Cape Gazette
Covering Delaware's Cape Region

Richard Allen School makes history

Marker honors building's role in educating African American children

The Richard Allen School as it appeared in 1923. SOURCE DELAWARE PUBLIC ARCHIVES

Melissa Steele

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Eunice Richardson talks with the media in front of Richard Allen School. Richardson was one of the first students to attend Richard Allen in 1926. BY STEVEN BILLUPS

Sen. Brian Pettyjohn, R-Georgetowm, and Rep. Ruth Briggs King, R-Georgetown, bow their heads in prayer during the ceremony. BY STEVEN BILLUPS

The Richard Allen Coalition gathered under the historical marker for a photo. Shown in back are (l-r) the Rev. Marvin Morris, Jane Hovington and Betty Deacon. In front are Paulette Rappa, Peggy Trott, Darrell Melvin, Christy Taylor, Eunice Richardson, Carolyn Roach, Lorraine Morris, Harry Crapper and Willie Hughes, BY STEVEN BILLUPS

The marker sits at the corner of Railroad Avenue and Stevenson Lane in Georgetown. BY STEVEN BILLUPS

Rep. Ruth Briggs King, R-Georgetown, talks to the gathered crowd about the importance of establishing a cultural center. BY STEVEN BILLUPS

Jane Hovington, president of the Richard Allen Coalition, speaks during the unveiling of a historic marker placed at the school June 19. BY MELISSA STEELE

A historic marker noting the rich history of Richard Allen School in Georgetown was unveiled June 19, ensuring the school's heritage will remain for future Georgetown residents.

“This is truly a momentous occasion,” said Jane Hovington, president of the Richard Allen Coalition, during a presentation that included former students, legislators and other Sussex County dignitaries. “Now the building will be here to represent the whole community and Delaware.”

In March, members of the Richard Allen Coalition raised concerns over plans to renovate and possibly raze the historic school building by the owner of the property, the Boys and Girls Club.
Since then, the Boys and Girls Club returned the deed to the state pending a bill that would give the coalition ownership of the building after paying up to $6,000 to the Boys and Girls Club for improvements the club made to the facility. The bill unanimously passed the state Senate and awaits action in a House committee before the full House can vote on it.

Rep. Ruth Briggs King, R-Georgetown, a sponsor of the bill and marker, said she expects full support from her colleagues for the bill before the legislative session ends Tuesday, June 30. “I have spoken to many of them about the urgency of this bill, and it looks very good in the House,” she said.

Boys and Girls Club President George Krupanski said he was glad everything worked out for the Richard Allen school. “We're delighted,” he said.

Hovington said she was also pleased with the outcome and briefly added, “Everything is wonderful.”

The school holds a significant place in Georgetown history because it was one of 80 built in the 1920s by Pierre du Pont to educate African-American students. Following desegregation in the late 1960s, the school was used as an elementary for all students in the Indian River School District.

Sen. Brian Pettyjohn, R-Georgetown, went to school there for kindergarten and first grade. He sponsored the bill to turn the school over to the Richard Allen Coalition, and he also sponsored the historic marker along with Briggs King. “So many generations went to the school,” he said.

Carolyn Roach, secretary of the Richard Allen Coalition, said she is thrilled the building will remain for the community to appreciate. The coalition plans to turn the building into a museum for Sussex County African-American history.

“The school produced doctors, lawyers. Many, many came out of the school,” she said.

Sarah Denison, archivist with Delaware Public Archives, said she needed 10 markers to tell all the history of the building.
“Without you, we wouldn't be able to tell the stories that should be told,” she said, thanking the coalition members for their support.

