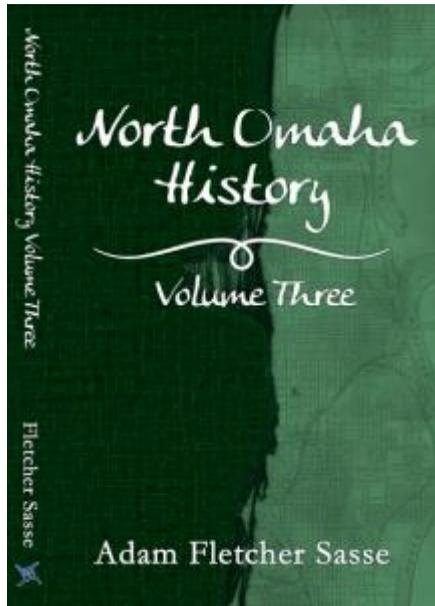


This is an excerpt from North Omaha History: Volume Three by Adam Fletcher Sasse. Published by CommonAction Publishing, Olympia, WA. Available November 2016 from amazon.com or by request from your local bookstore or library..



© 2016 Adam Fletcher Sasse. All Rights Reserved. All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without prior written permission of the author, or a license permitting restricted copying issued in the United States by the author.

Table of Contents

Technical High School In Omaha	3
Before Tech High	3
Welcome to the New School	4
Leaving a Mark on History	6
White Flight Closes Tech	7
Opening TAC.....	8
New Schools in the Old Tech	9

Chapter 106:

Technical High School in Omaha

Judges, teachers, decorated veterans, actors and singers, an Olympian and a Heisman Trophy winner are among its alumni. After opening in 1923, the last graduates were in 1984. Omaha Technical High School, called Tech High, was located at North 30th and Cuming Streets. This is a short history of the school.

Before Tech High

In 1914, the Omaha school district established a unique facility among the 50 schools that were open then. The Fort Street Special School for Incurable Boys was located at North 30th and Brown Streets in the Miller Park neighborhood. As a school for boys who “had no interest in school at all,” the challenge was to teach them lifelong learning skills in engaging ways. Installing a printing press, machining tools and drafting equipment, the students received a career and technical education that schools are striving to provide for

North Omaha History: Volume Three

learners today. However, after packing the building full, in a decade the Fort Street School was closed and the students were sent to a new school. The year was 1923.

Stenography and typewriting. Imagine going to a school where those are seen as primary subjects, and the rest of the classes are built around them. That was the vision of the Omaha school district when they opened the original Commercial High School. Opened before 1900, the school offered classes in carpentry, printing, auto mechanics, mechanical drawing, the gas engine, electricity and more. Commercial High was on the cutting edge when it opened because they had the district's first committed Domestic Science teacher. Originally operating in several buildings downtown, a school was eventually built at South 17th and Leavenworth Streets. However, in 1923 it closed and students were sent to a new school.

Welcome to the New School

In 1920, the Omaha Board of Education was excited to solicit bids to build a grand new Commercial High School between Cuming and Burt, from North 30th to North 33rd Street. The architect, Jack Wyman, created the designs over three years starting in 1917. However, the initial designs for the Technical and Commercial High School weren't accepted by the Board. Instead, it was redesigned and renamed to reflect its more specific mission as Technical High School.

North Omaha History: Volume Three

Omaha's Tech High opened on October 15, 1923, with nearly 2,400 pupils at 3215 Cuming Street. It was a five-winged building with a huge football field large athletic field that covered on three city blocks. The mascot of the new school was the Trojan, and all of its teams used the same mascot.

When it opened in 1923, Tech High was named the largest and most advanced high school west of Chicago.

The school board intended to combine the knowledge taught at Commercial High School with the skills taught at the Fort Street School, and then pack the building with excited learners who were driven to become successful students. To do that, they packed the building with the latest learning tools, including an entire floor of dedicated home economics classrooms, extensive wood and metal shops, and highly advanced science classrooms that were unparalleled in the district and across the entire Midwest. There was also a well-equipped greenhouse and two large gymnasiums. There was also a deck with a canopy on the roof of the building that housed an outdoor exercise area. Tech High also had the only swimming pool in any Omaha public school for decades.

There were 124 rooms throughout the building. By 1940 enrollment had reached 3,684 students, with more than 200 teachers. Developed with high academic standards the school was a forerunner to today's vocational education in high schools by offering students that largely choose not to continue on to college the opportunity to learn a trade or profession.

North Omaha History: Volume Three

There was also a high school radio station at Tech in the 1920s, whose call letters were KFOX. Originally called the Quadrant, the Tech High yearbook was also called Liongate and the Reflector.

There were hidden tunnels and staircases throughout the building, a grand marble lobby and even an underground stream.

Throughout the years, many popular performers appeared in the school's renowned auditorium. In 1928, John Philip Sousa's marching band performed, and in 1926, The Metropolitan Opera Company of New York played there. A famous period actress Cornelia Ottis Skinner made her first high school appearance there in 1930, with other actors including Helen Hayes and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. performing there, too.

