

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of PropertyHistoric name: Phyllis Wheatley Community Center

Other names/site number: _____

Name of related multiple property listing:

African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. LocationStreet & number: 1301 10th Avenue NorthCity or town: Minneapolis State: Minnesota County: HennepinNot For Publication: Vicinity: **3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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 at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide ___local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

Signature of certifying official/Title:**Date**_____
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:**Date**_____
Title :**State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government**

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4. National Park Service Certification

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 the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private: ☒
- Public – Local ☒
- Public – State ☐
- Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s) ☒
- District ☐
- Site ☐
- Structure ☐
- Object ☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL/civic

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL/civic

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: foundation: CONCRETE, walls: BRICK, roof: SYNTHETICS

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Phyllis Wheatley Community Center at 1301 10th Avenue North in Minneapolis, Minnesota is a single-story brick building constructed in 1970. The building is located within a civic and recreational complex that includes an adjacent school and park in a primarily residential area in the present-day Near North neighborhood of Minneapolis (also called the Northside). It features a simple Modern design with a rectangular footprint, simple punched window openings, and a flat roof. The building is locally significant under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic Heritage-Black and Social History for its association with the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center. Founded in 1924 as the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House and later known as the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center (PWCC), the organization was a prominent institution for the Black community of North Minneapolis, providing social, cultural, and recreational facilities that responded to the inequities created by racial discrimination. The building at 1301 10th Avenue North represents the organization's successful evolution and adaptation from a settlement house to a community center that continued to serve as a uniquely trusted institution in Minneapolis during the post-Civil Rights era. The period of significance is

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1970 – 1976, reflecting the date of construction and fifty years from today’s date, according to National Register program guidelines. The building continues to be used by the organization for the purpose for which it was built. The building retains sufficient integrity to communicate its historic significance.

Narrative Description

Exterior (Photos 0001 – 0004, 0009; Figures 1, 2, 4)

Setting and Site

The Phyllis Wheatley Community Center (PWCC) is located at 1301 10th Avenue North in the Near North (also referred to as the Northside) neighborhood of Minneapolis. It is part of a larger civic and recreational complex known as the Bethune Complex, which consists of Bethune Park, the Bethune Community School, and the PWCC building. The complex is bounded by 10th Avenue North on the north, Humboldt Avenue North to the west, Emerson Avenue North to the east, and a public sidewalk aligned with 8th Avenue North to the south (see Figure 1). PWCC and Bethune Community School share a party wall and are located at the northeast corner of the site. The buildings front on 10th Avenue North and are set back from the street by a parking lot which extends along the north side of the school and wraps around the west side of the PWCC building. Bethune Park occupies the remainder of the site and features athletic fields, a basketball court, playground equipment, and a small wading pool. The site is generally level, typical of the relatively flat topography of north Minneapolis.¹

The blocks surrounding the Bethune Complex are primarily residential in character, consisting largely of early- to mid-twentieth century single-family houses and apartment buildings. Interspersed within this residential fabric are several institutional and civic uses, such as Sumner Library, the Donald M. Fraser Early Childhood Center, and Community Covenant Church. One large industrial building is located at the intersection of Humboldt Avenue North and 11th Avenue North.

Within the Bethune Complex, the boundaries of the National Register property are defined by the public sidewalks that line the north, west, and south sides of the PWCC building and the party wall between PWCC and Bethune Community School to the east (see Figure 1). Between the public sidewalks and the building, there is a small strip of landscaped area with trees and shrubs. The property boundaries encompass two structures located immediately south of the PWCC building: a non-contributing playground (added circa 2019) and a free-standing, contributing outbuilding housing mechanical equipment for the main building (constructed

¹ The building at 1301 10th Avenue North is owned by the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center. PWCC leases the land on which the building is located from the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. The adjacent Bethune Park is also owned and operated by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board; the adjacent Bethune Community School is owned and operated by the Minneapolis Board of Education.

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concurrently with the main building in 1970).² The outbuilding features brick exterior walls, a flat roof, and a flat slab metal door at its east elevation.

General Exterior

The PWCC building is a single-story brick building with a rectangular footprint, a concrete foundation, and a flat roof with non-historic metal coping at the parapet. A historic courtyard with a rectangular footprint, accessed from the interior of the building, is located near the east side of the building. The primary entrance is located at the building's west façade; additional secondary entrances are located at the west façade and at the north and south elevations. All entrances are in historic locations and most have historic doors. At all elevations, fenestration consists of a mixture of historic and non-historic rectangular metal casement windows in historic window openings with historic concrete sills. Beneath each window opening, brick is laid in soldier coursing and slightly recessed from the façade. Several pieces of mechanical equipment, a cylindrical metal chimney, and a small, historic brick penthouse with a rectangular footprint are located on the roof.

Façade (West Elevation)

The building's façade faces the west parking lot and Bethune Park beyond. The primary entrance is centrally located on the façade and consists of two historic full-lite metal doors with metal-framed side lites. Two secondary entrances consisting of historic flat slab metal doors in metal frames are also located at the west façade, north and south of the primary entrance. Fenestration at the façade consists of four historic paired metal casement windows with metal security bars and hardware as well as two non-historic fixed rectangular aluminum windows with hopper-style lower sash. The façade also features metal channel letters reading "PHYLLIS WHEATLEY COMMUNITY CENTER" and "MARY T. WELLCOME CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER" near the primary entrance and the building address "1301" above the primary entrance.

North Elevation

The north elevation features a secondary entrance consisting of historic metal double doors with vision lites, a side lite, and a transom in a metal frame. This entrance is topped with a metal spandrel panel and is located at the east side of the north elevation. West of the entrance, there are ten historic windows: five paired rectangular metal casement windows and five single metal casement windows, all with metal security bars. Metal channel letters reading "1301" are also located at the west end of the elevation.

² The parking lots to the west and north of the building were respectively added or reconfigured after the end of the period of significance in 1976. See aerial photograph of 1301 North 10th Avenue, Minneapolis, 1970 and 1974, Minnesota Historical Aerial Photographs Online, John R. Borchert Map Library, University of Minnesota, <https://apps.lib.umn.edu/mhapo/>; aerial photographs of 1301 North 10th Avenue, Minneapolis, 1988 – 2020, Hennepin County Aerial Imagery Viewer, <https://hennepin.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=af6985232e094f95a5aa4075254b6cad>.

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South Elevation

The south elevation features two secondary entrances and additional fenestration. The entrances are positioned at the east and west sides of the elevation. The west entrance consists of a non-historic full lite metal door with a side lite accessed from the south playground area. The east entrance consists of historic flat slab metal double doors with vision lites, side lites, and a transom window. The east entrance is also topped with a metal spandrel panel. Fenestration consists of three non-historic rectangular windows with operable hopper-style lower sash, and two metal louvers in thin rectangular openings are located near the east entrance.

East Elevation

The building shares a party wall with neighboring Bethune Community School at its east elevation.

Interior (Photos 0005 – 0008, 0010 – 0015; Figures 3, 5-7)

At the interior, a historic entrance lobby is located inside the primary west entrance to the building (Photo 0014); from this lobby, one enters a corridor (Photos 0008, 0010, and 0014) that provides access to all areas of the main level. The corridor runs in a loop around the main level, surrounding a cluster of partitioned programmatic and support spaces at the center of the building's footprint – a kitchen, janitor's closet, two offices, a multi-purpose room (Photo 0011), classroom, and community room (Photo 0007) as well as the courtyard – and providing access to partitioned spaces along the north, south, and west sides of the building. At the east side of the building, the corridor (Photo 0010) runs north-south along the full length of the building, providing access to secondary entrances at the north and south elevations.

The south portion of the building contains a child development center with several larger partitioned spaces (Photo 0012). In this area, the central corridor is segmented with double doors that separate the development center from the rest of the building. The north side of the building is used as dedicated office space. A secondary corridor running east-west (Photo 0006) provides access to a row of partitioned offices along the north perimeter wall (Photos 0005) and to a row of office support spaces (restrooms, storage rooms, a conference room (Photo 0015), and a staff kitchen) facing them. Partitioned multipurpose programmatic spaces are located along the west wall of the building; these include a restroom, break room, youth room, and a room for school age children or the childcare center. At the east perimeter wall of the building, there is a set of double doors which access the Bethune Community School gymnasium; these generally remain locked.

Near the southeast corner of the building, a utility room holds a set of historic metal stairs with metal handrails. These stairs provide access to a basement boiler room with historic concrete floors and walls and exposed structure at the ceiling.

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The building is generally finished with historic vinyl tile or carpeted flooring, historic gypsum board or painted concrete walls, and two types of acoustical panels at ceilings, most of which appear to be historic. Doors are typically historic metal or wood in metal frames throughout; most feature single lites, and some feature large side lites. Exceptions to these typical finishes include the historic entrance lobby, which features concrete floors and a metal-framed glass wall with two full lite metal doors providing access to the corridor beyond; the restrooms in the north section of the building, which feature historic ceramic tile flooring; two offices near the center of the floorplate, which feature historic sliding glass doors in metal frames that provide access to the enclosed courtyard; one room at the west side of the building, which features non-historic resilient wood-look flooring and murals painted on wood over the historic concrete walls; and the east side of the central corridor, where historic brick is exposed at corridor walls.

The courtyard is enclosed by historic brick walls with metal fascia. The east wall features a large grouping of four historic fixed aluminum windows, and the south wall features two pairs of fixed aluminum windows with lower hopper-style sash. Historic metal-framed glass doors with side lites are located at the west wall and flanked by large metal picture windows, while the north wall features historic metal-framed sliding glass doors. The courtyard features exposed aggregate block walkways, wood benches, raised wood planters, trees, and metal light posts.

The most significant documented renovation to the building was the renovation of the child development center in 2013. At the exterior, this involved replacing windows at the south elevation of the building and the south side of the courtyard. At the interior, the project included installing resilient flooring in some rooms, painted gypsum board or plywood panels over original concrete walls, and new acoustical panels at ceilings.³ Apart from this renovation, permit records indicate few changes to the property over time.

Integrity

The Phyllis Wheatley Community Center retains all seven aspects of integrity. The building has never been moved and retains integrity of location. While there are numerous buildings in the vicinity constructed after the end of the period of significance in 1976 (for example, 700, 701, and 1000 Humboldt Avenue North, 740 Emerson Avenue North, 1200-1214 10th Avenue North, and 800-916 Emerson Avenue North), some pre-1977 properties remain in the vicinity (901 Humboldt Avenue North, 701 Fremont Avenue North, and 917 Emerson Avenue North). Additionally, the adjacent Bethune Park and Bethune Community School are extant and allow the property to retain integrity of setting. Integrity of design is communicated at the exterior in the retention of the building's original rectangular footprint with interior courtyard, flat roof, primary and secondary entrance locations, and historic fenestration patterns at all elevations (see Figure 4). At the interior, integrity of design is communicated through the

³ Amondo Dickerson, conversation with the author, December 15, 2025.

