department of Education, through its administrative guidelines, pushed local districts to hire architects who specialized in school buildings. As the local newspaper described the Baker School, "No structure of its kind has been more carefully planned, the best advice from the state school authorities in regard to requirements necessary to receive the maximum of state aid in the different departments had been obtained and followed."<sup>8</sup>

The school board let the contract to the Gray Construction Company of Watertown, South Dakota, at a cost of \$140,000. Construction began in July 1912 with work completed by the end of 1913. Students

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Ramsey, "The Strange Case of Charles Emlen Bell: an episode in the professionalization of architecture," Association for Practical and Professional Ethics Conference, Dallas TX (February 1998).

<sup>7</sup> William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota.

<sup>8</sup> *IF Press*, 4 June 1914.

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commenced classes in January 1914. Earl Pendergast, a student, provided a local newspaper with a witty commentary on life in the new building. He wrote:

Our experiences in the new high school rooms are at least varied enough to break the monotony. Monday and Tuesday we were treated to a continuous sun bath and when after we were done a turn, temporary curtains were put up at the windows the form of bath was changed to the popular Turkish. Something happened to the ventilating shaft, which caused it to exit steam for something like thirty minutes. We are thankful the drinking fountains are no longer hot springs.<sup>9</sup> The building originally housed the combined grade and high schools with additional manual training and business courses. A large basement room provided space for the introduction of kindergarten to the curriculum.

Taking advantage of the additional space, the school district offered three new programs that benefited the surrounding community. A normal school provided teacher-training classes, a key source of staff for rural county schools. These classes continued at Baker School until 1924 when the program transferred to the new high school. In addition, the new building hosted an approved agricultural program, offering classes to area residents with support of the state extension service.<sup>10</sup>

The school district also conducted an adult night school, established under Superintendent E. E. McIntyre, offering English classes for the area's large immigrant population. The curriculum, however, covered a wide variety of instruction. A newspaper article described the program:

There have been about fifty enrolled in this school which includes men and some of their wives of almost every nationality represented in our city, as follows: Russians, Greeks, Fins, Austrians, Polanders, Swedes, Norwegians, and Irish. The classes that have been arranged for them run all the way from the primary grade to the high school work, and their teachers testify to rapid progress.<sup>11</sup>

These night school classes continued for a decade.

The new building quickly reached its capacity as the Falls continued to grow. Within three years, the high school had seventy-five students and the grade school had 533. In response, the school district purchased Block 29, directly east of the courthouse, in 1921, and constructed a high school building in

1924.

<sup>9</sup> *IF Press*, 22 January 1914.

