## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

### REGISTRATION FORM

#### 1. Name of Property

- Historic name: Palmer Fire School
- Other names/site number: Firemen’s Hall

#### 2. Location

- Street & number: 2601 East Seventh Street
- City or town: Charlotte
- State: North Carolina
- Code: NC
- County: Mecklenburg
- Code: 119
- Zip code: 28205

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property **meets** does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant **nationally** and **statewide** and **locally**. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

**Signature of certifying official:**

[Signature]

**Date:** 4/30/04

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property **meets** does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

**Signature of commenting or other official:**

[Signature]

**Date:**

State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

1. I hereby certify that this property is:

   - [ ] entered in the National Register
   - [ ] determined eligible for the National Register
   - [ ] determined not eligible for the National Register
   - [ ] removed from the National Register
   - [ ] other (explain):

   **Signature of Keeper:**

   [Signature]

   **Date of Action:**

   [Date]

   [Signature of commenting or other official]:

   [Signature]

   [Date]
Palmer Fire School  
Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: private

Number of Resources within Property

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Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
GOVERNMENT
RECREATION AND CULTURE

Other: fire training school
dancehall

Current Functions
WORK IN PROGRESS

7. Description

Architectural Classification
LATE NINETEENTH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS
Other: Late Gothic Revival

Materials

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Narrative Description: See Continuation Form, Section 7
Applicable National Register Criteria

- **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- a owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- b removed from its original location.
- c a birthplace or a grave.
- d a cemetery.
- e a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- f a commemorative property.
- g less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

**POLITICS/GOVERNMENT**

Period of Significance | 1938-1954 | Significant Dates | 1938, 1940

Significant person(s): Palmer, William Hendrix

Cultural Affiliation | N/A

Architect/Builder | City of Charlotte Engineering Department

Narrative Statement of Significance: See Continuation Form, Section 8
Palmer Fire School
Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography; See Continuation Form, Section 9

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # ___________
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # ___________

Primary Location of Additional Data

X State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
X Local government
☐ University
☐ Other

Name of repository: NC Division of Archives & History, Raleigh; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, Charlotte

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 5

UTM References Zone Easting Northing
17 388440 3922060

Verbal Boundary Description: The National Register boundary is defined by the heavy line drawn on the accompanying Mecklenburg County property map.

Boundary Justification: The National Register boundary encompasses the stone assembly hall and the associated brick drill tower, the two key resources that historically constituted the Palmer Fire School. The boundary also encompasses the surrounding park-like landscape that defines the setting.

11. Form Prepared By

Mattson, Alexander and Associates, Inc. date 2-1-04
2228 Winter Street telephone 704-376-0985
Charlotte, NC 28205

Property Owner

Barwick & Associates, LLC 704-333-3317
1614 Park Road
Charlotte, NC 28203
7. Narrative Description

The Palmer Fire School occupies a spacious five-acre, park-like setting along East Seventh Street in Charlotte. Tree-shaded grounds buffer the fire school from East Seventh Street, a four-lane thoroughfare that defines the south side of the tract. The CSX Railway borders the north side, Briar Creek marks the east side, and residential East Fifth Street the west. The property consists of one building and one structure—the 1940, one-story, rock-faced assembly hall and the 1938, six-story, red-brick training tower. Facing south, the hall stands on a slight rise of land shaded by mature trees. The large concrete letters, “CFD” (Charlotte Fire Department), are embedded in the grassy embankment in front of the building. A paved drive leads from East Fifth Street around the front of the building to a small parking lot on the east side. The brick drill tower stands roughly 150 feet to the west, connected to the assembly hall by a concrete sidewalk. The tower stands on a sizeable concrete pad that also serves as a parking lot. In recent years, the grounds have been used for corporate team-building exercises and contain a collection of temporary, small exercise stations west of the hall.