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retention of much of the building's historic layout and vertical and horizontal circulation patterns (see Figures 3 and 5). While some minor alterations have been made to the layout, the building retains many of its historic primary circulation and programming spaces. These include the entrance lobby and corridors, the historic activities room (now room #100), the historic recreation room (now room #104), the historic game room (now room #101), and the office area with the historic director's office at the north side of the building. Integrity of materials is communicated at the exterior through the retention of historic brick walls, historic windows at the north and west elevations and interior courtyard elevations, and some historic entrance doors. While some non-historic finishes have been installed at the interior, integrity of materials is communicated through the retention of historic exposed concrete at the lower-level boiler room, historic vinyl tile flooring, historic exposed concrete block at walls, and some historic acoustical ceiling panels. Integrity of workmanship is communicated through the retention of historic masonry and in the simple interior finishes. The building's continuous association with the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center through the present day allows the building to communicate integrity of feeling and association.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ 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 grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE – BLACK

SOCIAL HISTORY

Period of Significance

1970-1976

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Griswold & Rauma (architect)

Magney Construction (builder)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Phyllis Wheatley Community Center building at 1301 10th Avenue North is locally significant under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic Heritage-Black and Social History for its association with the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center. Founded in 1924 as the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House and later known as the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center (PWCC), the organization was a prominent institution for the Black community of North Minneapolis, providing social, cultural, and recreational facilities that responded to the inequities created by racial discrimination. The building at 1301 10th Avenue North was constructed in 1970 and represents the organization's successful evolution and adaptation from a settlement house to a community center that continued to serve as a uniquely trusted institution in Minneapolis during the post-Civil Rights era. The PWCC continues to operate from this location today. The proposed period of significance is 1970 - 1976, corresponding to the building's date of construction and extending to fifty years from today's date in accordance with National Register program guidelines. The building continues to be used by the organization for the purpose for which it was built. This nomination is informed by the "Community, Social Organizations, Recreation, and Education" historic context contained in the Multiple Property Documentation (MPD) Form, *African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota*.⁴

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Settlement Houses in the United States

In the United States, the settlement house movement was one of several that arose during the nineteenth-century Progressive Era in response to social conditions caused by such factors as an unprecedented influx of immigrants, rapid urbanization, and industrialization.⁵ Inspired in part by the settlement house movement occurring in England, the intention was to create friendly

⁴ Much of the historic context for this nomination is provided in the "Community, Social Organizations, Recreation, and Education" historic context located in Section E, pages 54 – 68 of the *African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota* Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPD). To prepare this nomination, the authors consulted the archival collections of the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, and the Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center and conducted oral history interviews with individuals historically or currently connected to the PWCC. One of the interviewees was also engaged as a peer reviewer. Throughout the nomination, the terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably, for consistency with the MPD. When racialized and period-specific terminologies are referenced in the narrative, these are enclosed in quotation marks to indicate period-specific language that does not represent the views of the authors. See MPD, Section E, page 2.

⁵ Catherine A. Paul, "The Progressive Era," Virginia Commonwealth University Social Welfare History Project, Hasan Family Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2017, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/progressive-era/>; John E. Hasan, "The Settlement House Movement," Virginia Commonwealth University Social Welfare History Project, Hasan Family Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2011, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/settlement-houses/settlement-houses/>.

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spaces for voluntary members of the privileged classes (“settlers”) to live and work alongside their poorer counterparts so that they could both experience and learn about conditions faced by the poor and simultaneously assist in relieving poverty. This provided settlers with sociological research and observation opportunities as well as the opportunity to share educational and religious (primarily Christian) values to assist others in overcoming perceived personal and/or structural obstacles to success.⁶ Initially, settlement houses were established in overcrowded “slum” neighborhoods primarily (though not exclusively) inhabited by recent immigrants. Settlers designed and organized social and educational activities, such as English classes, and engaged in wider advocacy around specific issues of concern, such as abuse of immigrants, working conditions in factories, unsanitary living conditions, and the effects of disease. Settlers were action-oriented, and many assisted in the establishment of neighborhood infrastructure (such as parks and playgrounds), organizations (some for personal enrichment through cultural or fine arts areas), and social welfare programs to combat deficits in housing, workplace safety, labor organization, protection of children, public health, early child development, legal aid, and consumer protection. Many organizations and programs representing the fruits of the settlers’ labor survive today. As new needs arose, settlers responded in kind; many opened health clinics, conducted studies and research, wrote reports, or described their experiences in memoirs that could be more widely distributed. The number of settlement houses expanded rapidly in the late 1800s: in 1897, seventy-four settlement houses existed, and by 1910, they numbered over 400. The number of American settlement houses peaked in the 1920s with roughly forty percent located in large cities.⁷

Though settlers may have been well-intentioned, their paradigms still often reflected prejudices and ethnic stereotypes that were common during the late nineteenth century.⁸ Contemporary society often views their efforts to teach and instill middle-class Christian values as a means of facilitating social advancement and cultural assimilation as paternalistic. In addition, settlement houses predominately served European immigrants and impoverished communities. Some settlement houses tried to help establish similar enterprises that aimed to serve their non-white counterparts. For example, settlement house reformers assisted in organizing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, members of urban Black communities needed or desired many of the same services and did not find themselves well-served at most settlement houses near them.⁹

Settlement Houses of Minneapolis

In line with the national trend of establishing settlement houses to combat social ills and poverty, several settlement houses emerged in Minneapolis between 1879 and 1924 with the aim

⁶ Hasan, “The Settlement House Movement.”

⁷ Hasan, “The Settlement House Movement.”

⁸ Hasan, “The Settlement House Movement.”

⁹ Jade Ryerson, “Settlement Houses in Chicago,” National Park Service, last updated December 12, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/settlement-houses-in-chicago.htm>.

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of improving living conditions, strengthening family life, building community, integrating ethnic communities, and developing indigenous leadership.¹⁰ Plymouth Congregational Church established the first of these, Plymouth Mission, in 1879 and reorganized it into Bethel Settlement in 1897; this settlement provided child care for working mothers, a home economics department, a kindergarten, and an employment bureau.¹¹ This evolved into the Pillsbury Settlement House when local flour magnates John and Charles Pillsbury donated the funds to construct a new building at 320 16th Avenue South in 1905. At this point, services expanded to include adult and youth social clubs and music events in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of South Minneapolis. In 1897, the minister of Church of the Redeemer and his wife established Unity House at 250 17th Avenue North; this offered child care, English language classes, and United States citizenship classes primarily to immigrant women and children.¹² In 1908, St. Mark's Episcopal Church established Wells Memorial House on 6th Street between Hennepin and Nicollet Avenues in downtown Minneapolis; this provided medical, social, and educational services to nearby residents of any religious affiliation.¹³ In 1912, the League of Catholic Women founded the Margaret Barry House to serve Italian and Syrian immigrants in Northeast Minneapolis by offering classes, activities, and services.¹⁴ In 1915, Northeast Neighborhood House followed, offering sewing, cooking, dancing, and carpentry classes, assistance to women seeking employment, a day nursery, supervision of children, and a dental clinic to the immigrant community, which was heavily divided by religion and nationality.¹⁵ In 1917, the North Minneapolis Talmud Torah (Jewish Sunday school) established a Social Services Department to combat juvenile delinquency and create a community center for the Jewish community; this evolved into the Emanuel Cohen Center, which housed a pool and gymnasium, sponsored sports teams, and offered a dental, infant, and children's clinic (extant).¹⁶ The National Council of Jewish Women opened the Southside Neighborhood House in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of South Minneapolis in 1923, which presumably served the neighborhood's

¹⁰ Christine Jacox, "Minneapolis Federation of Settlements records," November 2007, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, <https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/11/resources/2422>.

¹¹ "Pillsbury Settlement House, Minneapolis," Houses of Worship, University of Minnesota, accessed on March 18, 2026, <https://housesofworship.umn.edu/research-items/pillsbury-settlement-house-minneapolis>.

¹² Jacox, "Minneapolis Federation;" "Shutter & Unity House," Religions in Minnesota, Carlton College, accessed on March 18, 2026, <https://religionsmn.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/firstuniversalistminneapolis/historyfirstuniversalist/sitehistory/shutterandunityhouse>.

¹³ "Wells Memorial Settlement House, Minneapolis," Houses of Worship, University of Minnesota, accessed on March 18, 2026, <https://housesofworship.umn.edu/research-items/wells-memorial-settlement-house-minneapolis>.

¹⁴ "Margaret Barry House records, 1939-1961," June 2004, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, <https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/11/resources/653>.

¹⁵ Peter J. DeCarlo, "Northeast Neighborhood House, Minneapolis," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified April 10, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/structure/northeast-neighborhood-house-minneapolis>.

¹⁶ Laura Weber, "Sabes Jewish Community Center," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified April 11, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/group/sabes-jewish-community-center-minneapolis>.

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Jewish population.¹⁷ Notably, these settlement houses primarily targeted European immigrant communities, while few comparable social service resources were available to Minneapolis' Black population.¹⁸

Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House: The First Twenty Years

As the settlement house movement took hold in Minneapolis, the First Great Migration (1910 – 1940) was underway, with more than one million Black southerners moving north and west in search of the same opportunities pursued by immigrant communities. Although Minneapolis' Black population remained small relative to those of other northern cities during this time, distinct African American community hubs developed in three areas of the city:

1. North Minneapolis, particularly in the vicinity of 6th Avenue North (now Olson Memorial Highway) and Lyndale Avenue North and in the Shingle Creek neighborhood;
2. South Minneapolis, including the area known as Old Southside (located between 34th and 46th Streets East and Nicollet and Chicago Avenues) and the area along Snelling Avenue between Lake Street East and 32nd Street and Minnehaha and Hiawatha Avenues;
3. the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood.

The growth of Black neighborhoods was confined by racially restrictive real estate covenants (which prevented non-white individuals from purchasing homes), racial violence, and other forms of socially enforced segregation.¹⁹ As discriminatory covenants became more pervasive in Minneapolis real estate in response to the diversifying population, North Minneapolis remained one location where minority groups could find a place to live.²⁰ In the late 1800s, the area had attracted new Jewish immigrants and refugees, followed by members of the Black community after the turn of the century.²¹ In 1919, Minnesota law banned religious discrimination in real estate, but racial covenants remained legal; these prevented the growing Black population of the Northside from achieving prosperity through homeownership and ensured this community remained concentrated in North Minneapolis.²²

¹⁷ Laura Weber, "Jewish Roots of Neighborhood House, St. Paul," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified April 10, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/group/jewish-roots-neighborhood-house-st-paul>; <https://www.adathjeshurun.org/history.html>.

¹⁸ Sherick Francois, "Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified on April 10, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/structure/hallie-q-brown-community-center>.

¹⁹ Steve Gallo, Treasure Tinsley, Max Chavez, Lindsay Wallace, Laura Sadowsky, and Erin Que, "African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota," (National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2026), E-10, E-15 – E-20.

²⁰ Lev Gringauz, "Shared Experiences. And Then A Split," *TC Jewfolk*, September 4, 2020, <https://tcjewfolk.com/2020/09/24/shared-experiences-and-then-a-split/>.

²¹ Gallo et al., "African American," E-15.

²² Gringauz, "Shared Experiences."

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Racial covenants were just one form of discrimination Black residents faced when arriving in Minneapolis in the early twentieth century. Hotels generally did not accept reservations by or for Black individuals, the University of Minnesota forbade Black students from living in its dormitories, and some historians estimate there were over ten chapters of the Ku Klux Klan in Minneapolis.²³ Furthermore, unlike the growing European immigrant populations, Black individuals arriving in Minneapolis before 1924 were unlikely to find adequate support or services at existing settlement houses. The framework of the "separate but equal" racial doctrine of the era defined efforts to address the social service needs of Minneapolis' underserved Black residents. White settlement house leaders believed Black individuals "could better progress on their own, through separate self-help or racially oriented organizations," yet a dearth of social service organizations geared towards the needs of African Americans persisted into the 1920s.²⁴

This need was the impetus for the creation of the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House. The initial push for the organization arose out of a lack of housing for Black female students at the University of Minneapolis. In 1924, the Council on Social Agencies and the Women's Cooperative Alliance (WCA; also listed in some sources as the Women's Christian Association) – a group of women's organizations originally formed in 1917 to combat juvenile delinquency – initiated the establishment of a boarding house for Black women. This idea quickly evolved into a settlement house that would serve the entire Black community.²⁵ Although there were already three existing settlement houses (Wells Memorial, Unity Settlement House, and the Emanuel Cohen Center) in the neighborhood, North Minneapolis was selected as the location for the new facility – evidence that neighborhood settlement houses were not adequately serving the area's growing Black population. The Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House formally opened in 1924 and was the first such institution in the Twin Cities to specifically support Black individuals.²⁶ The organization was located in North Minneapolis, but as the only Black settlement house in Minneapolis, it served Black individuals in other areas of the city beyond the Northside.²⁷

²³ Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 79-80.

²⁴ Sherick Francois, "Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, St. Paul," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified on April 10, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/structure/hallie-q-brown-community-center>.

²⁵ Kirsten Delegard, "'The mixture of races in this district is detrimental': North Minneapolis in the 1920s," Streets.mn, March 16, 2014, <https://streets.mn/2014/03/26/11512/>; "About Us: Our History," Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, accessed on April 13, 2026, <https://www.phylliswheatley.org/about-us>; Howard Jacob Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley House: A History of the Minneapolis Black Settlement House, 1924 to 1940," *Phylon* (1960-) 47.1 (1986), 81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/274697?read-now=1&seq=3>; <https://www.minnpost.com/mnopedia/2016/12/minneapolis-phyllis-wheatley-house-served-community-center-city-s-african-american/>.