Historic marker designates site

The historic marker at the Richard Allen School reads as follows:

In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, Delaware did not have a comprehensive state-wide education system. By 1915, Delaware schools were ranked among the poorest in the country. Worse yet, African American students often attended dilapidated schools under deplorable conditions. Seeing an opportunity to help all students in Delaware, Pierre S. du Pont used his wealth to invest in Delaware public education by breaking ground on 80 new schools throughout the state. This is the site of the Richard Allen School, an African American school that opened in the late 1920s replacing the school at nearby Prospect AME Church. The school was named after Richard Allen, a freed slave and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the late 18th Century in Philadelphia. When the Richard Allen School opened, it became the focal point of the African American community in Georgetown and many events were hosted here. The school was used until desegregation was fully implemented in Delaware.

Georgetown marks African-American legacy at historic school

Delaware Public Media

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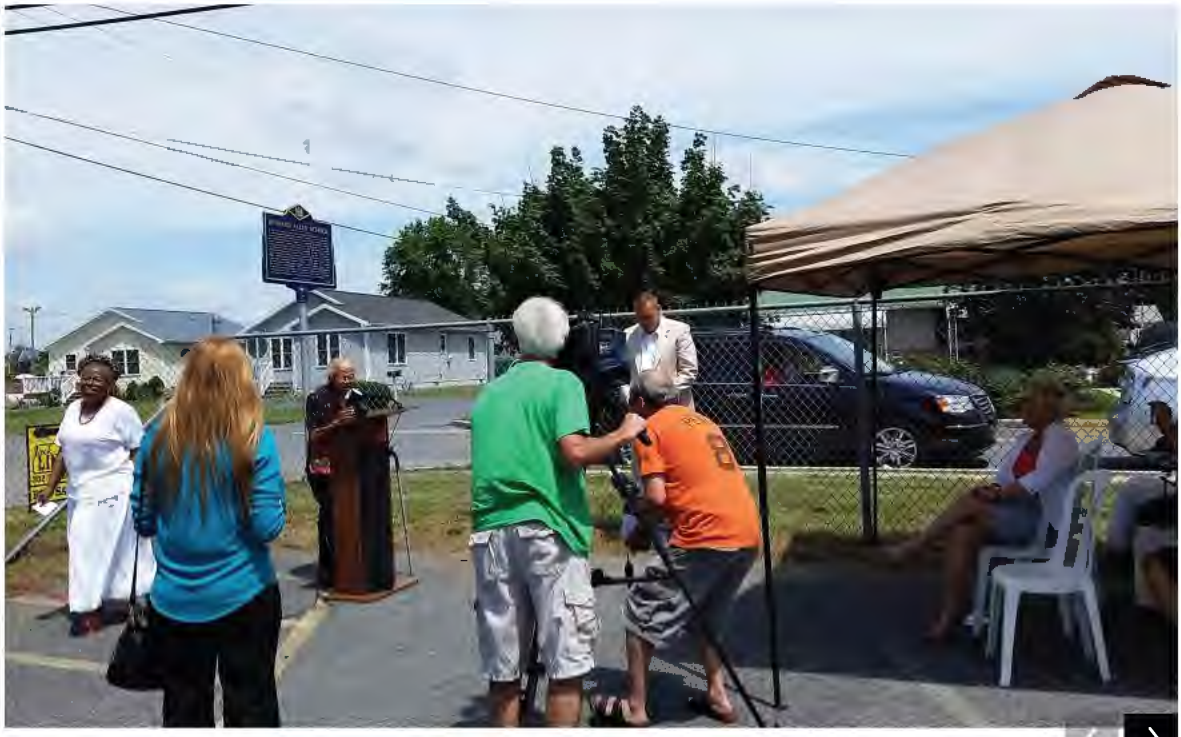

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On the heels of the mass shooting that killed nine people at a historic black church in South Carolina, a Sussex County town is taking its own steps to heal.

They're working to preserve the Richard Allen School in Georgetown. It served as a center of African-American community for nearly a century, but it hasn't been a functioning school in several years.

Now, locals are hoping to see it reopen in a new form. They celebrated a milestone recently, as an official state historic marker was unveiled outside the building.

Harry Crapper: [singing] "I don't feel no ways tired…"

Just past the railroad tracks in Georgetown, Harry Crapper is ringing in a new chapter of his old school's history.