Assembly Hall - 1940

In materials and design, the assembly hall evokes the popular image of a small medieval fortress. It is a rectangular building with an exterior of random-coursed, rough-faced, variegated fieldstone, projecting ends bays, crenellated parapets with scalloped trim, and narrow, fixed-sash windows suggesting corner towers. The front (south) elevation is five bays wide with a stuccoed, crenellated parapet and projecting end bays that flank the center entrance. The main entrance is framed by a concrete arch and has double batten doors with original hardware, including iron hinges. An arched transom tops the doorway, which is sheltered by a later metal awning. A multiple-pane, steel-sash window with a concrete lintel and sill is located on each side of the entrance. Although these windows are now boarded over, their steel sash survives intact. A stone stairway with concrete steps lit by two iron lampposts leads to the entry. Stairways of matching stone and concrete construction lead to the other entries on the north and south elevations. The front elevation also includes four steel-sash basement windows located in concrete-block window wells.

Just west of the main doorway, a metal plaque affixed to the wall bears the inscription “Built by the Works Progress Administration in Cooperation with the City of Charlotte 1940.” Above the doorway, a square concrete tablet displays the official insignia of the City of Charlotte Fire Department. A recessed name panel in the parapet reads “Palmer Fire School” in metal letters.

Facing the fire tower, the east elevation of the hall has nine symmetrical bays, including the projecting crenellated corner bays and an exterior stone fireplace and chimney in the center bay. The fireplace has a brick hearth, a stuccoed chimney with chimney pots, and a scallop motif along the bottom edge of the stucco. This decorative motif matches the scalloped trim along the parapets in the building’s corner bays and along the front elevation. The elevation’s seven interior bays have multiple-pane, steel-sash windows (now boarded over but intact) with concrete lintels and sills, and two entries with single batten entry doors reached by stone and concrete stairways. The entry on the east side has a later metal awning. At the west
bay, a stone-walled ramp descends to a single batten door that opens into the basement. In addition, an original stone, service/wheelchair ramp with a pipe railing runs along the side of the elevation.

The building's east side also consists of nine evenly spaced bays with projecting crenellated corner bays and steel-sash windows (boarded) that match those on the front and west elevations. This elevation has a center entrance with a double batten door and stone and concrete stairway. A modern metal awning extends over the entry. The interior bays flanking the entrance have multiple-paned, steel-sash windows. The elevation includes two basement entries consisting of concrete block stairwells with pipe railings and concrete steps running parallel to the facade. These entries have single batten doors capped by arched concrete hoods.

The five-bay rear (north) elevation also has projecting crenellated end bays with narrow, fixed-sash windows to match the other elevations. Otherwise, the elevation is blind. There is a crenellated parapet above the middle of the façade. The elevation includes two later additions: a frame, shed-roofed trash receptacle and a gray brick, gable-roofed boiler room with a slightly tapered brick chimney against the assembly hall wall.

Inside, the well-preserved main level is dominated by the large assembly room with a stage along the north side. The walls are sheathed with original composition boarding grooved to simulate paneling, and have high, wood-paneled, tongue-and-groove wainscoting. Linoleum tiles cover the floor. The high, coffered ceiling is covered in large square composition tiles and has recessed lighting. The room features a massive, random-coursed, variegated fieldstone fireplace with a brick hearth along the west wall. Two metal tablets are set into the rock overmantel. At the center of the overmantel is a large, circular tablet, framed by stone voussoirs, that holds the insignia of the City of Charlotte Fire Department; below this is a smaller commemorative plaque.

The south side of the main level includes the main entry alcove flanked by an original office on the east side and two original restrooms on the west. The office and restrooms have two-panel wood doors. A stairway along the office wall descends to the lower level. The stairway has a wooden railing with slender turned balusters. In recent decades, gypsum-board partition walls have been installed to create several small offices that separate the entry and stairway area from the rest of the assembly room.