²⁶ Five years later, a similar organization was founded in St. Paul to "complement" the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House, the Hallie Q. Brown Settlement House. Heidi Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley House, Minneapolis," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified January 7, 2026, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/place/phyllis-wheatley-house-minneapolis>; Francois, "Hallie Q. Brown;" Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 80-82.

²⁷ Judith Ann Trolander, *Settlement Houses and the Great Depression* (Wayne State University Press, 1975), 103, <https://archive.org/details/settlementhouses0000trol/page/102/mode/2up?q=%22workers+alliance%22>.

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The Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House (colloquially referred to as “the Wheatley”) was uniquely focused on the problems faced by Black individuals and families, but white women (primarily aligned with the WCA) initially comprised its board. As originally conceived by the WCA, the organization was intended to provide a social and recreational place for African American girls. However, as Theartrice “T.” Williams, who served as executive director of the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center from 1965 – 1972, explains,

The African American community leadership of the time saw the proposed focus on “Negro girls” as much too narrow, because cultural, social, or recreational spaces were not available to any of the approximately four thousand Black people living in Minneapolis in 1924. But the Black community had an even deeper, more fundamental need: an institution that could position itself to fight for social justice – to oppose all the ways that anti-Black discrimination showed its ugly face – for the long haul.²⁸

In response to the community’s desire for such an institution, the WCA hired W. Gertrude Brown, a seasoned settlement house worker originally from Ohio, as its first Head Resident. Duluth-born writer and activist Ethel Ray Nance was Assistant Head Resident starting in 1926. Brown and Nance were among the first Black individuals to assume a leadership role in the organization.²⁹ In the words of T. Williams, Gertrude Brown “resolved to make Phyllis Wheatley House a model for demonstrating what a community-based, nonprofit institution could accomplish in terms of providing a safe, nurturing space for Black people while also championing civil rights, educational and economic progress, and dignity.”³⁰

The house was immediately popular with the surrounding community; within two years, it was abundantly clear that a larger building was necessary. In October of 1929, a new building funded through donations was completed at 809 Aldrich Avenue North (no longer extant).³¹ As social historian Howard Karger explains, the new building offered “a main office, head resident’s office, library, nursery, kindergarten, kitchen, playrooms, club rooms, laundry and showers, space for dental and baby clinics, and eighteen bedrooms. The transient bedrooms were an important part of the Wheatley’s services in that they provided space for [B]lack visitors and university students” who remained barred from hotels and university residences.³² The following

²⁸ Theartrice Williams, *Rewind: Lessons from Fifty Years of Activism* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2025), 102.

²⁹ Karger, “Phyllis Wheatley,” 81-82; Heller, “Phyllis Wheatley;” Heidi Heller, “Nance, Ethel Ray (1899-1992),” MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified November 3, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/person/nance-ethel-ray-1899-1992>.

³⁰ Williams, *Rewind*, 80.

³¹ Karger, “Phyllis Wheatley,” 81; Heller, “Phyllis Wheatley.”

³² Karger, “Phyllis Wheatley,” 82.

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year, voters elected the first Black women to the board, which marked the beginning of a slow and steady increase in and eventual conversion to a board with all Black members.³³

Initially, the Wheatley's stated purpose was "to foster a wholesome leisure-time program for men, women, and children" through programming it provided in its four departments of Recreation, Education, Music and Dramatics.³⁴ In the 1930s, the Wheatley evolved beyond providing typical settlement house support services to also become what archivist Heidi Heller labels "a center of African American life in Minneapolis," hosting early meetings for the local chapter of the NAACP and acting as a proponent of Black needs and culture.³⁵ By 1934, the Wheatley added courses in sewing and textiles, public speaking, Black literature, and food.³⁶ During the Great Depression, the Wheatley collaborated with the Urban League to create and administer a Black Worker's Alliance³⁷ and Worker's Education programs. Furthermore, the Wheatley went above and beyond the activities normally undertaken by settlement houses by locating lost relatives, caring for delinquent youth, identifying foster care options, providing family counseling, securing hospital care and treatment, and becoming involved in discrimination cases.³⁸

According to Heller's article on the history of the Wheatley, during this decade, it functioned as:

a boarding house for Black college students blocked by segregation from living in the University of Minnesota dorms. It housed visiting Black luminaries, including Marian Anderson, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson, who could not stay in Minneapolis hotels. It was a meeting space for Black groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Brotherhood of Pullman Porters, who were not welcome at other places in the city. The Wheatley House also fought for social reform. It provided many Black children with amenities they might not have otherwise received, such as summer camp, nursery school, and organized sports. Many of these children later described the Wheatley House as a home away from home—a place where they could build self-confidence.³⁹

³³ Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley."

³⁴ Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 81.

³⁵ Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley;" Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 83.

³⁶ Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 82.

³⁷ This appears to have been a counterpart to or chapter of the national Worker's Alliance of America, an organization of unemployed workers formed during the Great Depression. See Judith Ann Trolander, *Settlement Houses and the Great Depression* (Wayne State University Press, 1975), 103, <https://archive.org/details/settlementhouses0000trol/page/102/mode/2up?q=%22workers+alliance%22>.

³⁸ Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 82-83.

³⁹ Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley."

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The Wheatley not only supported the survival of Black people in North Minneapolis in the face of several unique obstacles, but it also fostered a shared cultural identity and encouraged individual growth and potential. T. Williams provides the following perspective of the Wheatley's early days:

Throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties, Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House was the most viable and essential institution in the city's Black community, engaging entire families with its cultural, athletic, and recreational enrichment; early childhood education; and other program activities. It was the Black community's premier venue for large gatherings and special events. The historical significance of Phyllis Wheatley to the Black community of the Twin Cities is unparalleled.⁴⁰

This description demonstrates the great impact the Wheatley had on the collective quality of life for Black residents of Minneapolis.

As the Wheatley brought opportunities and positive impact to its service community, it (and the larger North Minneapolis community) also faced a growing challenge: city-led neighborhood "renewal" efforts that began in the 1930s. Due to the lack of economic opportunity available to its residents, housing conditions in North Minneapolis were substandard compared to other areas of the city.⁴¹ These areas were often deemed "slums" by city leaders and targeted for redevelopment.⁴² In 1936, the city demolished half of the Oak Park neighborhood (located in the current day Near North and North Loop neighborhoods), which at that time was predominately occupied by Black and Jewish residents, in order to construct a new permanent location for its municipal farmers' market. In 1938, the construction of the Sumner Field and Olson public housing projects replaced thirty acres of existing housing in the Sumner Glenwood neighborhood (located east and adjacent to the Near North neighborhood).⁴³ These changes were only the beginning of redevelopment efforts to come, which would create new challenges for the Wheatley and its North Minneapolis community.

The Wheatley in the Postwar Era: 1945 - 1960

By the mid-1950s, nationwide tensions over continuing racial discrimination bubbled over into the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁴ Even as participants in the movement advocated for change, persistently unequal opportunities in housing and employment continued to impede

⁴⁰ Williams, *Rewind*, 82.

⁴¹ Judith A. Martin and Antony Goddard, "Past Choices/Present Landscapes: The Impact of Urban Renewal on the Twin Cities" (report, 1989), page 33, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/items/c45abc6d-4c2c-456e-ac96-0f4deeb058ae>.

⁴² New History, "Minneapolis in the Modern Era: 1930-1975" (historic context study, 2020), 4.2; Gallo et al., "African American," E-16.

⁴³ Martin and Goddard, "Past Choices/Present Landscapes," 33; Larry Millett, "Near North neighborhood in Minneapolis was once a showcase of Victorian homes," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, April 16, 2021.

⁴⁴ "The Civil Rights Movement," Library of Congress, accessed March 26, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/post-war-united-states-1945-1968/civil-rights-movement/>

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upward mobility for the North Minneapolis Black community. Furthermore, the additional clearance of homes and neighborhoods as part of the mid-twentieth century planning practice of “urban renewal” would soon compound existing inequalities and disrupt existing success stories. According to history professor and author Brent Cebul,

at the very moment when the civil rights movement [sic] secured voting rights and the desegregation of public and private spaces, the federal government unleashed a program that enabled local officials to simply clear out entire Black neighborhoods...that program, in operation between 1949 and 1974, constituted one of the most sweeping and systematic instances of the modern destruction of Black property, neighborhoods, culture, community, businesses, and homes.⁴⁵

Even as many Black institutions and neighborhoods were destabilized by these forces, the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House demonstrated remarkable resilience and continued to serve as a center of community life and support for Black residents.

Following the close of World War II in 1945, Minneapolis officials embarked on project to clear the Grant and Glenwood neighborhoods (an area encompassing a portion of the current day Near North neighborhood and roughly bounded by Plymouth Avenue at the north, Humboldt Avenue at the west, Lyndale Avenue at the east, and Glenwood Avenue at the south).⁴⁶ The Glenwood project demolished over 700 homes deemed “substandard” and replaced them with 831 standard housing units, displacing 1,000 families and 200 individuals, 269 of which were minority households.⁴⁷

The Wheatley stood ready to help displaced members of its service community navigate the process of relocation while continuing to offer its typical support services, such as its nursery school, youth sports and enrichment opportunities, and recreational opportunities for senior citizens, throughout the 1950s.⁴⁸ Furthermore, as summer camps rose to peak popularity in the 1950s, the Wheatley secured property to construct the first Black-owned summer camp in Minnesota, Camp Parsons in Watertown (extant), in 1956.⁴⁹ This resource remained a popular offering until 2001.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Brent Cebul, “Tearing Down Black America,” *Boston Review*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/brent-cebul-tearing-down-black-america/>.

⁴⁶ Martin and Goddard, “Past Choices/Present Landscapes,” 35-36.

⁴⁷ Martin and Goddard, “Past Choices/Present Landscapes,” 37-38.

⁴⁸ “Wheatley Community Make-Up Purely Democratic,” Director Says,” *North Minneapolis Post*, March 24, 1960, Social Agencies: Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House Env. (Times Clips Enclosed) Clippings & Brochures + Writings for the Years (1950s & 1960s) folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁴⁹ Social Agencies: Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House Env. (Times Clips Enclosed) Clippings & Brochures + Writings for the Years (1950s & 1960s) folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁵⁰ Planning is currently underway to rehabilitate the property.

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Meanwhile, the demographics of North Minneapolis continued to evolve. Drawn by the promise of new housing and better schools located outside the city limits, the North Minneapolis Jewish community began migrating to the suburbs in increasingly large numbers. Black residents, however, found themselves still geographically limited by the legacy of racial covenants, even as the courts were ruling such covenants unenforceable and ultimately illegal.⁵¹ By 1960, the Near North neighborhood was home to one of the largest Black communities in the city.⁵²

From Settlement House to Community Center: The 1960s

During the 1960s, the Wheatley faced a series of challenges to its identity and existence, which ultimately led to a shift in the organization's model of providing services and the construction of a new building. By 1960, the United States Supreme Court had declared segregation in educational facilities unconstitutional, and in 1964, the Civil Rights Act formally ended segregation in public places and businesses.⁵³ These advances gave many white Americans the overarching assumption that institutions supporting the Black community were no longer necessary – or soon would not be.⁵⁴ The dismantling of legal segregation, though important, did not erase the racial attitudes and inequities that decades of segregation had fostered. As T. Williams explains, “Black travelers could now book hotel rooms at hotels that had previously turned them away. Black residents could attend cultural events and use recreational facilities that had previously been off-limits to them. But this new reality didn’t diminish the important roles Phyllis Wheatley had historically filled as a beloved and trusted linchpin of community life.”⁵⁵ Despite questions of its continued relevance, the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House retained its reputation as an essential community institution that continued to provide social support, while embracing an evolution of its mission to provide a sense of belonging and empowerment that legal rights alone could not guarantee.