Crapper: "Lord have mercy. [singing] Nobody told me that the road would be easy… I don't believe He brought me this far to leave me. [speaking] And I say it one more time…"

Crapper was there with other alumni and Delaware leaders to unveil an official state historic marker at Richard Allen -- and celebrate the hard work that's gone into studying and preserving this shuttered landmark.

"This school helped me to be the man that I am today," he says. "You know, you've got to have a foundation, and this school was my foundation."

Richard Allen is one of the few remaining du Pont schools, started by philanthropist Pierre Samuel du Pont in the 1920s for Delaware's African-American youth. At the time, they had few options for getting an education -- and Crapper says even the du Pont schools had their struggles.

"We used to get books and everything from the other school. And half would have the pages torn out, would have the backs torn off 'em. And we had to learn what we could from those books," he says. "But even with all of that, we had lawyers and judges leave this school. And that was because our teachers thought enough of us to make us learn."

Ninety-year-old Eunice Richardson says the same thing. She's a longtime local mentor and educator who was one of the first students in the little brick schoolhouse.

"When I went it was only two rooms here, two schoolrooms. But each room had four classes, but only one teacher in all of it," she says. "I think our restrooms were outside then, and we had wood stoves for heat."

Richard Allen was a peaceful place, she says, where every kid got a hot meal. And if you misbehaved, word traveled fast in the neighborhood.

"We learned from home that if you messed up in school, you were gonna get a spanking when you got home, so it was best to be good," Richardson says, laughing.

The school only went up to eighth grade, and for most black kids, segregation meant leaving Georgetown for high school. But former student Darrell Melvin says Richard Allen was always a focal point for African-Americans in Sussex County.

"This was like home here. The school, the area, the community -- everything was just one back then," Melvin says. "I learned to play football right on that eld right there. …We played baseball, and people came from different towns, they all came here. So this was the central location for everything. And that's what we remember -- that's why we said we wanted it so bad, because that unity needs to come back."

"Melvin is part of the Richard Allen Coalition, which spent years working with the Delaware Public Archives and state legislators to secure the historic marker for the school. Next, they want to renovate and reopen the building as a multi-cultural community center -- to carry on the school traditions that coalition historian Christy Taylor says began at neighboring Prospect AME Church.

"It really apparently was a school at the church, earlier than the school being built by du Pont," she says. "So there really was always something going on in this community relating to what we're trying to do now: education, arts, religion."

Taylor and her brothers all attended Richard Allen too. The brothers became civil rights lawyers, and Taylor is a music and dance teacher -- soon, she hopes, at the school itself.

And with racial tensions in the spotlight after a string of well-publicized police shootings of black people and a suspected hate crime in South Carolina, where a white gunman is charged with killing nine black AME churchgoers, Taylor says it'll be vital to open the Allen school's doors to everyone.

"This is a real healing, what is happening. And the more we can do, you know, religious or not, it's about love -- it's about just what we're doing now, talking about the history. We should know everyone's history," Taylor says. "I really believe strongly that… it's not just serving one community. I think that's maybe how we can really open up and get rid of the fear and the ignorance between ourselves as humans."

When the school reopens, the coalition wants to fill it with mementos from its rich history. That means books and papers kept by folks like Agnes Ingram Williams, who went to the school in the 1930s and 40s. She grew up across the street, and now lives there again.

"That was so much fun, being six or seven -- I'd stand there, hear that bell, and by the time she was ringing that second one, I'd be dipping under her and in my seat when she came in," she remembers, laughing. "So that was one of the experiences."

Williams went to high school in Wilmington after Richard Allen, onto college in Maryland, and then into the civil service at Dover Air Force Base for 32 years. She became an engine manager there before retiring -- and all thanks to humble beginnings and a close-knit community back at home.

"We were poor, and if we were poor, we didn't know it, 'cause everybody -- it was, as they say, you need a village," Williams says. "It was just great -- and I'm so thankful that I'm here at this time and I can see where we have traveled from."