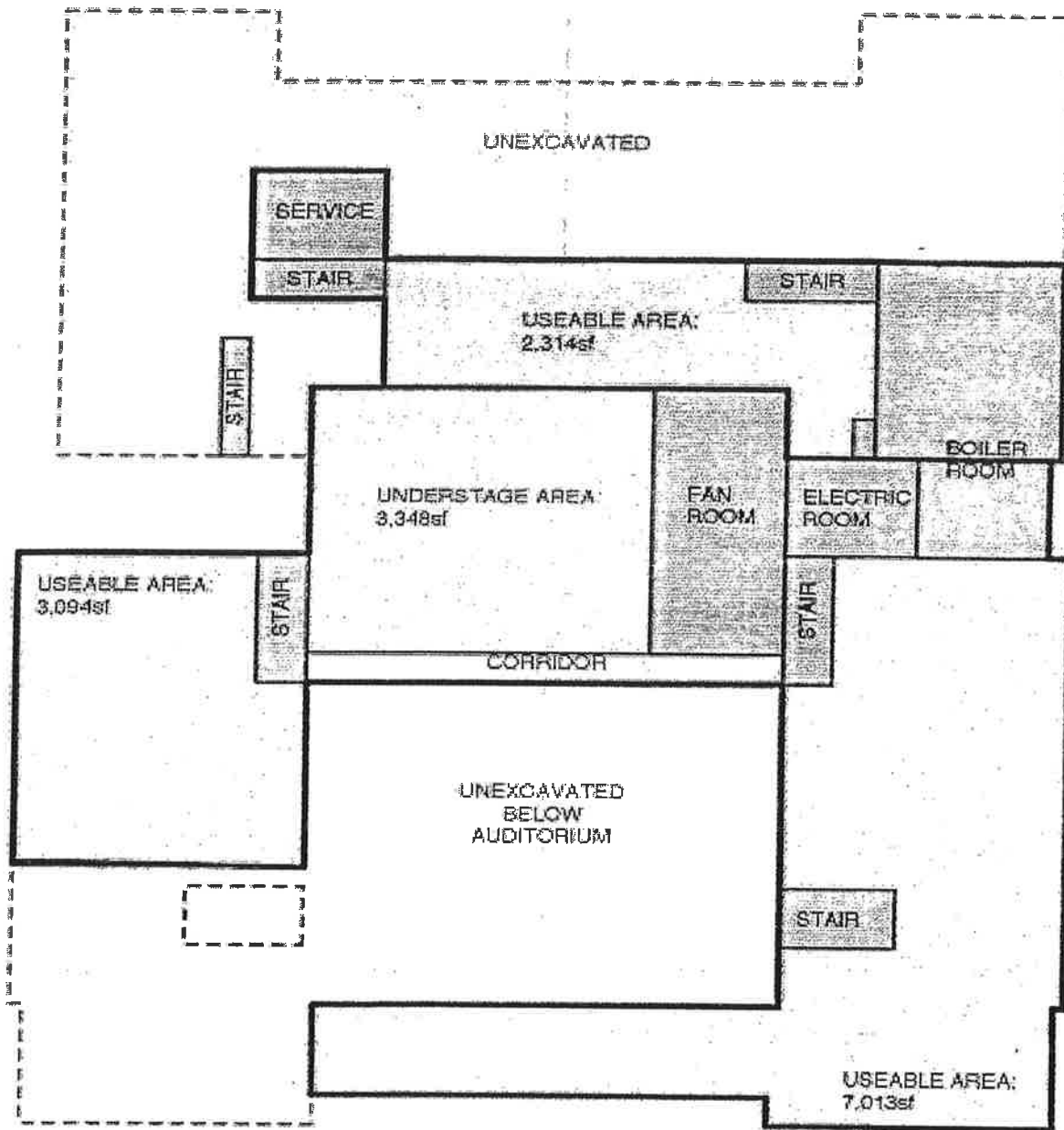
<sup>10</sup> *IF Press*, 13 November 1913; 1 January 1914.

<sup>11</sup> *IF Press*, 22 January 1914.