Despite the progress of the Civil Rights Movement, T. Williams notes that “specific, persistent problems still presented major barriers to something resembling a reasonably high quality of life for Black Minnesotans.”⁵⁶ Many experienced widespread “undisguised housing discrimination and police misconduct in the treatment of Black citizens,” such as white landlords

⁵¹ Susan Marks, “Civil Unrest on Plymouth Avenue, Minneapolis, 1967,” MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified September 30, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/event/civil-unrest-plymouth-avenue-minneapolis-1967>.

⁵² Eric Hankin-Redmon, “Near North African American Community, Minneapolis,” MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified October 23, 2025, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/place/near-north-african-american-community-minneapolis>.

⁵³ Williams, *Rewind*, 83; “The Civil Rights Movement.”

⁵⁴ Williams, *Rewind*, 83.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Rewind*, 83.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Rewind*, 83.

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refusing to rent living quarters to Black individuals.⁵⁷ Furthermore, members of the Black community deeply distrusted the official channels of government support that were now technically open to them. Therefore, during this era, the Wheatley's role as a trusted figure for the community was rapidly rising to the surface as the organization's most important and unique feature. Recognizing that the turn of the twentieth century settlement house model was outdated, the Wheatley pivoted to a community center model and changed its name to the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center in 1962.⁵⁸ This shift allowed the organization to focus on social supports rather than on boarding assistance, a service that had phased out by 1950.⁵⁹ This switch to the community center model was in alignment with national trends in the mid twentieth century as increased federal funding for programs to fight poverty (such as the 1964 Community Action Program) resulted in an increasing number of community centers appearing across the country.⁶⁰

Official urban renewal initiatives continued throughout this decade, further impacting North Minneapolis inhabitants and creating an existential crisis for the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center itself. In 1960, the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority's Grant Urban Renewal Plan laid out a program "to prevent the further spread of blight" in the Glenwood, Harrison, Grant, and Near North neighborhoods.⁶¹ The plan involved demolishing 98 percent of the existing buildings and structures to construct new single and multiple family housing and commercial buildings.⁶² Furthermore, the extension of Interstate 94 through North Minneapolis was poised to displace even more individuals, families, businesses, and institutions along the proposed path.⁶³ These projects had dire implications for the survival of the Wheatley, which was still located at its 1929 building at 809 Aldrich Avenue (just outside of the highway project area and near the border of the Grant Urban Renewal Area). The extent of the proposed displacement would effectively leave the Wheatley without a community in the immediate vicinity to serve, which presented the possibility it would be edged out of existence entirely.⁶⁴

In addition to these concerns, PWCC was facing significant pressure to merge with other settlement houses. According to T. Williams, around this time, "fundes had begun to raise the question of whether or not the agency was still needed going forward, since to some white

⁵⁷ Williams, *Rewind*, 83-84.

⁵⁸ Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley."

⁵⁹ Karger, "Phyllis Wheatley," 82; Williams, *Rewind*, 107.

⁶⁰ "Community Action Program," Dictionary of American History, *Encyclopedia.com*, April 1, 2026, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/community-action-program>.

⁶¹ Martin and Goddard, "Past Choices/Present Landscapes," 40, 129-130.

⁶² Don Herring, "NS Settlements Ponder Future," *North Minneapolis Post*, November 7, 1963, Social Agencies: Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House Env. (Times Clips Enclosed) Clippings & Brochures + Writings for the Years (1950s & 1960s) folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁶³ Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley."

⁶⁴ Harry "Spike" Moss, interview with New History, February 23, 2026, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

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people who counted themselves as allies, it had begun to appear as if full racial justice in America might actually be just around the corner.”⁶⁵ The United Way, which provided substantial funding for PWCC’s operating budget at the time, began to pressure PWCC to merge with the nearby Unity and Wells Memorial settlement houses. These organizations were located within close range in North Minneapolis, and the same urban renewal and interstate projects had implications for their futures as well.⁶⁶

During the mid-1960s, as board and community members deliberated the future of the organization, racial unrest escalated in many cities across the United States. Though many believed Minnesota’s location would insulate it from such turmoil, the Plymouth Avenue Uprisings of 1966 and 1967 underscored the realities of racial inequality in the heart of North Minneapolis. These tensions were the catalyst for the establishment of two additional Black community centers in Minneapolis. A growing desire for more explicit political and militant action amongst community activists led to the creation of The Way, another Black community center in North Minneapolis (originally located at 1913 Plymouth Avenue North, no longer extant), in 1966.⁶⁷ According to T. Williams, some community members viewed The Way’s approach as radical, where “any community member with a contrary point of view might feel intimidated.”⁶⁸ Sabathani Community Center, initially located at 3809 3rd Avenue South (no longer extant) in South Minneapolis, was also established in 1966.⁶⁹ Initially founded by the Sabathani Baptist Church, the center soon separated from the church in order to shift from the church’s stance of nonresistance to more active engagement in addressing concerns such as police brutality and school integration.⁷⁰

While these organizations filled some of the same roles as the PWCC by serving as hubs for community organization and providing social services and support to the Black community, their creation highlighted the uniqueness of the Wheatley and its enduring role as a source of stability. Following the first in the series of violent events that culminated in the Plymouth Avenue Uprisings, the Wheatley engaged in community meetings and conversations with local

⁶⁵ Williams, *Rewind*, 85-86.⁶⁶ Williams, *Rewind*, 98, 102; “To Be Razed,” *Minneapolis Star*, December 22, 1964, Social Agencies: Wheatley, Phyllis Settlement House 1930s, 40s, 70s folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Theatrice Williams, interview with Jeff Norman, June 21, 2012, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center; “Our History,” Pillsbury United Communities, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://pillsburyunited.org/about/history/>; Abe Altowitz, “Settlement Houses Being Faced by New Problems,” *Minneapolis Star*, July 8, 1965.⁶⁷ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-65.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Rewind*, 98, 102; “To Be Razed,” *Minneapolis Star*, December 22, 1964, Social Agencies: Wheatley, Phyllis Settlement House 1930s, 40s, 70s folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Theatrice Williams, interview with Jeff Norman, June 21, 2012, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center; “Our History,” Pillsbury United Communities, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://pillsburyunited.org/about/history/>; Abe Altowitz, “Settlement Houses Being Faced by New Problems,” *Minneapolis Star*, July 8, 1965.⁶⁷ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-65.

⁶⁷ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-65.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Rewind*, 178.

⁶⁹ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-64.

⁷⁰ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-64.

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and state leadership to help ease the tension.⁷¹ PWCC held massive community meetings (with many meetings exceeding 500 attendees) for individuals to voice their frustrations and concerns and encouraged dialogue by inviting controversial figures to speak.⁷² According to T. Williams, the Wheatley was “the one place in the community where people with varying points of view could safely gather to discuss their differences.”⁷³

According to Williams, the unrest of 1966-1967 led many who had not realized the importance of Black institutions to understand their necessary role; in his words, “after the 1966-1967 street violence on Plymouth Avenue, the political winds suddenly shifted and there was general support for retaining community organizations that had Black identities and were controlled by Black people.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, he notes that the Black community “understood something else that some of our white allies did not: even if all racially prejudiced Americans lost that prejudice overnight, there was still a long road ahead in targeting and dismantling the systems of institutional racism that had long been suppressing Black access to capital, decent housing, equitable employment opportunities, a quality education, and equality under the law.”⁷⁵ Williams explains that,

Building a strong, unique public identity for a Black organization during these contentious times was tricky business. Because much of the white community was anxious about how the march toward racial justice was going to play out and fearful about the prospects for more violence, there was a pronounced tendency to seek out and latch onto the Black voices that sounded least strident and threatening to them. Many in the white community came to see us at Phyllis Wheatley...as that less threatening, more moderate voice, especially compared with the spokespeople of more outwardly radical organizations...even though there was never really much daylight between our organizations in terms of what we wanted. Along with this came the highly uncomfortable personal baggage of being thought of as representative of the responsible Black community.⁷⁶

During the late 1960s, the Wheatley’s staff and leadership also expanded the organization’s role and connections in serving not just the Black community, but the broader community of North Minneapolis. In 1966, the Wheatley was one of nineteen Northside agencies that submitted a grant application to the federal government to establish the Pilot City Regional Health Center (now North Point Health and Wellness Center), which provided county health and

⁷¹ Theartrice Williams, interview with Jeff Norman.

⁷² “GROWING UP WITH THE WHEATLEY,” *INSIGHT* (September 1974), page 8, SOCIAL AGENCIES MPLS: PHYLLIS WHEATLEY SETTLEMENT HOUSE CONT. (1980- folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁷³ Williams, *Rewind*, 107.

⁷⁴ Williams, *Rewind*, 102.

⁷⁵ Williams, *Rewind*, 86.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Rewind*, 146-7.

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social services to Northside residents.⁷⁷ The Pilot City program had a resident advisory board chaired by PWCC staff member Cozelle Breedlove. In 1967, a group of Minneapolis executives asked T. Williams to co-lead an effort to develop an urban coalition in Minneapolis. The coalition would aim to address inner city challenges, including issues of race and poverty, in a bottom-up approach involving cooperation between corporate businessmen, non-profit leaders, and community residents. Williams and Larry Harris (special assistant for urban affairs to the superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools) led the planning effort that resulted in the successful establishment of the Minneapolis Urban Coalition in February of 1968, and the PWCC was a member of the coalition's board.⁷⁸ In 1969, at the request of University of Minnesota's president Malcolm Moos, T. Williams also served on a commission reviewing the takeover of a university building (Morrill Hall) by Black student protesters; the commission's findings ultimately helped establish an Afro-American Studies department at the university.⁷⁹

As PWCC continued to chart its own course through the 1960s, it still needed to grapple with the external pressure to merge with the Unity and Wells Memorial settlement houses, and with the realities of the urban renewal projects that threatened its Aldrich Avenue location and service community. T. Williams, who was appointed as the center's executive director in 1965, believed that a merger was not in the best interest of the Wheatley or its service community.⁸⁰ In his words:

I believed Phyllis Wheatley shouldn't enter into a merger if it was perceived to be the weakest of the three organizations. I believed that if Phyllis Wheatley was not seen as equal or superior to the two organizations, a merger would not be in the best interest of the community it served. I wanted to demonstrate to the community and to local decision-makers that Phyllis Wheatley was an essential community resource holding a unique and indispensable place in the ecosystem of agencies on the Northside.⁸¹

The Wheatley board agreed with Williams' assessment, recognizing that while its physical service community might disappear from the immediate area, the culturally-sensitive needs the organization rose to meet never would.⁸² In 1967, PWCC determined to remain an independent organization, and succeeded in maintaining its autonomy despite external pressures.⁸³

⁷⁷ "Pilot City to Name Clinic Committee," *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 23, 1969; T. Williams, personal email to Jillian Knight, April 24, 2026; Theartrice Williams, *Rewind: Lessons from Fifty Years of Activism* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2024), 233-235, Kindle.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Rewind*, 137 – 170, Kindle; T. Williams, personal email to Jillian Knight, April 24, 2026.

⁷⁹ T. Williams, personal email to Jillian Knight, April 24, 2026; Williams, *Rewind*, 199, Kindle.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Rewind*, 82-83.

⁸¹ Williams, *Rewind*, 173.

⁸² Social Agencies: Wheatley, Phyllis Settlement House 1930s, 40s, 70s folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁸³ Heidi Heller, "Phyllis Wheatley House, Minneapolis," MNOpedia, Minnesota Historical Society, last modified January 7, 2026, <https://www.mnhs.org/mnopedia/search/index/place/phyllis-wheatley-house-minneapolis>.

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As an independent entity, the organization had a choice: to rehabilitate and remain in its existing building or to sell it to the Housing and Redevelopment Authority, who was interested in acquiring the property due to its location adjacent to the renewal projects.⁸⁴ By this time, the Wheatley's existing building was no longer centrally located within its service area, was experiencing structural problems, and featured a layout that was designed around a hotel use, which was no longer a key need for its service community. These factors supported the organization's ultimate decision to relocate.⁸⁵

An opportunity for a new location arose when officials began planning for a new school-park-community center complex as part of the Grant Urban Renewal Plan. Some suggested that one of the North Minneapolis settlement houses displaced by urban renewal projects could perhaps be incorporated into the complex in order to provide more amenities from a single location.⁸⁶ Ultimately, PWCC decided to participate as the community center arm of the project.⁸⁷

Several entities contributed to the planning of the complex, including the Minneapolis Planning Commission, the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Hennepin County Health and Welfare Council, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, Minneapolis Public Schools, and PWCC.⁸⁸ The intersection of 10th Avenue North and Emerson Avenue North was identified as the location for the facility, which became known as the Bethune Complex. While it received partial funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported that PWCC also "chipped in funds with those of the Minneapolis school and park boards for the Bethune neighborhood complex. The project is being touted as an innovative community center, unparalleled in the nation...the parks people maintain the grounds and the building; Wheatley provides the staff for community, recreational and educational projects."⁸⁹ The *Tribune* further reported that "other community schools...are run entirely by the school system," which differentiated this complex from those that had come before it. According to T. Williams, the new building was the first to be completed with

⁸⁴ "To Be Razed;" Williams, *Rewind*, 102.