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NEWS

Historic black school remains a fond memory

RAE TYSON SPECIAL TO DELMARVA MEDIA GROUP

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Without question, the quality of education for African-American children suffered mightily in Delaware in the early days of the 20th century.

That is, until philanthropist and industrialist Pierre duPont dug deep into his own pockets to build schools for black children in a state that, notoriously, had one of the worst records in the nation when it came to educating its African-American youth.

“The origins of the school rebuilding program (funded by duPont) come from a 1919 national study of education that ranked Delaware 35th in the nation,” said Robin Krawitz, director of the historic preservation program at Delaware State University. “Striving to improve education in the state, Pierre duPont funded a comprehensive school building program for African-American children.”

From the 1920s, duPont, a member of the state’s most prominent family, personally financed the construction of 80 new, predominantly black schools in Delaware, including 33 in Sussex County. Total personal investment: More than $6 million, an amount that would approach $800 million in 2015.

One such duPont project was the Richard Allen School in Georgetown. It was a new brick structure, intended to serve grades one through six. When it opened in the 1920s, it replaced a primitive all-black school in the Prospect AME Church a short distance away on Railroad Avenue.

Richard Allen, for which the school was named, was a freed slave who founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in the late 1700s in Philadelphia.

And the Georgetown school and its history will be the subject of a lunch time lecture on Friday, Feb. 13, at the Hotel Rodney in Lewes, sponsored by the Lewes Historical Society.

The guest speaker is C. Daniel Parsons, Sussex County's historic preservation planner and records manager. For information about the lecture, visit www.historiclewes.org.

Working in concert with Krawitz at Delaware State, Parsons has been assembling an oral history of the school and its students, which are an important element of black heritage in the seat of Sussex County government.

"I definitely think a big part of the history is that it meant so much to the people who attended, and they are so passionate about preserving it," Parsons said. "I feel fortunate that they allowed us to document it."

For students who attended the Richard Allen School, it remains a fond memory.

"It was one of the best schools in the county," said Harry Crapper, who attended in the 1950s and is now involved in a campaign to return the school to the black community.

Lorraine Morris, a Bridgeville resident who attended the school in the early 1950s, said, "We were a family. The teachers really cared about their students and the teachers and parents had such a great rapport."

Morris was one of eight children in her family. All of them attended Richard Allen School, which was a short distance from their Georgetown home. Five of her brothers later became ministers.

Growing up in a family that was "dirt poor, one of the poorest in Georgetown," Morris remembered "admiring the way the teachers were dressed."

She also remembered that a teacher named James Evans gave her the first introduction to black history.

"My first memories of the importance of black history came from him," she said.

"The teachers were very caring," said Patsy Young, who first attended the school in 1953.

Young also remembers that teachers at Richard Allen were not afraid to physically discipline students, if necessary.

"If you were bad, they cracked your hand with a ruler," she said, adding with a chuckle: "They sure couldn't do that today."

"It was a good experience," said Martina Williams, who attended in the 1950s.

Willams' aunt, Eunice Richardson, 93, is one of the oldest surviving students of the Richard Allen School. "She has some stories to tell," said Williams.

Indeed she does.

Richardson attended the school shortly after it opened in the early 1920s. Though the building was new, she remembered that teachers often operated at a disadvantage compared to schools for white students.

"We always got second-hand books," she recalled. "But we always had good teachers."

Richardson went on to the all-black William C. Jayson High School in Georgetown then attended college at the Princess Anne Academy, which later became the University of Maryland Eastern Shore. After college graduation, she worked briefly in the Bronx, New York, before returning to Delaware and a teaching position working with handicapped children at the Stockley Center in Georgetown.

Though retired, at the age of 93 she still teaches Sunday school at her local church. "I keep myself busy," she said.

When duPont provided the money to construct Delaware schools for black students, he hired the nationally prominent New Jersey architectural firm of Guilbert and Betelle to create a distinctive design for the schools. Rural duPont schools that still survive in Sussex County, according to Krawitz, include a one-room structure on Route 9 in the Cool Spring community and the Nassau School, a two-room structure in Belltown and another on Route 1 in an area called West Rehoboth.