The lower level is divided into two distinct sections. The south side is finished with composition-board sheathing and tongue-and-groove wainscoting that matches the main level. This area consists of an original locker room/restroom and a small canteen. A later small restroom has been added on the north side. The room has a concrete floor and ceiling and steel support columns. The north side of the level lower was excavated shortly after the west side was finished. This area consists of a series of small storage rooms with sheet-metal partition walls organized along a hallway that leads to the boiler room.
Drill Tower - 1938
Sited west of the assembly building, the six-story drill tower is a rectangular, flat-roofed structure constructed of common-bond brick. There are window openings with concrete sills and lintels on all four sides and all six stories. While the upper-story windows are simply openings, those on the ground level are multiple-paned, steel-frame, fixed sash windows with original wooden shutters with iron hinges. Facing west, the entrance bay extends slightly from the tower and contains a single iron door topped by a transom. Inside, there are six levels divided by concrete-slab floors and reached by a utilitarian metal stairway, with a single run ascending to each floor.
Statement of Significance

Summary Statement
Constructed between 1938 and 1940, the Palmer Fire School is considered eligible for the National Register under Criterion A for Politics/Government and Criterion B for its association with Charlotte Fire Chief William Hendrix Palmer. The school clearly represents the efforts of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the federal relief program created during the Great Depression to fund public works projects to relieve mass unemployment. Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA spent eight billion dollars nationally and nearly 175 million dollars in North Carolina. Palmer Fire School was the only drill school for firemen funded by the WPA, and upon completion in 1940 was the leading firefighting training facility in North Carolina and one of the finest in the nation. William Hendrix Palmer, the fire chief who championed its construction, led the modernization of the city’s growing fire department. Under Palmer’s leadership, the Charlotte Fire Department was the nation’s first to adopt the enclosed fire truck (which Palmer designed and promoted), and one of the first to use a radio fire alarm system and a central office fire alarm. Throughout his long tenure as chief, Palmer spearheaded successful drives to reduce fire hazards in the city and improve inspection procedures. In 1940, he was elected to the top post of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. The Palmer Fire School exemplifies his career accomplishments.

The period of significance extends from 1938, when the drill tower on the site was constructed, to 1954. Although the fire school continued to function as a training facility until 1976, the property does not have the exceptional significance under 36 C.F.R. 60 to extend the period of significance to within the last fifty years.

Historical Background Context
Palmer Fire School, also known as Fireman’s Hall, was completed in 1940 at what was then the eastern edge of the Charlotte city limits. The 9,685-square-foot building was named for the individual who conceived the idea of a formal fire training facility and championed its construction, William Hendrix Palmer (1884-1955). Born in nearby York, South Carolina, Palmer was a member of Charlotte’s fire department for forty-four years, and chief from 1927 to 1948. He was twice president of the North Carolina Firemen’s Association, organized the North Carolina Fire Chiefs Association, and in 1940 became president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, his profession’s most prominent rank (Huffman and Gatza 1989: 3-4; Charlotte News, 26 August 1955; Charlotte Observer, 9 August 1940; 28 February 1950; Charlotte Fire Department, Millennium History 2000: 17-21).

Palmer was recognized internationally for his fire-fighting innovations. He is credited for designing the first enclosed fire truck in America. The enclosed design was inspired by an accident involving an open fire truck that resulted in the death of a Charlotte firefighter. In 1936, the Charlotte Fire Department was the first department in the country to adopt the enclosed vehicle. Under the Palmer administration, the department was also one of the country’s first to use a radio fire alarm system as well as a central office fire alarm. In 1929, Palmer established the Fire Prevention Bureau, under which firemen made quarterly
inspections of some 6,000 properties, examining furnace pipes and electrical wiring. Palmer developed a citywide mapping system that depicted floor plans and building materials, and he endorsed a municipal cleanup movement to remove flammable trash from alleys and vacant lots. He also led the campaign to eliminate wood shingle roofs in Charlotte. The ordinance outlawing wood roof shingles finally passed city council in 1939 (Charlotte Fire Department, Millennium History 2000: 17-21).

As fire chief, Palmer was instrumental in modernizing the department’s training procedures. He established the department’s first training program, which consisted of drills held one hour daily for thirty days. However, there was no official drill facility, and the training division consisted of a single room on the second floor of Fire Station No. 1. Department officers and firemen were instructed in the use of ladders and hoses, pump operations, and tying knots. Practices were held at First Ward Elementary School, where firefighters used the school’s stair tower to practice raising ladders. Assistant Chief C. M. Griswold conducted drills on hose layouts and pump operations at a vacant lot at Seigle and Orr streets. Charlotte Fire Department records also show that in 1934 five Charlotte firemen were sent to a drill school in Durham, North Carolina, for training held in the summer months. In 1935, a class in scientific firefighting methods and administration was conducted for officers in Charlotte. By the late 1930s, special classes were being held at each of the city’s seven fire stations, and firefighting drills had become standard procedure in the department (Charlotte Fire Department, Millennium History 2000: 17-21; Cook 2003).