⁸⁵ "To Be Razed."

⁸⁶ "To Be Razed;" Abe Altowitz, "Settlement Houses Being Faced by New Problems," *Minneapolis Star*, July 8, 1965.

⁸⁷ Lindsey M. Burke and Jonathan Butcher (eds.), "The Not-So-Great Society," Heritage Foundation, accessed March 26, 2026, <https://www.heritage.org/the-not-so-great-society#:~:text=Johnson%20announced%20his%20%E2%80%9CGreat%20Society%E2%80%9D%20proposal%2C%20which,birth%20to%20Medicaid%20and%20Medicare%2C%20fund%20the>.

⁸⁸ "Dedication of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center Grant Park," 1970, Social Agencies: Wheatley, Phyllis Settlement House 1930s, 40s, 70s folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁸⁹ Carl Griffin Jr., "Old-timers reminisce about Phyllis Wheatley Center, now 50 years old," *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 28, 1974.

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Community Action Program funding in Minnesota.⁹⁰ The property was designed by Minneapolis-based architects Griswold and Rauma, who also designed the attached Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary School (now Bethune Community School), and construction was completed by Magney Construction.⁹¹

PWCC's involvement with the Bethune Complex ensured its continuation in North Minneapolis. A new complex also went hand in hand with the institution's evolving emphasis that individuals of all ethnicities and religions were welcome to receive its services.⁹² By expressing this attitude, PWCC mirrored rising American attitudes around racial desegregation and integration. In a 1965 article in the *Minneapolis Star*, T. Williams noted that "with the push of integration in the last several years... 'some feel Wheatley is of the past and should remain of the past. Some say Wheatley and think of a Negro agency. Some feel the identity is a good thing... but why shouldn't some of the services offered Negroes be just as good for anybody?'"⁹³ However, some members of the Black community saw the explicit expansion of services to all populations and collaboration with official agencies as signaling a loss of identity. In their view, official agencies had orchestrated generations of upheaval through housing clearance, ill-conceived neighborhood renewal, and legalized discrimination, and it concerned them to see PWCC working directly with or alongside these agencies. The community center navigated appeasing both the worried members of its service community and the white-led institutions that now had a greater say in its operations – and by doing so, ensured its own survival.⁹⁴

As planning for the Bethune Complex progressed, PWCC further honed walking the fine line between retaining its identity and acquiescing to stipulations set by sponsoring institutions involved in the planning and funding of the complex.⁹⁵ According to T. Williams, PWCC's involvement in the project showed it could "work with [its] core constituency to imagine the kind of multipurpose community center the Northside needed and then to build the kind of consensus and collaborative action among institutions that was required to make that vision come to fruition."⁹⁶ In other words, the construction of the new building demonstrated that PWCC's vision continued to be guided by the needs of its service community, yet the organization was capable of forging and maintaining collaborative relationships with institutions that could help make that vision a reality. According to T. Williams, the new building also

⁹⁰ Theartrice Williams, interview with New History, January 15, 2026, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

⁹¹ Building permit no. B418384 for 919 Fremont Ave No, October 2, 1969, on file at the City of Minneapolis; "Dedication of Phyllis Wheatley."

⁹² "'Wheatley Community Make-Up.'"

⁹³ Maurice Hobbs, "Wheatley House Nears End: New Head Ponders Merger," *Minneapolis Star*, October 14, 1965, Social Agencies: Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House Env. (Times Clips Enclosed) Clippings & Brochures + Writings for the Years (1950s & 1960s) folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

⁹⁴ Williams, *Rewind*, 146-147.

⁹⁵ Williams, interview with New History.

⁹⁶ Williams, *Rewind*, 135, Kindle.

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brought PWCC increased visibility and understanding both within and outside of the Black community. In his words, the Wheatley:

had become more visible than ever - a symbol of community pride and cohesion. And now, we were beginning to feel truly *seen* by the wider metropolitan community as well, our place in the ecosystem of human services better understood and respected. Phyllis Wheatley had come to be viewed as an institution with the ability to bridge the racial divide, one that had the respect of both the radical and conservative elements within our diverse Black community.”⁹⁷

As the Wheatley navigated the tensions of this time period, it also served as a model for newer Black organizations. According to the *African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota* MPD, beginning around 1970, The Way began to promote a goal of “interracial unity, encouraging involvement and attendance by all community members regardless of race,” similar to the move PWCC had taken years earlier.⁹⁸ Likewise, Sabathani Community Center provided food kitchens, adult education, housing and meal services, and counseling to the Southside Black community when it was established in 1966 – not unlike the services PWCC had been offering to the Northside Black community at least since its shift to a community center model in 1962.⁹⁹ While PWCC’s approach to its service community was not dissimilar to The Way and Sabathani Community Center, it had existed for nearly fifty years by the time these others emerged, and it served as a trailblazer for the others to follow throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As Harry “Spike” Moss, community activist and founder of The Way, noted, “[The Way] was an imitation of everything the Wheatley did. But it was built to take the next step, and the next step was harder.”¹⁰⁰

Phyllis Wheatley Community Center: the 1970s

At the end of 1970, the Bethune Complex opened, and PWCC faced the new decade from a new home. As the organization pivoted to a community center from a settlement house model and physically moved to a new location, it maintained its historic mission to support the Black community while being open to providing services for people of all racial backgrounds. Upon moving into its new space, the PWCC was approaching fifty years as an organization and ten years as a community center. It continued to refine its services to better align with the shifting needs of its North Minneapolis community. At the onset of the 1970s, PWCC’s programming included services in the following general areas:

⁹⁷ Williams, *Rewind*, 107.

⁹⁸ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-65.

⁹⁹ Gallo et al., “African American,” E-64-65.

¹⁰⁰ Moss, interview with New History.

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- Elementary Department (serving ages four to twelve), including club groups, tutorial programs, arts and crafts, group and social rehabilitation, physical education, social development, reading enrichment, mentoring opportunities, and field trips;
- Recreation and Teen services, including group social rehabilitation, physical education, and social development opportunities, such as basketball, football, baseball, softball, tennis, volleyball, track and field, judo, wrestling, a Junior Achievement club (which connected high achieving high school students with employment or internship experiences), Spanish Club, dances, parties, roller skating, horseback riding, boating, and a teen council. Some of these activities were sponsored by Northwestern National Bank, the YMCA, and the Department of Parks and Recreation;
- Special Services, including fine arts, special education, intergroup relations, music programs (ages seven and up), arts and crafts, dramatics, a minority literature library, a monthly newsletter, and a partnership with the Afro-American Organization in Sandstone, Minnesota, working with former inmates of Sandstone Correctional Institution to help build bridges with the community;
- Neighborhood and Family Services, including short-term counseling and referral services
- Camping, mainly including the continuous operation of Camp Parsons in Watertown, Minnesota
- Neighborhood Youth Corps, or the employment of youth at the PWCC building as aides for building maintenance, clerical duties, teaching, and recreation.¹⁰¹

Two of the key differences between the services provided at the new building and the two previous locations included 1) removal of boarding services and 2) an increased emphasis on youth and family programming. These changes had begun while the organization was still at its previous location. In the mid-1960s, the organization still provided housing from its Aldrich Avenue building, but its focus on residential services had diminished; furthermore, as the Wheatley was no longer a settlement house, T. Williams began his tenure with the title of executive director rather than head resident and was the first executive director to live off-site. Additionally, Williams had perceived an increase in youth attendance numbers by the time he started as director in 1965, and he hired a new youth programming coordinator shortly thereafter to help expand the center's after-school programming.¹⁰²

The design of the new community center reinforced these shifts in programming. As a 1970 article in the *Minneapolis Tribune* explained, in contrast to the previous emphasis on residential housing and a highly competitive athletic program, "now an important part of the house's mission is neighborhood and family services. Wheatley employs a full-time family worker to provide counseling and referral services, a recreation director, a neighborhood

¹⁰¹ "PROGRAM NARRATIVE ---- 1971 BUDGET," pages 1-4, SOCIAL AGENCIES: PHYLLIS WHEATLEY SETTLEMENT HOUSE folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

¹⁰² Williams, *Rewind*, 108, 115, Kindle.

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organizer to help persons make their voices heard in the renewal area, and a person to direct the programs in music, art and drama.”¹⁰³ The building's dedication program from December 1970 highlighted spaces intended to suit a variety of recreational and gathering purposes, which were likely highly useful for some of the center's youth and family programming. This included an activities room, game room, music room, library, arts and crafts room, a recreation room, and several meeting rooms (see Figure 5).¹⁰⁴ Though the organization had shifted away from the competitive athletic programming of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, athletics continued in the Wheatley's programming in a recreational format, as many community leaders believed it was one of the most valuable pathways for the development, mentorship, and success of Black youth.¹⁰⁵ Although the new facility was smaller, its partnership with the Bethune School and the neighboring park grounds allowed these types of programs to endure. Recognizing the importance of the Wheatley's athletic legacy, T. Williams worked with the school and construction teams to secure funding for a full-sized gymnasium (not typical of elementary schools at the time), which could be used for some of PWCC's youth and athletic programs as well.¹⁰⁶ Art also emerged as a strong component of the center's programming, such as offering a ceramics class (using an on-site kiln), arranging for Guthrie Theater actors to visit the center, and hosting an informal acting workshop for youth and adults.¹⁰⁷

Some of the Wheatley's programs occurred off-site, such as Camp Parsons and field trips, and the organization's long-time child care center also appears to have begun operating at a separate location in North Minneapolis during this period.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the new building remained the Wheatley's administrative and organizational center, housing its staff and executive director and serving as the base from which its broader programs and activities were coordinated.¹⁰⁹

While the new facilities represented a reduction in scale from the earlier, two-story settlement house building, the Wheatley maintained its longstanding commitment to providing educational, recreational, and social opportunities for Minneapolis' Black community. The programming offered at the new building embodied the organization's evolution from the traditional settlement house model toward a broader community-centered approach that

¹⁰³ Peg Meier, “Wheatley House Added Discipline to Dream,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 6, 1970, Social Agencies: Wheatley, Phyllis Settlement House 1930s, 40s, 70s folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

¹⁰⁴ “Dedication of Phyllis Wheatley.”

¹⁰⁵ “Summary History of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center,” *St. Paul Recorder*, May 23, 1974; Meier, “Wheatley House.”

¹⁰⁶ Williams, interview with New History.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, interview with New History; “Announcement,” *St. Paul Recorder*, May 18, 1972.

¹⁰⁸ By 1973, the organization's long-time child care program, the Mary T. Wellcome Child Development Center, was located at 1003 Bryant Avenue North (not extant). By 1988, it was located at 1220 Seventh Avenue North (unclear if extant). See “Social Agencies Losing Funds,” *St. Paul Recorder*, March 8, 1973; “Center,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 16, 1988; Hennepin County Property information.

¹⁰⁹ “Dedication of Phyllis Wheatley.”

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emphasized youth development, cultural enrichment, leadership, and community empowerment. As described by executive director Cozelle Breedlove in 1972 (paraphrased by the *St. Paul Recorder*):

The Wheatley Center is a multi-service agency whose activities are aimed at bringing together the various segments of the community through individual and group experiences, encouraging the development of individual talents, and enhancing and fostering new abilities and interests...the goal of the entire program is to assist individuals in finding or reaffirming their worth as individual contributors to society, and to formulate a united effort to better conditions through the total community.¹¹⁰

The physical spaces of the building were intended to support these more contemporary community center functions, providing a permanent and visible home for the programs and relationships that had long defined the institution.