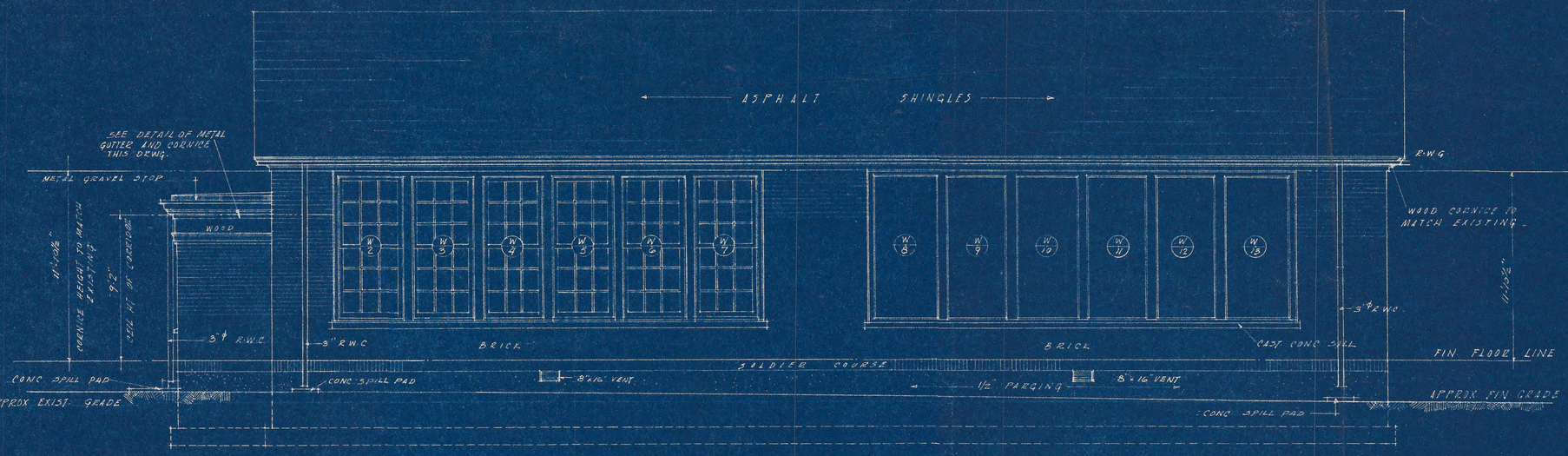
The urban schools, many of them brick and still surviving, according to Krawitz, include the Richard Allen School in Georgetown and one in Bridgeville — named for Phyllis Wheatley. Also surviving: the Frederick Douglass School in Seaford, the Paul Lawrence Dunbar School in Laurel and the Frederick D. Thomas School in Lewes, named after a prominent local black educator.

The segregated schools survived well into the 1960s when Delaware, reacting to the landmark 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision in the U.S. Supreme Court, finally started closing or integrating them.

In Sussex County, some of the schools were integrated and others were converted to other uses. In Lewes, for example, the Frederick D. Thomas building became a school for special needs students. Today, it houses Cape Henlopen School District offices and the University of

Delaware's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. In Georgetown, the William C. Jason Comprehensive High School, built in 1950, was closed in 1967 and its black students were integrated into other area facilities. The building is now part of the Delaware Technical Community College.

"This is a big part of the (black) history and it meant so much for those who attended these schools," Parsons said.



