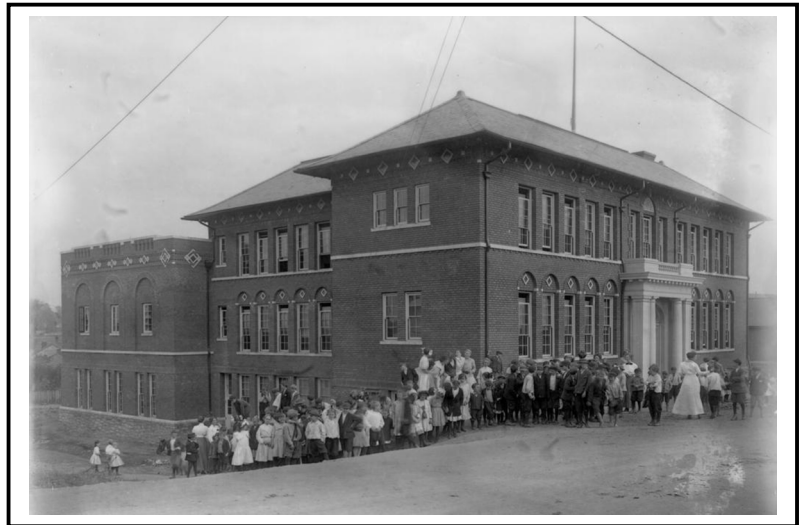


## The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project

### Abraham Lincoln School

Abraham Lincoln School was opened in 1912 on West High Street in Irishtown. The public school, funded by a mixture of private donations and public funds, was a progressive model for elementary education with facilities and programs far ahead of the times. Lincoln also exemplified the era of school segregation in Lexington. Black students were not allowed to attend Lincoln throughout its fifty-five years of service as a public school.

*Figure 1: Abraham Lincoln School, ca 1912. Courtesy, Louis Edward Nollau F Series Photographic Print Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.*



Abraham Lincoln School was built thanks to the efforts of Madeline McDowell Breckenridge who was the great-granddaughter of Henry Clay. Mrs. Breckenridge (1872-1920) was an energetic civic leader, social activist and philanthropist. She is best known as a Progressive reformer for the Women's Suffrage Movement (Breckenridge 1921). In 1908, Lexington's Board of Education appropriated \$10,000 for the construction of a public school in the West End neighborhood known as "Irishtown." As President of Lexington's Civic League, Mrs. Breckenridge raised an additional \$30,000 from private patrons throughout the U.S., including Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of Abraham Lincoln (Watson 1930). Dr. Sophonisba Preston Breckenridge provides a detailed description of the development of Lincoln School in chapter seven of her biography, *Madeline McDowell Breckenridge: a leader in the new South*, University of Chicago Press, 1921.

*Figure 2: Madeline McDowell Breckenridge, ca. 1900.*

### A Community School

Abraham Lincoln School was designed as "settlement" or community school with facilities and programs created for both children and adults. Lincoln housed students from kindergarten to sixth grade. It had a playground, swimming pool, carpenter shop, kitchen, sewing room, rooftop garden, neighborhood laundry, circulating library, and domestic science department. The school served as the meeting place for numerous local clubs, including the Camp Fire Girls, Mother's Club, and Athletic Club. The auditorium was "used as the Social Center of the neighborhood" such as public meetings, dances and movies. Lincoln School also had innovative programs. The Open Air School served "anemic" children. The school also had one of the first Montessori rooms (Watson 1930). There are several photographic collections with images of Abraham Lincoln School related to its opening in 1912, the founder Madeline Breckenridge, and its vital service to the community during the Great Depression.

**The Louis Edward Nollau F Series Photographic Print Collection**, Special Collections, University of Kentucky, four of eight photographs from this collection with images documenting the opening of Lincoln School in 1912.