# Appendix I • Floor Plans

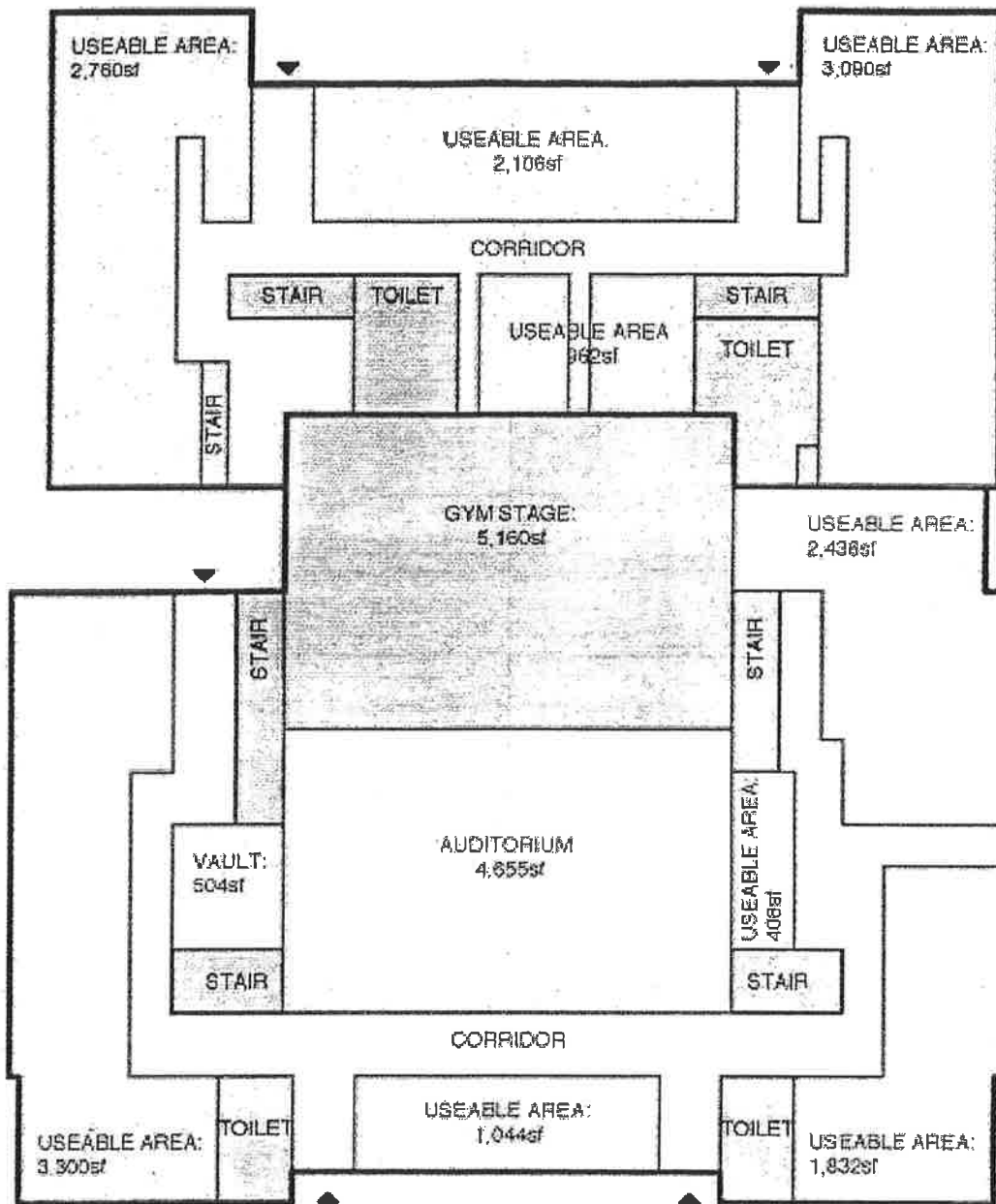
## Basement Plan



BASEMENT FLOOR/ALEXANDER BAKER & BACKUS SCHOOLS 1/32"=1'  
Baker Area: Gross 4,500sf/Net 2,314sf  
Backus Area: Gross 18,922 sf/Net 13,455sf  
01-31-01