NORTH WEST ELEVATION

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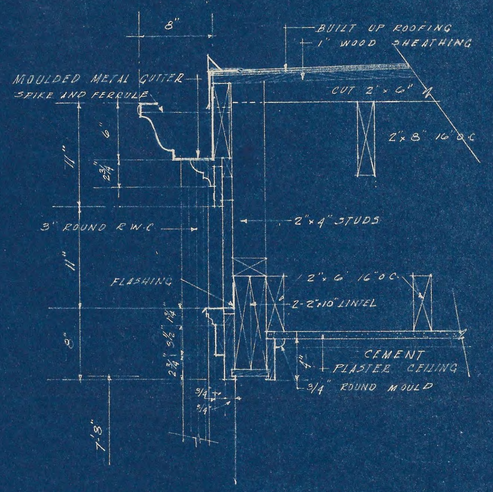
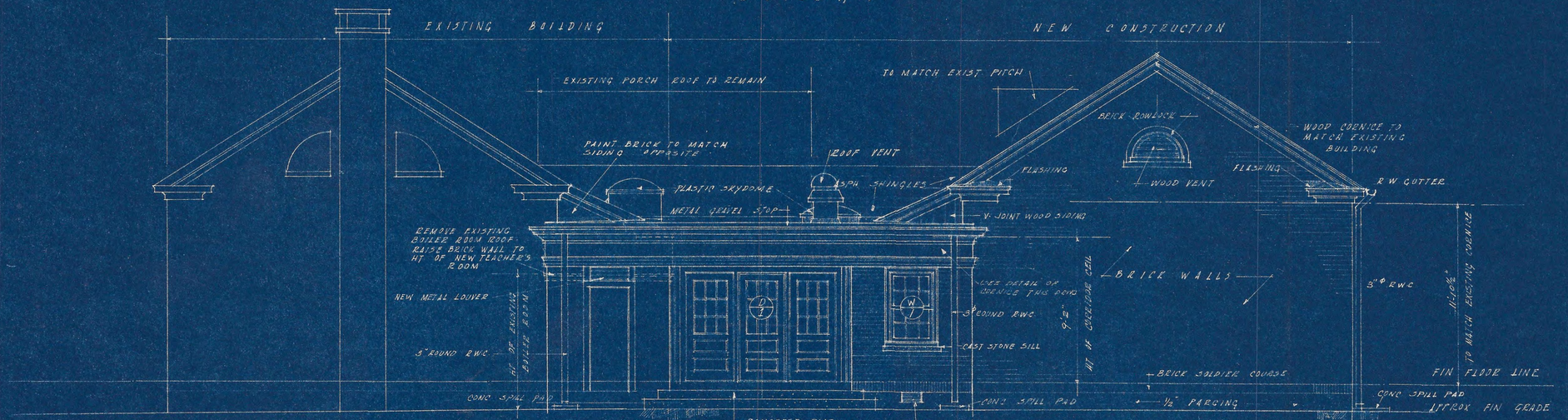