Leaving a Mark on History

Throughout its history, the school graduated more than approximately 25,000 students. Its most important graduates included military officers including Captain Alfonza W. Davis, a Tuskegee Airman; and Brigadier General Kenneth Walker, US Army Air Corps, posthumous recipient of the Medal of Honor in World War II, and pioneer in military aviation. Several politicians graduated from Tech, including Roman Hruska, former US Senator; Johnny Rosenblatt, former Omaha mayor; James Dworak, former Omaha mayor; and Sen. Ernie Chambers, the longest-serving ever member of the Nebraska State Legislature.

North Omaha History: Volume Three

Among the Tech Trojans were many of the 20th century's most important Nebraska athletes, including Bob Gibson, Baseball Hall of Famer for the St. Louis Cardinals; Louis Hartz, former American political scientist; Jim Houston, national rodeo champion; Johnny Rodgers, former college football superstar and Heisman Trophy winner; Bob Boozer, a college and professional basketball player and Olympic Gold Medalist in 1960; Jack Urban, former professional baseball player (Kansas City Athletics, St. Louis Cardinals); Les Webster, college and professional football player for the Cincinnati Bengals; Lucille Wilson, 3x United States women's track team in the Olympics; Phil Wise, college and professional football player; and Ron Boone, a professional basketball player.

Actor John Beasley also graduated from Tech.

White Flight Closes Tech

Housing equality became a primary issue in the late 1950s for the civil rights movement and redlining and forms other discrimination had to end. White people in North Omaha generally didn't want to live near African Americans. So, from Cuming northward to Ames and from 40th east, North Omaha emptied out of white families rapidly in part of a nationwide trend called "white flight." Race restrictive covenants that were signed by a lot of middle class homeowners became illegal to enforce, and white people didn't want to live by African Americans.

North Omaha History: Volume Three

Becoming a *de facto* segregated “black school,” Tech also became Omaha Public Schools’ center for mentally handicapped students. The pressures of these realities, coupled with being underfunding, understaffed and poorly supported by the school district drove school performance down, further pushing away students.

By the mid-1960s, Tech’s student population was down to 800 students. As part of its desegregation plan, the district implemented a magnet school program in the 1970s that brought students back. In 1972, the Omaha school board approved an extensive renovation of the school. It featured new science labs, a radio/television center, painting and more in the classrooms and halls, along with new light fixtures and new classroom furniture. By 1974 the population was back up to 1,500.

However, even with all the money and promotion, it wasn’t enough to sustain a mixed race student population and white students left Tech en masse again. By 1983, the student population hovered around 700, with African American students making up at least 60% of the student body. The district didn’t want to maintain a segregated school, so it closed. After graduating thousands of students over 60 years, the school was permanently closed in 1984.

Opening TAC

It was later repurposed, with architects refurbishing and restoring much of the building in the early 1990s. The original lobby features polished marble and ornate

North Omaha History: Volume Three

moldings. During renovations, Omaha Public Schools converted the football field into a parking lot and moved the main entrance to the building to the east side, with a three story atrium greeting guests.

Architects used the high ceilings in the two original gymnasiums to create two floors of office space, while leaving the original auditorium and other features largely intact. They renamed the building the TAC, or Teacher Administrative Center.

Working over a decade, alumni restored the building's 2,200-seat auditorium, and it was re-opened in 2014. The original lobby, which has been preserved, is an elegant structure of polished marble and ornate moldings. The main entrance to the building is now on the east side. Stone steps to a former second story entrance were removed and a new first floor entrance was built for easier access. A three story atrium is featured inside the east entry. Architects used the high ceilings in the two original gymnasiums to create two floors of office space in this area.

New Schools in the Old Tech

Today there are three parts of the former Tech High. At the east end is the TAC. In the central part of the building is the auditorium which hosts a variety of public events now. On the west end is the Career Center, where more than 700 high school students learn technical and career skills.

In 1996, the Skinner Magnet Center, named for Tech graduate and the first African American school leader in Omaha Eugene Skinner, opened in the former

North Omaha History: Volume Three

Tech High. Focusing on performing arts, technology and math, it hosts a small cadre of students from across the district in a small section of the building.

In the late 1990s, the Omaha Public Schools Career Center opened at Tech High. Offering a variety of skilled and technical sciences courses, it is a modern version of the original purpose of the building. Courses include automotive technology; automotive collision repair and refinishing; construction; electrical systems technology; construction; electrical systems technology; motor sports repair; welding; professional services; commercial design; culinary skills; digital video production; photography; health science; emergency medical technician; and health occupations. There are also innovation partnerships at the Career Center that have resulted in the University of Nebraska Medical Center High School and the Zoo Academy, in partnership with the Henry Doorly Zoo.

This history is dedicated to the memory of Omaha Technical High School, 1923-1984, including all the students and adults who ever shared its halls. Photo from the Omaha Tech High alumni facebook group.

The future of Tech High continues to reveal itself, and with the leadership of the Omaha school district's board and staff, the building should live long into the future.

North Omaha History: Volume Three

*This is an excerpt from North Omaha History:
Volume Three by Adam Fletcher Sasse.
Published by CommonAction Publishing,
Olympia, WA. Available November 2016 from
amazon.com or by request from your local
bookstore or library.*