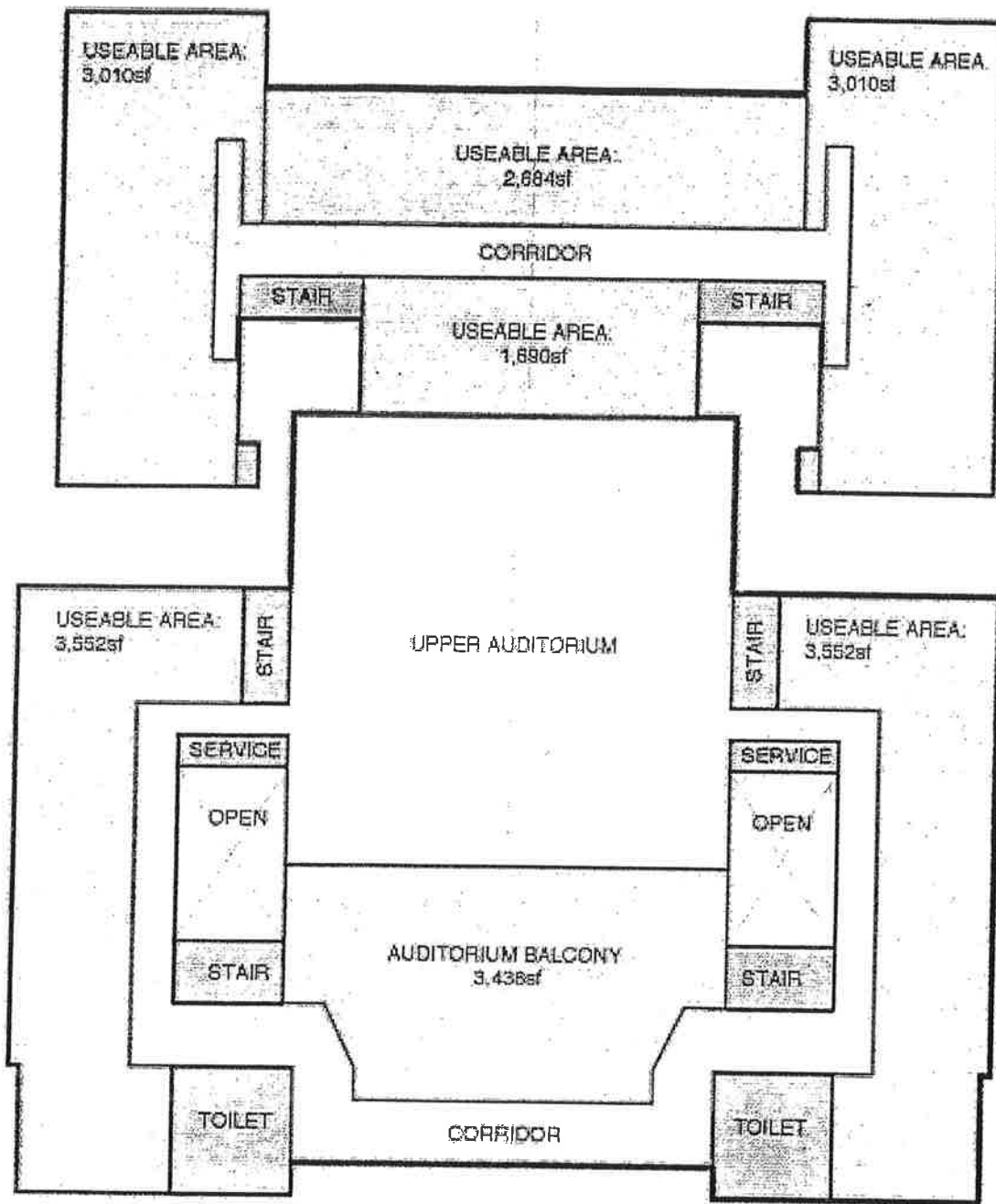
# First Floor Plan



FIRST FLOOR/ALEXANDER BAKER & BACKUS SCHOOLS 1/32"=1'  
 Baker Area: Gross 13,616sf/Net 8,918sf  
 Backus Area: Gross 25,330 sf/Net 18,427sf  
 01-31-01