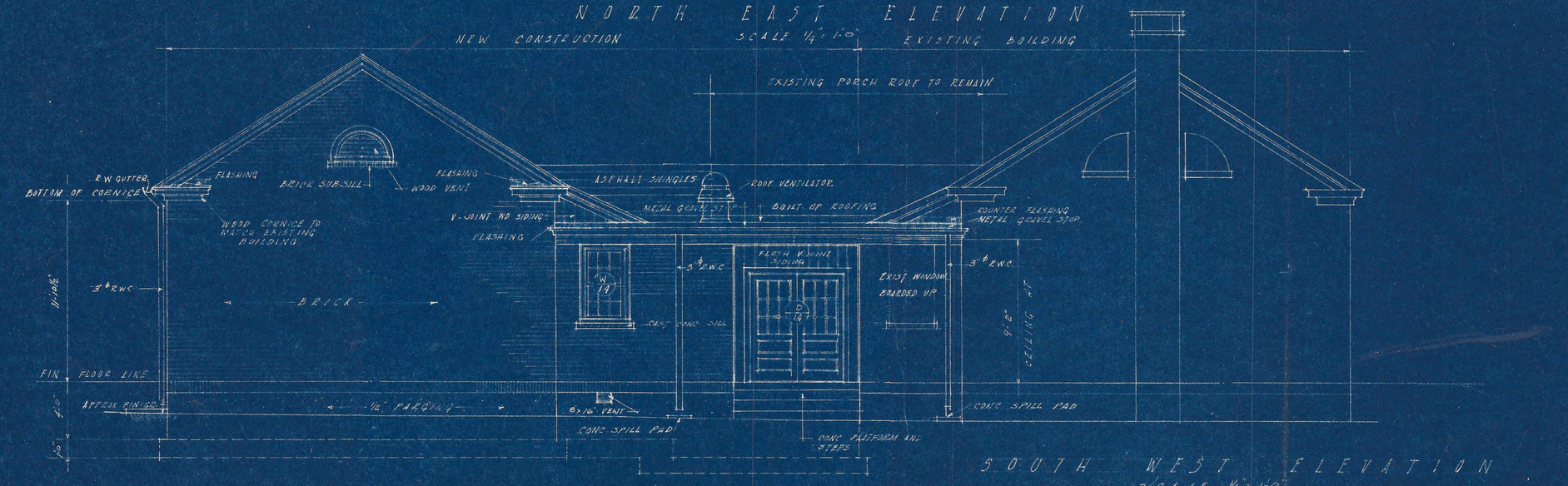
DETAIL OF METAL GUTTER AND CORNICE

SCALE 1 1/2" = 1'-0"



NORTH EAST ELEVATION

NEW CONSTRUCTION SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0" EXISTING BUILDING



SOUTH WEST ELEVATION

SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0"

CONTRACTOR TO VERIFY ALL DIMENSIONS AT SITE

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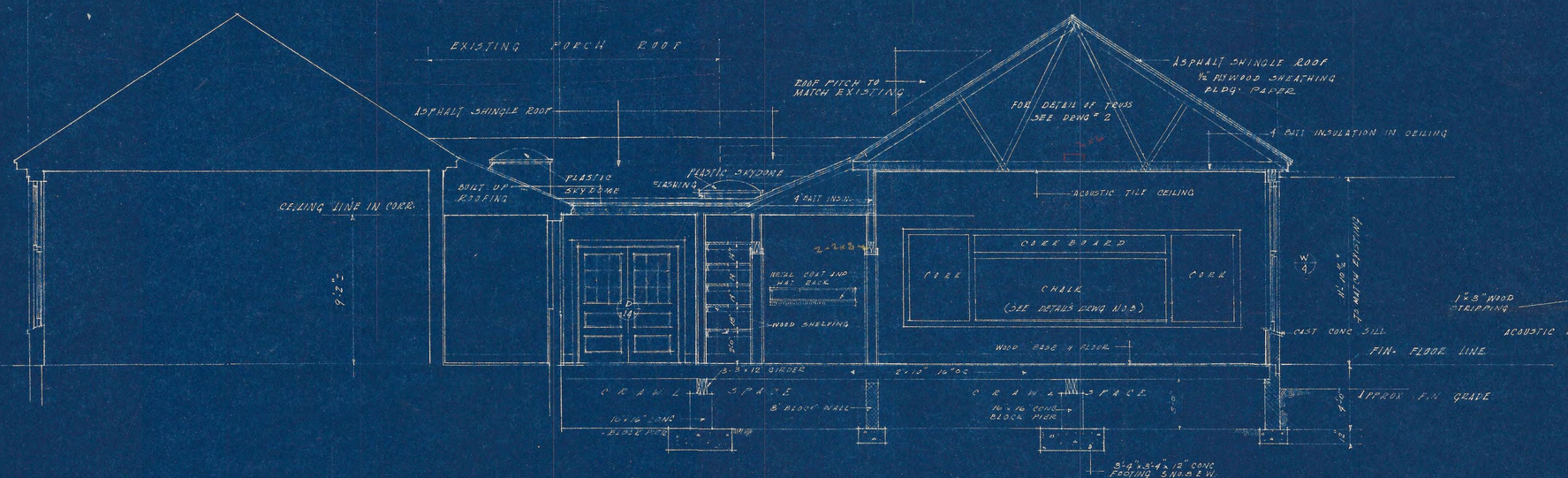

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