Similar to when it first opened as a settlement house, the new PWCC location was immediately busy and popular, a testament to its ability to uniquely continue meeting community needs.¹¹¹ The physical relationship with the adjoining school fueled PWCC's programming for youth; according to a 1970 article by *Minneapolis Tribune* journalist Peg Meier:

As soon as classes are over in the adjoining Bethune School, the Wheatley center is packed with youngsters – 'It seems like all 600 kids from the school come over here in two minutes'[T.] Williams said as he watched hordes of young people troop in. Since the move to the new building in September, participation has doubled in the elementary-school category and tripled for high-school students. They have their pick of sports and rough-housing in the gym and the playground, cooking classes (popular with the boys as well as the girls), sewing instruction, arts and crafts, reading, grooming tips, record-listening sessions, dances in the multi-purpose room, painting, guitar and piano lessons and many others.¹¹²

In addition to the youth-centered programs, the new facility continued to be a community gathering spot to address issues important to the Black community. For example, the *St. Paul Recorder* and *Minneapolis Spokesman*, two local Black newspapers published by Cecil Newman, ran articles throughout the 1970s advertising workshops and meetings held at the Wheatley regarding a range of issues including education, Black families, prisons, housing, and police violence. According to articles from 1970, the Independent Coalition of Blacks, Inc. of Minnesota held its regular meetings at the new PWCC building.¹¹³ The new facility began

¹¹⁰ "Cozelle Breedlove Named Executive Director Wheatley," *St. Paul Recorder*, August 17, 1972.

¹¹¹ Meier, "Wheatley House."

¹¹² Meier, "Wheatley House."

¹¹³ "ICBM Meeting at Wheatley Center Monday January 12," *St. Paul Recorder*, January 8, 1970; "Black Coalition Election of Officers Monday, June 8," *Minneapolis Spokesman*, May 28, 1970.

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running Health Fairs in 1972, with special attention to sickle cell anemia, a blood disease that disproportionately affects Black Americans; Cathy Young, who served as the Social Worker Supervisor for the Wheatley during this time, was part of the initial Sickle Cell Anemia Task Force in the Twin Cities.¹¹⁴ During its 1972 annual meeting, the PWCC invited civil rights lawyer and Vice Mayor of Richmond, Virginia Henry L. Marsh III, to be its guest speaker to discuss quality integrated education.¹¹⁵ These represent a few ways the new PWCC building hosted service community-driven activities during the 1970s.

The Wheatley also continued to engage in advocacy on issues that were critical to its service community. For example, according to a PWCC budgetary program narrative from 1971, the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority had constructed a high concentration of low-income housing in North Minneapolis, creating “a low income ghetto” and “a tremendous need for adequate housing” in the area.¹¹⁶ This problem had existed for several decades, and though the construction of new housing in the neighborhood was underway, PWCC believed it would “add considerably to the population of the school and quickly create an overcrowding problem,” so it planned to engage with other agencies and the general community on how to face this issue.¹¹⁷ Around 1974, PWCC began advocating for youth halfway houses in order to support juveniles who either had experienced conflict with the law or whose home situations were experiencing difficulties and exploring how it could become involved in crime prevention.¹¹⁸ In 1976, the Wheatley hosted a forum to help mediate tension between police and city officials and North Minneapolis residents experiencing increased racial violence and intimidation.¹¹⁹ These activities illustrate how, despite significant changes in its physical surroundings, the Wheatley’s new facility continued the institution’s longstanding role as a trusted gathering place where the Black community could exchange culturally-relevant ideas and address issues of collective concern.

In 1970, two-thirds of youth attending PWCC programming were Black, and one-third were white children living in the surrounding neighborhood and attending Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary School.¹²⁰ While both white and Black children attended PWCC programming, some white parents removed their children from PWCC programming before they attended high school, and PWCC staff members surmised that the idea of their children engaging in interracial dating was behind this phenomenon. This underscores that while racial

¹¹⁴ “Big Turnout for Sickle-Cell Screening Test In St. Paul,” *St. Paul Recorder*, March 9, 1972.

¹¹⁵ “Henry L. Marsh, III To Be Guest Speaker At Phyllis Wheatley” *St. Paul Recorder*, May 11, 1972.

¹¹⁶ “PROGRAM NARRATIVE ---- 1971 BUDGET,” 3-4.

¹¹⁷ “PROGRAM NARRATIVE ---- 1971 BUDGET,” 4.

¹¹⁸ “GROWING UP WITH THE WHEATLEY;” David E. Early, “Phyllis Wheatley celebrates golden anniversary,” *Minneapolis Star*, October 24, 1974, SOCIAL AGENCIES MPLS: PHYLLIS WHEATLEY SETTLEMENT HOUSE CONT. (1980- folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

¹¹⁹ “Northsiders Confront Police, City Officials on Terrorism, Violence.” *Minneapolis Spokesman*, June 17, 1976.

¹²⁰ Meier, “Wheatley House.”

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discrimination was no longer legal, the Black community continued to experience racial prejudice in the 1970s; it further explains why the Black community continued to turn to the Wheatley rather than other white-led community centers in the 1970s.¹²¹

In this era, the trust PWCC held with the Black community distinguished it from other Minneapolis agencies providing social services. Mainstream institutions were facing increasing pressure to remove discriminatory practices and many Black members of the Twin Cities community had developed deep distrust of official agencies by this time. PWCC distanced itself from these distrusted agencies to focus on building community in its new surroundings.¹²² From its new location, PWCC continued to provide a trusted physical space to convene and welcoming opportunities to connect with other community members during activities.¹²³

1976 to the Present:

In 1972, longtime employee Cozelle “Cozy” Breedlove assumed the role of executive director of the community center, and the organization’s activities continued under his leadership through approximately 1981.¹²⁴ Continuing the organization’s tradition of Black leadership, subsequent executive directors included Charles McKenzie (circa 1984 – 1991), Angela Carter (1992 – 1997), and Barbara Milon (2003 – ca. 2017), to name a few.¹²⁵ Under the direction of these leaders and the center’s board of directors, the Wheatley has continued its programming and services through the present day.

By the late 1980s, the center’s programming included anti-abuse and anti-violence programs, tutoring, day care, and programs for senior citizens.¹²⁶ During this decade, the center contemplated constructing a new building, suggesting a perceived shift in its function and role in the community. According to a 1988 article in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the property’s lack of space hampered its ability to effectively serve the community, particularly its youth programming.¹²⁷ In addition to its child care center, the organization’s family services were also located off site at 1019 Olson Memorial Highway (extant), further evidence of the lack of space

¹²¹ Meier, “Wheatley House.”

¹²² Williams, interview with New History.

¹²³ “Wheatley,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 28, 1974, Social Agencies: Wheatley, Phyllis Settlement House 1930s, 40s, 70s folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

¹²⁴ Peggy M. Koop, “Friends bid adieu to pair who spread warmth at Phyllis Wheatley Center,” *Star Tribune*, April 21, 1988, SOCIAL AGENCIES MPLS: PHYLLIS WHEATLEY SETTLEMENT HOUSE CONT. (1980- folder, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis Central Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota; “Murder Sentence Opens Discussion,” *Minneapolis Star*, June 10, 1984.

¹²⁵ “Corrections,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, August 3, 1999; “Sunday People,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 16, 2003; “meetings,” *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, March 8, 1984.

¹²⁶ “Center,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 16, 1988.

¹²⁷ “Center,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 16, 1988.

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at its 10th Avenue North location. In 1988, the board of directors embarked on a planning effort to study a new, larger building that would consolidate these functions in a single location.¹²⁸

In the end, however, the organization determined to keep its main building at 10th Avenue North. During the early 2000s, the center continued to offer academic support programming, community education and training program on violence prevention, entrepreneur opportunities for youth, and sports and recreation programs. In 2001, PWCC closed its summer camp, Camp Parsons.¹²⁹ In 2012, PWCC's Mary T. Wellcome Child Development Center began operating from the 10th Avenue Building; in 2015, it was given the distinction of being the longest continuously operating child development center in Minnesota.¹³⁰ In 2022, PWCC began planning to rehabilitate and reopen Camp Parsons.¹³¹ In 2026, Bryan Tyner, former City of Minneapolis fire chief, assumed the role of the center's executive director. As an individual who attended the Wheatley during his childhood and later sent his children to the center, Tyner's appointment illustrates the enduring influence of the Wheatley and its ability to cultivate lifelong connections within the community.¹³²

Impact on a Community

The significance of the Wheatley's programs and its influence on the lives of children and adults is palpable in many testimonials of those who attended and/or worked at the organization. A selection of testimonials below illustrates this:

- Harry Davis (Wheatley attendee as a child, executive director of the Minneapolis Urban Coalition, and president of the Wheatley board), 1970, as quoted in the *Minneapolis Tribune* and in a 2002 excerpt from his autobiography *Overcoming*:
 - If you were black and growing up on the North Side, there wasn't much hope for you...Nobody went to college. Success meant being a wealthy pimp who wore silk shorts and drove a Cord automobile. It was Phyllis Wheatley House that put youngsters on the right track as nothing else did, according to Davis...directors helped a lot of black persons break out of the environment. 'We had the dream, but not the discipline,' Davis said. 'What they did was give us the discipline.' Youngsters were taught what self-dignity meant and that they didn't have to bow and scrape to any man, he recalled. For more than 40 years, the Phyllis Wheatley

¹²⁸ Robert Guenther, "4 Day Care Centers Given County Funds," *Minneapolis Star*, October 13, 1976; "Center," *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 16, 1988; Hennepin County Property information.

¹²⁹ Caitlin Cook-Isaacson, "A Camp of Our Own: Camp Katharine Parsons," StoryMap, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center & Minnesota Historical Society, June 16, 2025, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/8b563e3e7d0445e7a340847c520b8a90>.

¹³⁰ Barbara Milon, "High-Quality Preschool Will Pay Off Well Into Adulthood," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, June 6, 2015; Valerie Stevenson, personal email to Lauren Anderson, June 23, 2026.

¹³¹ Susan Du, "Phyllis Wheatley Community Center to revive decades-old summer nature camp for city kids," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, November 11, 2022.

¹³² Louis Krauss, "Mpls Fire Chief Retires After 30 Years," *Minnesota Star Tribune*, October 10, 2025.

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center [sic]...has been a hub of cultural, social and recreational activities for Minneapolis black people.¹³³

- o “I remember...at the center of my world, Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House...Gertrude Brown and her staff at Phyllis Wheatley were there to be our mentors and leaders. Those of us who were Wheatley kids from the time it opened in 1924 until the old house was torn down in 1971 were richly blessed. We lived, learned, and loved the Wheatley all our lives, and we are the better for it...My hope is that this...will inspire other Wheatley kids to record their memories about that special place and its extraordinary power to shape young lives. It is important that the Wheatley’s wisdom not be lost.”¹³⁴
- Louis Mason, Jr. (Wheatley attendee and Pittsburgh, PA City Council chair), 1974, quoted in the *Minneapolis Tribune*
 - o “The settlement house afforded us the opportunity for self expression [sic]...one of the ideas behind it was to keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble. They had a lot of success too.”¹³⁵
- Harry “Spike” Moss (Wheatley attendee, co-founder of The Way), 2026
 - o “You had everything you needed...the unique thing about it was we could stay there while we’re waiting for our parents to get home. We were in a safe place and we could play with other kids, just have a ball...and learning how to be better people and learning respect and going to the library on learning about things that we didn’t know nothing about and then feeding us, you know, and teaching us respect and how to respect people, how to talk to people, how to act around people. They laid all of that on us ... They taught us all kind of survival skills. We were little, but we were listening and paying attention. I don’t know why we were so focused, but we were focused...And always a kind word, always a lesson, always teaching...it was a lesson on what you need to do with your life, why you need to do it, how you should carry yourself, what you should or should not do, how to respect others, how to respect adults. So we would be exposed to children without that, and we got the nerve to speak up.”¹³⁶
- Kimberly Caprini (Wheatley attendee, current PWCC Program Manager), 2026

¹³³ Meier, “Wheatley House.”

¹³⁴ W. Harry Davis, *Overcoming: the autobiography of W. Harry Davis* (Afton Historical Society Press, 2002), 13.