In 1930, Chief Palmer submitted his first formal request to the city for an official and permanent drill school and training tower in Charlotte, which became the Palmer Fire School. Two years later, Palmer submitted a second request, and in 1934 the city’s Public Works Department approved construction. Legal technicalities and the deepening Great Depression delayed funding. However, in 1938, direct financial aid was provided through the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) (Huffman and Gatza 1989: 4; Charlotte News, 13 May 1940; Gardner 1976).

The WPA was a national relief agency authorized by the United States Congress and enacted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1935. Regarded as one of the most important of Roosevelt’s long list of New Deal programs, the WPA provided federal dollars for a wide variety of public projects to reinvigorate the construction industry and combat mass unemployment. Nationwide, the WPA spent some eleven billion dollars, employed over eight million workers, and funded the construction of hundreds of thousands of public facilities between 1935 and 1943, when the program ended. In North Carolina, the WPA expended nearly 175 million dollars for 3,984 projects, giving work to over 125,000 people. The WPA funded the building of roads, airfields, privies, hospitals, schools, and wide variety of other permanent public buildings. Although the agency focused primarily on construction projects, it also employed actors, writers, historians, clerical workers, and musicians, and established community arts centers. For construction jobs, such as the Palmer Fire School, the WPA typically supervised the work locally, and after completion, turned the building over to the city or county for its use (United States and Works Progress Administration 1940: 1; Lefler and Newsome 1954: 616-617; Badger 1981: 41-47; Morris 2003).
The WPA appropriated approximately $54,000 for the Palmer Fire School, and the City Engineering Department drew up the plans. The brick drill tower was completed in 1938, and the stone assembly hall in 1940. Palmer Fire School is the only known fire training facility funded by the WPA in North Carolina or the country. Chief Palmer enlisted his crew of firefighters to assist in construction. Employing a two-wheel pole trailer pulled by a maintenance truck, they hauled the stone for the assembly hall from an abandoned tannery on Burton Street downtown. Other materials were salvaged from an abandoned incinerator on the site. When additional room was needed in the hall, the firefighters themselves excavated and finished the basement. Two department captains, J.R. Jamison and R.T. Barnes, landscaped the five-acre grounds. The fire department had its own woodworking shop, and some of the interior, including wood benches with the department insignia at the ends, was made there, under the direction of Captain Glen Beckham. Captain Beckham had formerly been employed at H. M. Wade and Company, makers of office and bank furnishings in Charlotte (Huffman and Gatza 1989: 4; Morris 2003).

Palmer Fire School was dedicated on May 13, 1940. At a luncheon held at the Hotel Charlotte, T.T. Richardson, Charlotte area supervisor of the WPA, gave the keys to the new facility to C.C. McGinnis, state WPA supervisor. McGinnis handed the keys to Charlotte City Manager J.B. Marshall, who in turn presented them to Chief Palmer. Addressing the large gathering at the ceremony, Samuel J. Pope, Chief of the Boston (Massachusetts) Fire Department and president of the New England Fire Chiefs Association, praised Palmer as “one of the outstanding fire chiefs in America.” Other guests of honor were D. W. Brosnan, Chief of the Albany, Georgia, Fire Department and ex-president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, and Sherwood Brockwell, North Carolina State Fire Marshall. Brockwell praised the efforts of Chief Palmer and the department firefighters who helped build the new school for $50,000, roughly $4,000 under budget. He then declared, “Charlotte now has the finest training center for firemen in the United States.” He concluded his speech stating that commencing immediately, the annual three-day North Carolina Fire College and Pump School, which had previously met at sites around the state, would be held at the Palmer Fire School. The fire college would be held annually in Charlotte for the next nineteen years (Charlotte Observer, 28 February 1940; Huffman and Gatza 1989: 5).