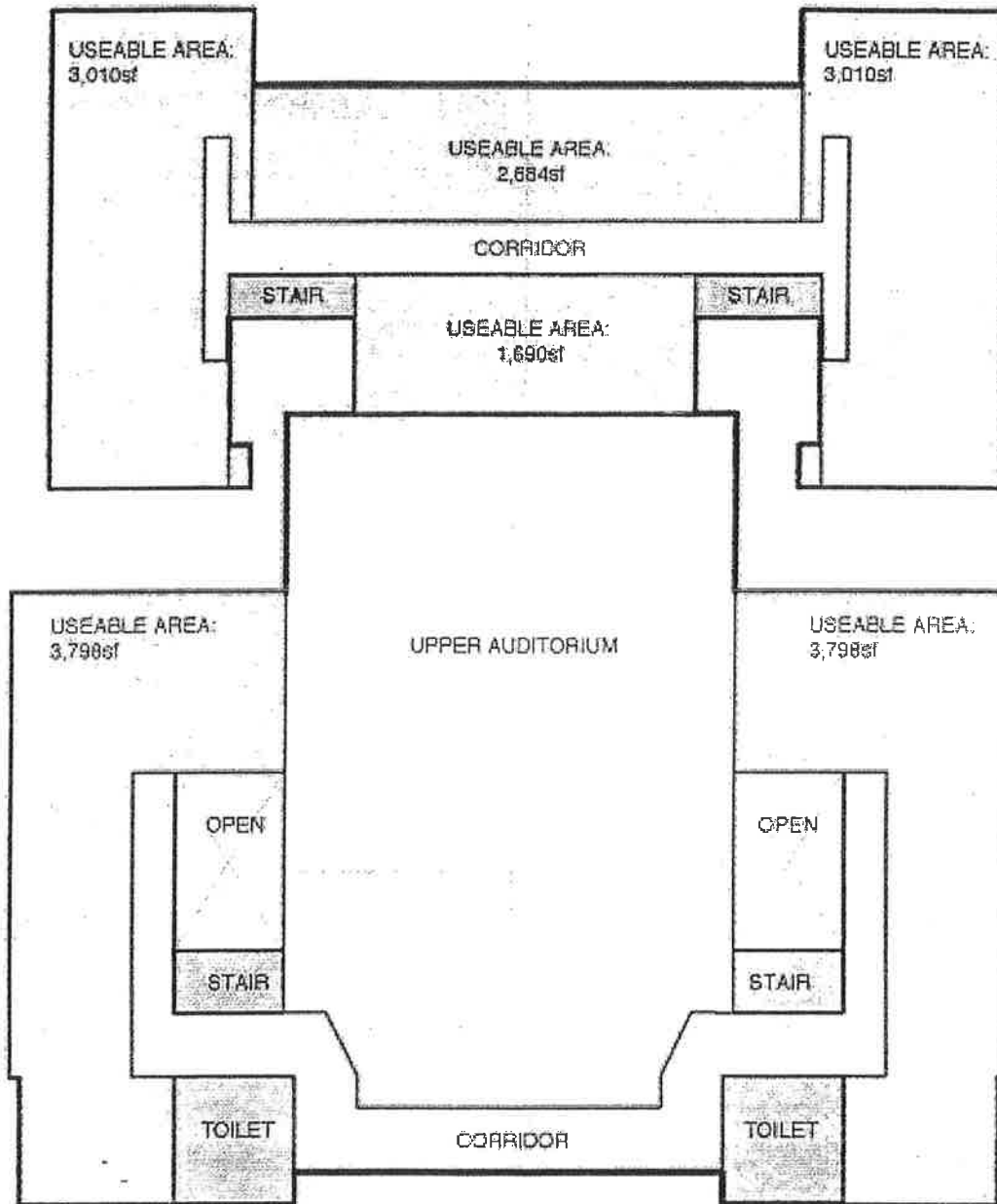
Second Floor Plan



SECOND FLOOR/ALEXANDER BAKER & BACKUS SCHOOLS 1/32"=1'  
 Baker Area: Gross 12,438sf/Net 10,394sf  
 Backus Area: Gross 15,466sf/Net 10,542sf  
 01-31-01



Third Floor Plan



THIRD FLOOR/ALEXANDER BAKER & BACKUS SCHOOLS 1/32"=1'  
Baker Area: Gross 12,438sf/Net 10,384sf  
Backus Area: Gross 12,028sf/Net 7,596sf  
01-31-01