¹³⁵ Griffin Jr., “Old-timers.”

¹³⁶ Moss, interview with New History.

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- o When it comes to race relations and...just the acceptance of differences and the schools I went to and the difference between religions...I never felt like I was that special. But the women [at the Wheatley] that would create these spaces for a small amount of girls always made us feel like we were everything... There were areas we couldn't go, there were kids we couldn't play with, but these leaders gave us space to feel recognized and...even, I believe, probably were kind of gingerly pushing us towards acceptance of self and becoming a leader yourself...so I say that those memories shaped who I am...that's what I learned from those leaders.¹³⁷
- Cozelle Breedlove (Wheatley attendee, PWCC executive director), 1974, quoted in the *Minneapolis Star*
 - o “We made it because the Wheatley was the only link for the folks with the outside world...it served an important need as a place where blacks [sic] could come and go freely, and also kids could identify with the first building named after a black person.”¹³⁸

PWCC clearly provided recognition and a sense of belonging and hope for a great number of Northside youth and adults, making it easy to understand how it achieved its trustworthy reputation. Harry Davis’ words vividly detail the impact of the Wheatley on neighborhood children, implying its absence may have led to a drastically different experience for countless children and adults. Louis Mason, Jr.’s life achievements lend weight to his positive statements about the Wheatley’s impact on him as a child. Kimberly Caprini’s fondness for the Wheatley’s positive effect on the personal development and self-esteem of its children are clearly reflected in her memories. These individual and collective memories and others like them capture the cultural and societal impact of the Wheatley more effectively and completely than any history ever will.

Comparison Properties

According to the MPD *African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota*, comparative analysis is not required for a property that is “the sole example of a property type that is important in illustrating the historic context.” From the time of its establishment in 1924, the Wheatley served as a prominent institution for the Black community of North Minneapolis, providing social, cultural, and recreational facilities to support Black residents in overcoming barriers created by racial discrimination. During the mid-twentieth century, PWCC successfully transitioned from a settlement house to a community center, continuing its role as a uniquely trusted Black institution in Minneapolis during the post-Civil Rights era while simultaneously

¹³⁷ Kimberly Caprini, interview with New History, March 2, 2026, Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

¹³⁸ Early, “Phyllis Wheatley.”

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becoming more inclusive to people of all races. This property is the PWCC's only remaining purpose-built community center building, and the sole example of a property that illustrates the center's unique role in the ethnic and social history of the North Minneapolis Black community during the post-Civil Rights era; therefore, the building has no comparable properties against which it can be evaluated.

While there are no direct comparison properties to the Wheatley, an examination of The Way (1966-1986) and Sabathani Community Center (established in 1966) helps to illustrate the Wheatley's uniqueness. Like PWCC, The Way was established specifically for and by the Black community by a group of Black citizen activists in 1966 in response to civil unrest in North Minneapolis.¹³⁹ From the beginning, its mission was explicitly more political in nature; it also offered a supportive space for Black youth experiencing the tumultuous impacts of neighborhood disinvestment.¹⁴⁰ As described in previous sections, The Way followed PWCC's example by adopting similar attitudes and programs after PWCC, such as expanding its services to members of any race or ethnicity in 1970. This organization closed in 1986. While the location it occupied from 1984 until 1986 (1315 12th Avenue North) is extant, its first home at 1913 Plymouth Avenue North is not.¹⁴¹

Another community center established specifically for the Black community was the Sabathani Community Center, which was established by Sabathani Baptist Church in 1966 at 3809 3rd Avenue South.¹⁴² Its first purpose was simply to provide a sports and recreation center for Southside Black youth, and this evolved into several additional sports offerings, such as baseball and boxing – similar to the popular sports offerings that PWCC provided (and which they continued to provide when Sabathani was established).¹⁴³ This eventually evolved into providing a larger set of social supports. By 1978, Sabathani had operated from four different locations, including 3801 1st Avenue South (extant). In 1979, Sabathani purchased the former Bryant Junior High School building at 310 38th Street East and continues to operate from this location today.¹⁴⁴ This organization is distinguished from PWCC by its location in South Minneapolis and its service to the Black community who resided there; furthermore, it represents another organization that followed the examples PWCC set.

When compared to these organizations, the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center's unique mission, geographic location, and more than 100 years of continuous operation distinguish it as historically significant for its unique association with Ethnic Heritage-Black and

¹³⁹ Gallo et al., "African American," E-65.

¹⁴⁰ Gallo et al., "African American," E-65.

¹⁴¹ Gallo et al., "African American," E-65.

¹⁴² Gallo et al., "African American," E-64.

¹⁴³ Thane Peterson, "Sabathani center a peculiar warehouse dishing up services to its neighborhood," *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 12, 1978.

¹⁴⁴ Gallo et al., "African American," E-64-E-65; Peterson, "Sabathani."

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Social History in North Minneapolis. Because the organization remains in operation from its 1970 building at 1301 10th Avenue North and has continually adapted its programs to address the evolving needs of North Minneapolis' Black community through the present day, 1976 (fifty years from today's date) is proposed as the end date of the period of significance.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

The building meets the five general property registration requirements outlined in the Multiple Property Documentation (MPD) Form *African American Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota*:

1. It is located within the 2025 City of Minneapolis city limits;
2. Its period of significance of 1970 - 1976 falls within the 1819 - 2025 period of significance defined by the MPD;
3. It demonstrates a close and significant association with the historic contexts presented in the MPD (specifically the *Community, Social Organizations, Recreation, and Education* context presented on Section E, pages 54-68) and demonstrates the significance of that association under National Register Criterion A;
4. It is eligible under Criterion A in the area of Ethnic Heritage-Black and Social History;
5. It retains sufficient integrity from the period of significance to convey its historic significance.

Furthermore, the building also meets the MPD registration criteria specific to civic and social organization properties nominated under Criterion A. Per the MPD:

Civic and social organization properties will generally be eligible under Criterion A as the headquarters, or place most closely associated with, one or more prominent organizations that played a significant role within Minneapolis' African American community...Properties may also be eligible under Criterion A if they served as the place where particularly important social events or activities occurred, or if they are associated with providing key social services to the Black community at a time when such sources were otherwise denied them by white-controlled institutions.¹⁴⁶

In conclusion, the PWCC building at 1301 10th Avenue North is the headquarters of a prominent organization that has played and continues to play a significant, trusted role in Minneapolis' African American community. The building is eligible under Criterion A in the areas of Black Ethnic Heritage and Social History for its association with the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, and it retains sufficient integrity to communicate that historic significance today.

¹⁴⁵ Once sufficient time has passed to evaluate the center's more recent history from an appropriate historical perspective, it may be possible to establish a later end date for the period of significance.

¹⁴⁶ Gallo et al., "African American," F-120.

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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 # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office

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- ☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☒ Other

Name of repository: Hennepin County Library Special Collections; oral histories

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): HE-MPC-07807

Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.6

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 44.987608 Longitude: -93.295854
2.

3. Latitude: Longitude:

4. Latitude: Longitude:

5. Latitude: Longitude:

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

1. Zone: Easting: Northing:

2. Zone: Easting: Northing:

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3. Zone: Easting: Northing:

4. Zone: Easting : Northing:

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The proposed boundaries of the National Register property align with the public sidewalks along the north, west, and south sides of the building and the shared party wall between the building and the neighboring Bethune Community School building to the east (see Figure 1). These boundaries encompass a small playground associated with the building's child development center and a small structure housing mechanical equipment for the building, both located immediately south of the building.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The property boundaries encompass the extent of the property most closely associated with the functions of the PWCC that retains integrity to the period of significance. The parking lots to the west and north of the building were added (west parking lot) or reconfigured (north parking lot) after the end of the period of significance in 1976 and are therefore excluded from the boundaries. The pool immediately south of the proposed boundaries is part of Bethune Park and is not operated by Phyllis Wheatley Community Center; therefore, the pool is also excluded from the boundaries.

Form Prepared By

name/title: Shannon Smith, Jillian Knight, and Lauren Anderson
organization: New History
street & number: 575 Southeast Ninth Street, #215
city or town: Minneapolis state: MN zip code: 55414
e-mail smith@newhistory.com
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date: August 5, 2026

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Phyllis Wheatley Community Center

City or Vicinity: Minneapolis

County: Hennepin

State: Minnesota

Photographer: Shannon Smith and Jillian Knight

Dates Photographed: December 15, 2025 and June 18, 2026

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1 of 15: View of west façade of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking northeast.

2 of 15: View of primary entrance at the façade of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking east.

3 of 15: View of south elevation of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking north.

4 of 15: View of north elevation of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking south.

5 of 15: View of an office on first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking northeast

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6 of 15: View of office corridor and lobby on first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking north.

7 of 15: View of a community room on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking northwest.

8 of 15: View of the corridor on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking east.

9 of 15: View of the interior courtyard of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking southeast.

10 of 15: View of the corridor on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking north.

11 of 15: View of a multipurpose room of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking southwest.

12 of 15: View of a classroom on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking northwest.

13 of 15: View of a classroom on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking northwest.

14 of 15: View of the entry lobby on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking southwest.

15 of 15: View of a conference room on the first level of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, looking northeast.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
Tier 2 – 120 hours
Tier 3 – 230 hours
Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

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Figure 1. Site map showing Bethune Complex (dashed black line) and PWCC National Register property boundaries (red line). North is up. Background image courtesy of Hennepin County.

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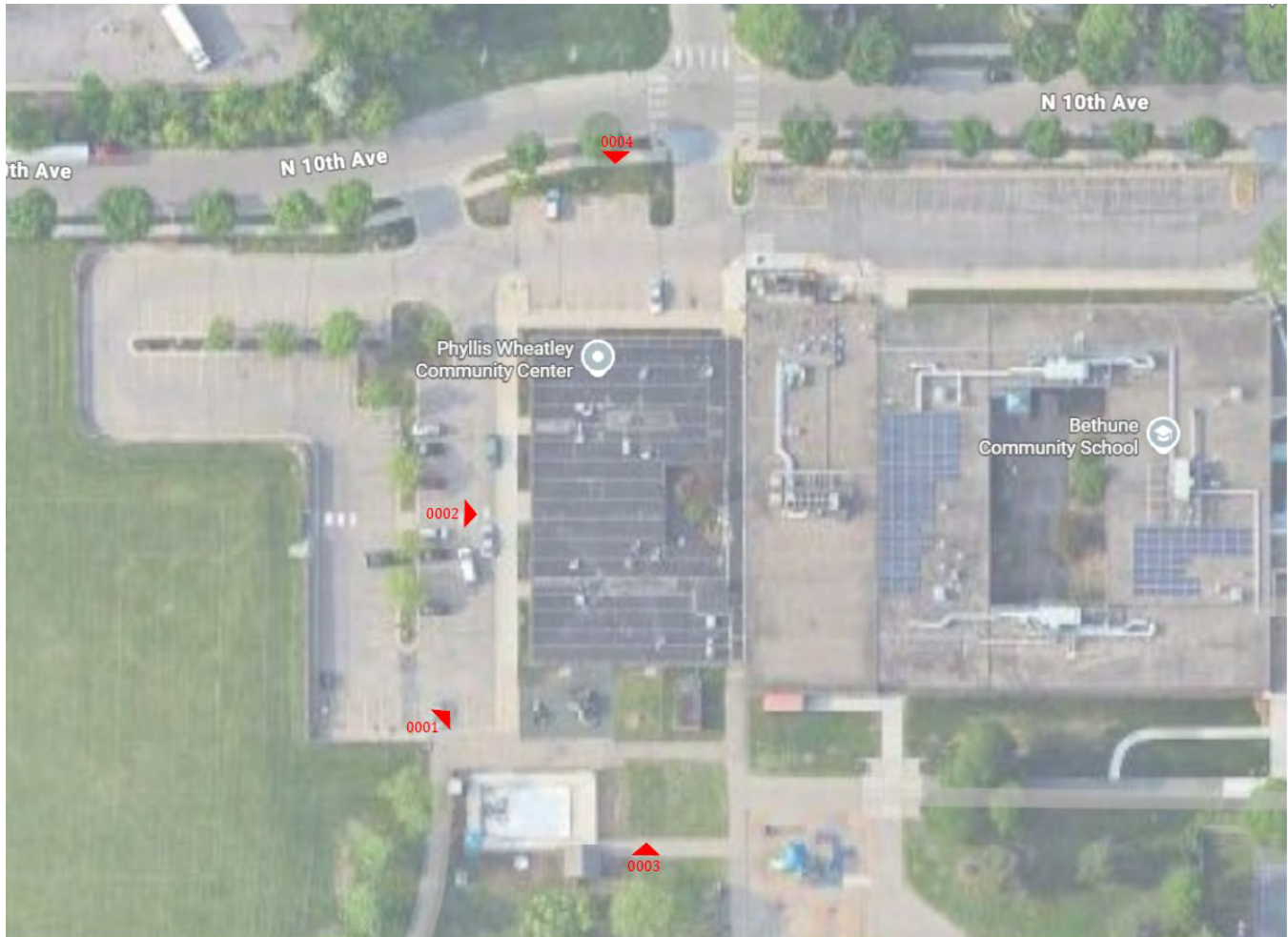


Figure 2. Exterior Photo Key. North is up.