Such praise for the Palmer Fire School was justified. Before World War II, the great majority of the nation’s firefighters learned their skills on the job, and formal fire schools were rare. Palmer Fire School operated for thirty-six years. It was the principal site of the department’s training program that evolved over the decades to meet changing demands and fire-fighting techniques. The drill school and tower offered training for Charlotte firefighters as well as for many other fire departments statewide and in South Carolina. Between 1940 and 1952 the school provided a standardized curriculum that included 298 hours of instruction and drills, and a final examination. In 1952, newly appointed training director Walter J. Black instigated a new training program based on a set of courses developed by the Department of Trade and Industrial Education at Oklahoma A&M College. These courses were compiled in a book with a red binder known as the “Red Book,” which was adopted by the Charlotte Fire Department as its official training manual. Chief Black also started formal recruit training, whereby new firemen were
required to complete a two-week training program at the Palmer Fire School before permanent assignment to a fire company. Until this time, recruits received no prior instruction before company assignment. The facility was the site of the state’s first pump operations school sponsored by the North Carolina State Firemen’s Association. By the 1950s, classroom instruction placed more and more emphasis on pre-fire and fire control strategies, including on-site inspections of businesses and factories. In the 1960s, the Mecklenburg County Volunteer Fire Departments began taking part in instructional exercises at the school as part of growing effort to improve the training of volunteers (Charlotte Fire Department, Millennium History 2000: 22-23, 73-75; Cook 2003).

Between 1965 and 1976, during the decade-long tenure of R.L. Blackwelder as Chief of Training, the total number man hours of training soared from 33,871 to 118,698. Firefighters were instructed in the use of various hoses and the latest pumping techniques, emergency medical training, rescue procedures, and strategies of fire control (Charlotte Fire Department, Millennium History 2000: 73-75; Cook 2003).

During its decades of use, Palmer Fire School also functioned as a clubhouse and well-known local social center. There were annual department barbeques on the grounds and the firemen’s Benefit Fund held square dances in the hall. Many local civic groups also rented the hall for dances and other events, with proceeds contributing to the building’s upkeep. In 1976, the fire department’s training division relocated to a newly constructed fire/police training facility, and the Palmer Fire School was transferred to the City Parks and Recreation Department. In subsequent years, the Charlotte Shakespeare Company used the building for rehearsal space, and private corporations used the grounds for various team-building exercises for employees. Most recently, the Metrolina Native American Association leased the drill school for its headquarters. At present, work is in progress to restore the hall and the fire tower, and plans are pending to lease the space to the Charlotte Firefighters Association (Charlotte Observer, 13 May 1940, 9 February 2003; Huffman and Gatza 1989: 5).
9. Bibliography


*Charlotte News.* 13 May 1940.


Morris, Gene. Interview with Richard L. Mattson. 20 February 2003. Gene Morris is the WPA Archivist, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section Number Photos Page 9

Palmer Fire School
Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

Photographs

The following information pertains to each of the photographs:

Name of Property: Palmer Fire School
Location: Charlotte, North Carolina
County: Mecklenburg
Name of Photographer: Mattson, Alexander and Associates, Inc.
Location of Negatives: Survey and Planning Branch
North Carolina Division of Archives and History
109 E. Jones Street
Raleigh, North Carolina 27601-2807

Date of Photographs: March 2003

1. Assembly Hall and Tower, View Looking North
2. Assembly Hall—Front Elevation, View Looking North
3. Assembly Hall—Front and East Elevations, View Looking Northwest
4. Assembly Hall—West Elevation, View Looking South
5. Assembly Hall—East Elevation, View Looking Northwest
6. Assembly Hall—North (Rear) Elevation, View Looking South
7. Assembly Hall—Interior, Fireplace
8. Assembly Hall—Interior, Main Level Stage
9. Assembly Hall—Interior, Stairway
10. Assembly Hall—Interior, Lower Level
11. Tower, View Looking Northwest