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The new Charles C. Mason High School in Tulsa was expected to be completed in time for students to attend classes for the second semester in January 1974. The circular section to the left was for classrooms. Shops, a pool, a gymnasium and an auditorium were in the other section. World archives



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Charles C. Mason High School opened on Jan. 3, 1974, and closed five years later, the victim of falling enrollment. That's the last time Tulsa has closed a high school.

The short saga of Mason is a cautionary tale of good intentions, poor planning, promises kept and white flight.

Charles C. Mason was a beloved former Tulsa Public Schools superintendent who served from 1944 until 1969, when enrollment surged from 33,000 to its peak of 80,000 students. Today, TPS has about half that number.

Memorial and Edison high schools were at capacity, and officials believed Tulsa's population was moving southeast. So it seemed to make sense for officials to propose a bond issue to build a new high school and name it after Mason.

The first vote failed, apparently because school officials did not spell out how they intended to spend the money. A second effort explicitly stated that four new schools — Mason, Thoreau Junior High and Bates and Mayo elementaries — would be built. It passed in 1969.



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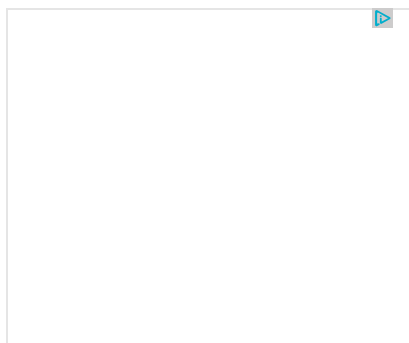
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But even then, school board members foresaw that the school might not be needed.

“We knew at that time. By then the birth rate was declining,” a former school board member said in a March 14, 1979, story by Tulsa Tribune reporter Laurie Mower.

Another reason — white families were moving to the suburbs due to school desegregation.

Moral obligation

As the board was preparing to award the building contract in 1972, some in the community were voicing opposition.

“Why should we continue with Mason when we have vacancies at other schools in the city?” asked school board member Eugene Harris, who voted against the contract.

“We had figures which indicated that Mason school was not needed even at that time,” said Estelle Hamilton, president of the League of Women Voters, which came out against the proposal.

Then-Superintendent Gordon Cawelti had the same figures and told the school board that the district would have a net loss of 2,700 students in the 1972-73 year. Two elementary schools already had been closed.

Nevertheless, Cawelti and the board felt they had a moral obligation to build the new high school they had promised patrons. (Cawelti resigned as superintendent in March 1973.)

Mason was set to open in fall 1973, but heavy rains delayed construction, so the Mason students attended Memorial until the new school at 6350 S. Utica Ave. opened on Jan. 2, 1974.

Students chose Patriots as their team name and navy blue, scarlet and white as school colors. The school’s unusual design featured a round, two-story classroom wing with a library in the center of each floor.

In its first full year, Mason had 787 students — 509 below capacity. It never had more than 800.

“Mason High School: Is it a ‘white elephant’?” was the headline on a 1977 Tribune story by Yvonne Rehg about the school’s low enrollment.

‘Preserve the traditions’

“The biggest problem is not the building and the classrooms being empty,” Associate Superintendent Paul McCloud said. “The really big problem is with teaching staff and curriculum when enrollment drops too low.”

Mason Principal George Fowler defended his school, saying, “We have more advanced courses than any other school as far as I know,” pointing to three years of Spanish, Russian and German and two years of French and Latin. He also touted the school’s student-to-teacher ratio of 20 to 1, compared with a district-wide ratio of 26 to 1 for high schools.

To the dismay of students, parents and staff, the school board voted on March 12, 1979, to close Mason. On May 24, students and faculty came together for a final farewell.

“I encourage all of you to do what you can to preserve the traditions of this high school,” Fowler told his [students](#). “I hope each one of you always will feel a part of Mason because it is a part of you. I am very proud of you.”

Most Mason students chose nearby Memorial or Edison as their new school. Several football players followed their coach to Nathan Hale, which won the 1979 4A state championship. The school’s baseball team merged with the Memorial squad that captured the state crown the next spring.

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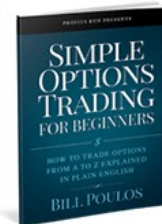
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Various ideas were floated as possible uses for the former high school, including a Tulsa Junior College southeast campus, a four-year state college, a vo-tech and a National Guard armory. Tulsa Mayor Jim Inhofe wanted to sell it to Jenks.

Disney Elementary School students attended class there for several months in 1980 after a fire damaged their school.

Metro Christian Academy leased the campus in 1983, and [purchased](#) the 40-acre property for \$5 million in 1997.

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