*Figure 3 (right):  
Students exercise in the  
school auditorium.*

*Figure 4 (below): The  
roof garden or Open Air  
School was designed to  
aid "anemic children."*

*Figure 5 (lower right):  
school laundry.*

*Figure 6 (lower left):  
carpentry classes.*



Three additional photographs relating of Lincoln School were published in **Madeline McDowell Breckenridge: a leader in the new South**, a biography by Sophonisba Preston Breckenridge, University of Chicago Press, 1921.



Figure 7: "Ordering from the Grocer" One way of learning arithmetic and domestic economy. The teacher is the beloved "Miss Betsy" Cloud.



Figure 8: "The Out-Door Class." Lincoln had an outdoor class on the roof for "anemic" children in the area during the era of tuberculosis.



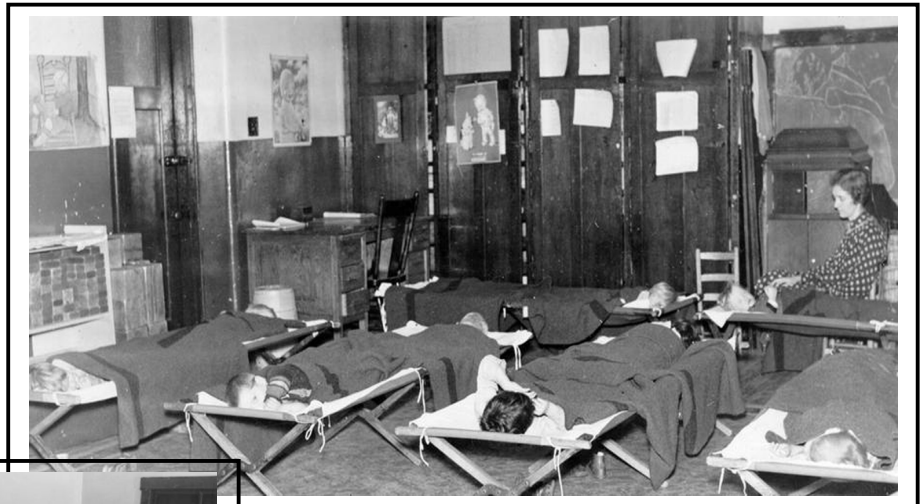
Figure 9: "Lincoln School and the Civic League." Miss "Betsy" Cloud (center of photo), Principal, Lincoln School, celebrates her birthday on May 20, 1921 at Ashland, the childhood home of her close friend Madeline McDowell Breckenridge. The mothers with babies were some of the first pupils at Lincoln School.

**The Goodman-Paxton Photographic Collection**, Special Collections, University of Kentucky, 1934-1942, contains seven photographs of Lincoln School taken from 1937 to 1940. Lincoln School played a crucial role in the lives of Davis Bottom residents during the Great Depression. The federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) supported several programs at Lincoln School, including a free Nursery School and free lunch program for area students. These photographs were taken by and/or for George H. Goodman, Director, Works Progress Administration, Kentucky.

*Figure 10 (right): "Nap time," nursery school, 1937.*

*Figure 11 (below): WPA lunch program, 1940.*

*Figure 12 (lower right): "Type of houses where children live that are eating school lunches," DeRoode Street, Davis Bottom, 1940.*





## Lincoln's Closure

Abraham Lincoln School, despite lawsuits from local residents, was closed by the Board of Education in 1967. After sitting vacant for several years, the building was sold to the Bureau of Highways in 1974 and demolished for the expansion of the West High Street viaduct.



Some Davis Bottom resident retain vivid memories from attending Abraham Lincoln School during the 1940s and 1950s. Mary Laffoon grew up on DeRoode Street within a few hundred yards of Lincoln School. She recalls that during difficult times, Lincoln served as a lifeline.

"No child or nobody had to pay for any lunch," says Mary Laffoon, adding, "All of us down here, their parents couldn't afford to pay for nothing like that because they barely could make it you know. But, nobody went hungry."

*Figure 13: Mary Laffoon in the back yard of her home on DeRoode Street, 1950s. Lincoln School is visible in the background. Courtesy, Laffoon Collection, Davis Bottom History Preservation Project.*

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