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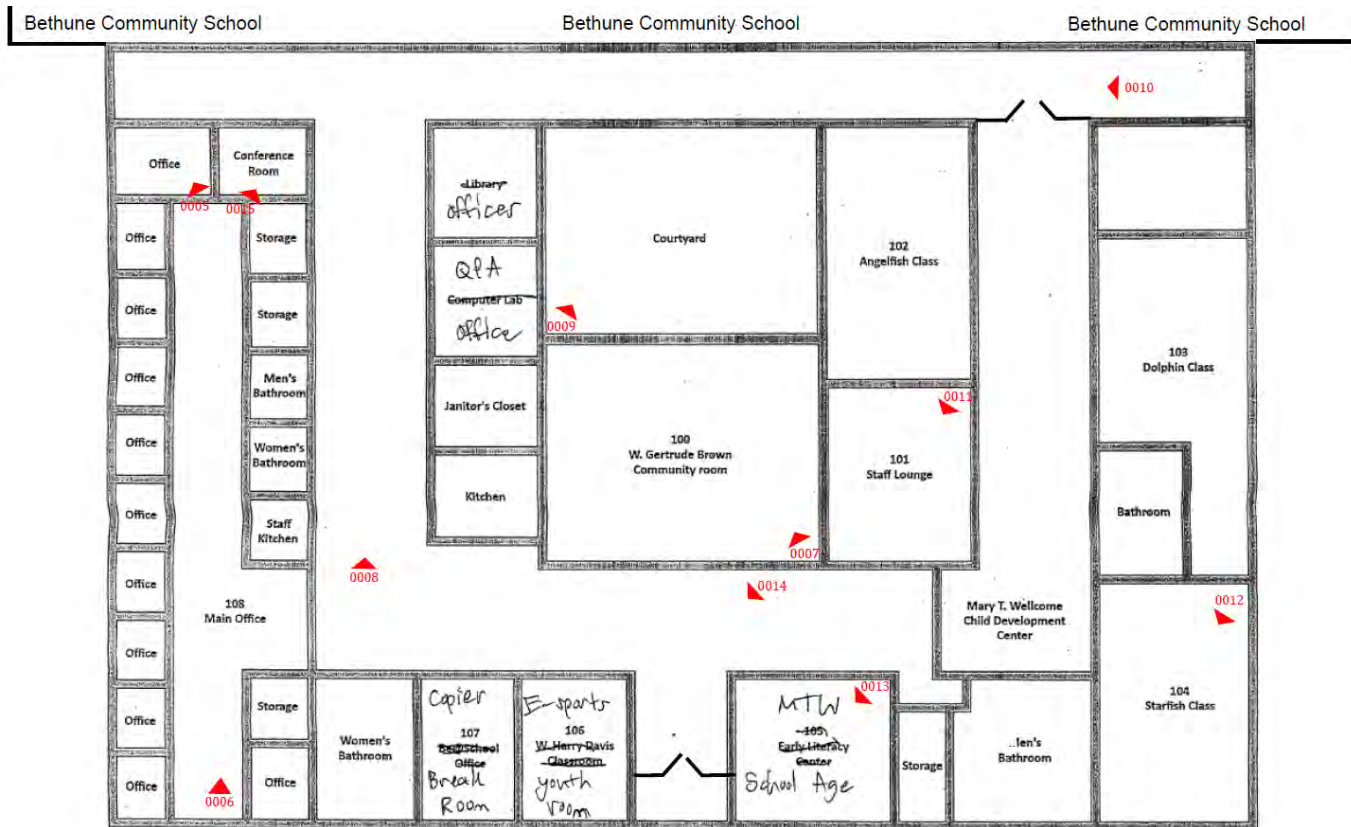


Figure 3. Interior Photo Key. East is up. Plan diagram not to scale.

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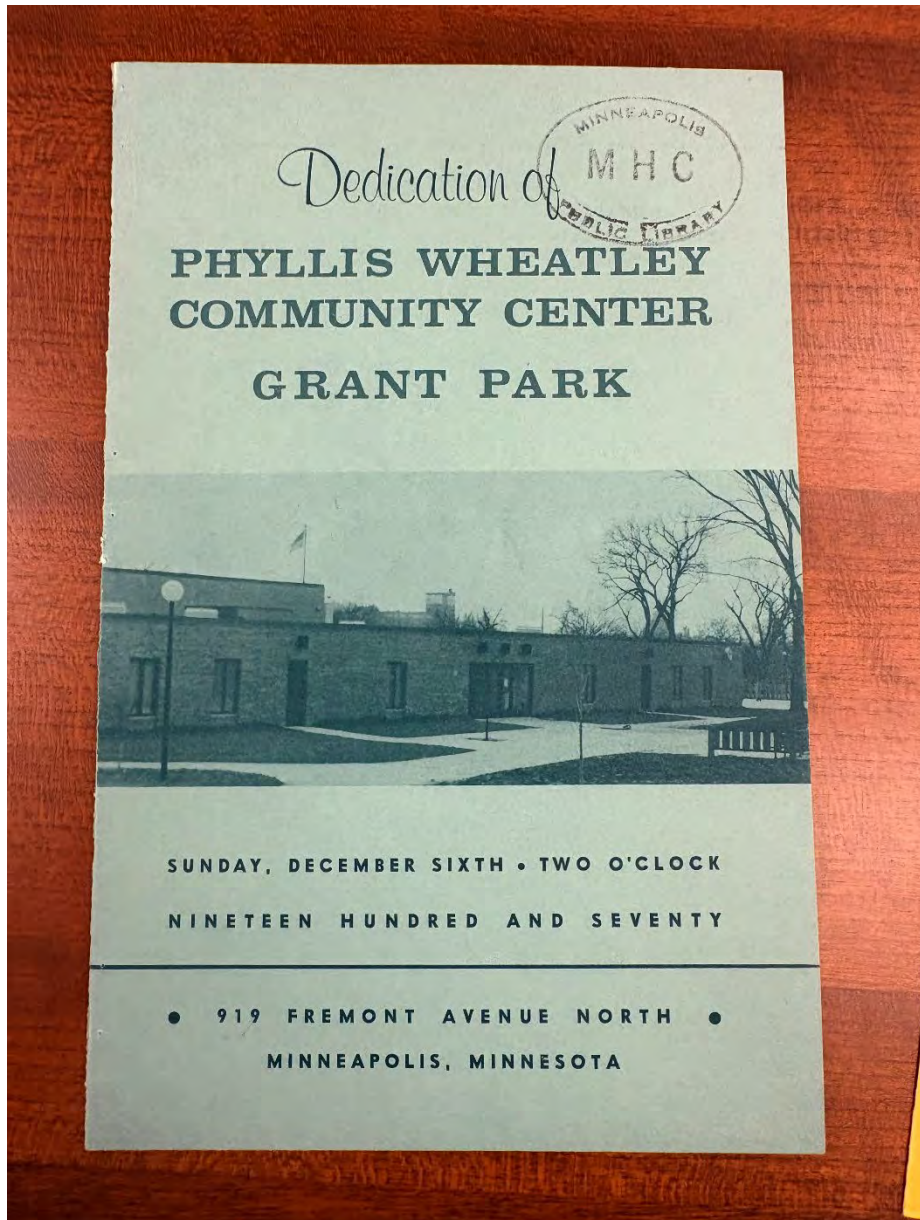


Figure 4. Phyllis Wheatley Community Center Dedication Program depicting the new building in 1970. Courtesy of Hennepin County Library Special Collections.

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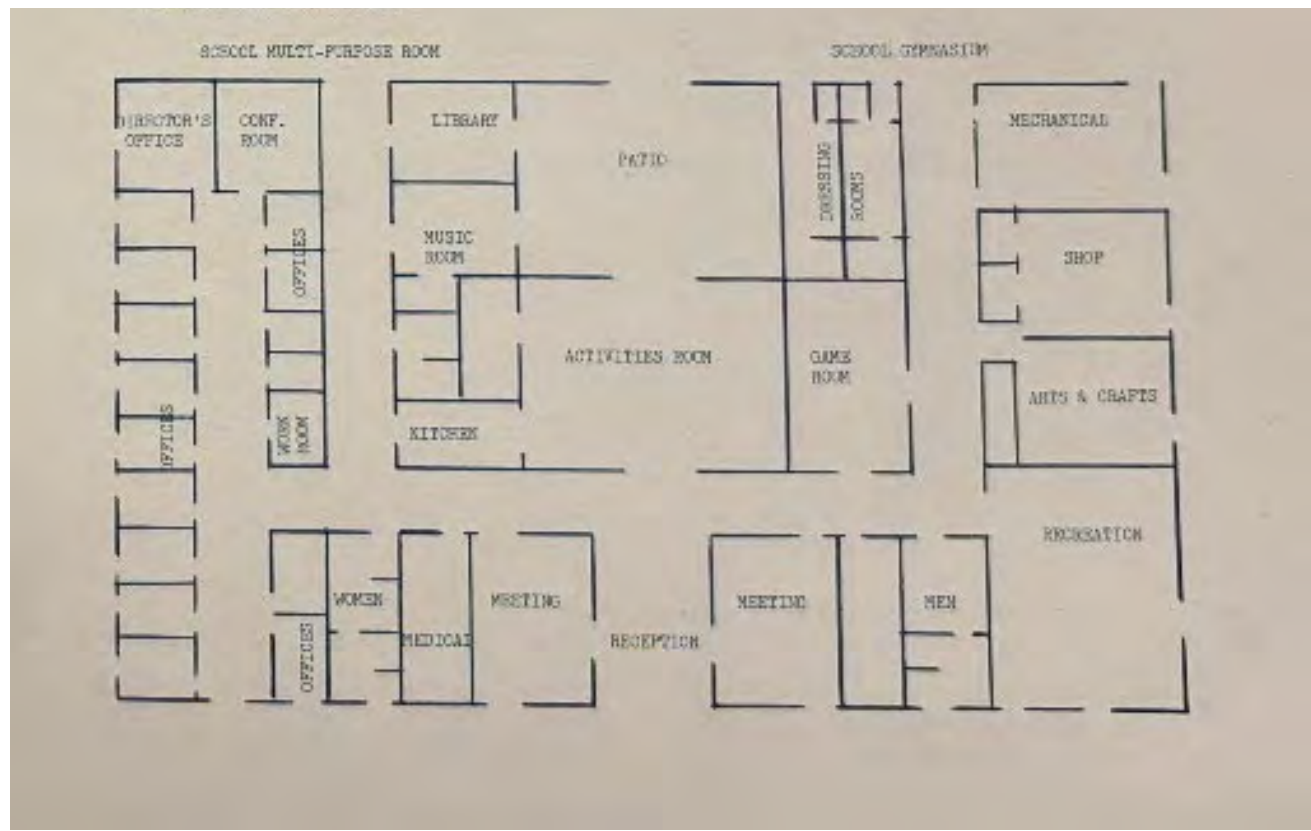


Figure 5. Phyllis Wheatley Community Center Dedication Program with historic building layout shown, 1970. Courtesy of Hennepin County Library Special Collections.

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Figure 6. Community gathering at Phyllis Wheatley Community, undated. Image courtesy of the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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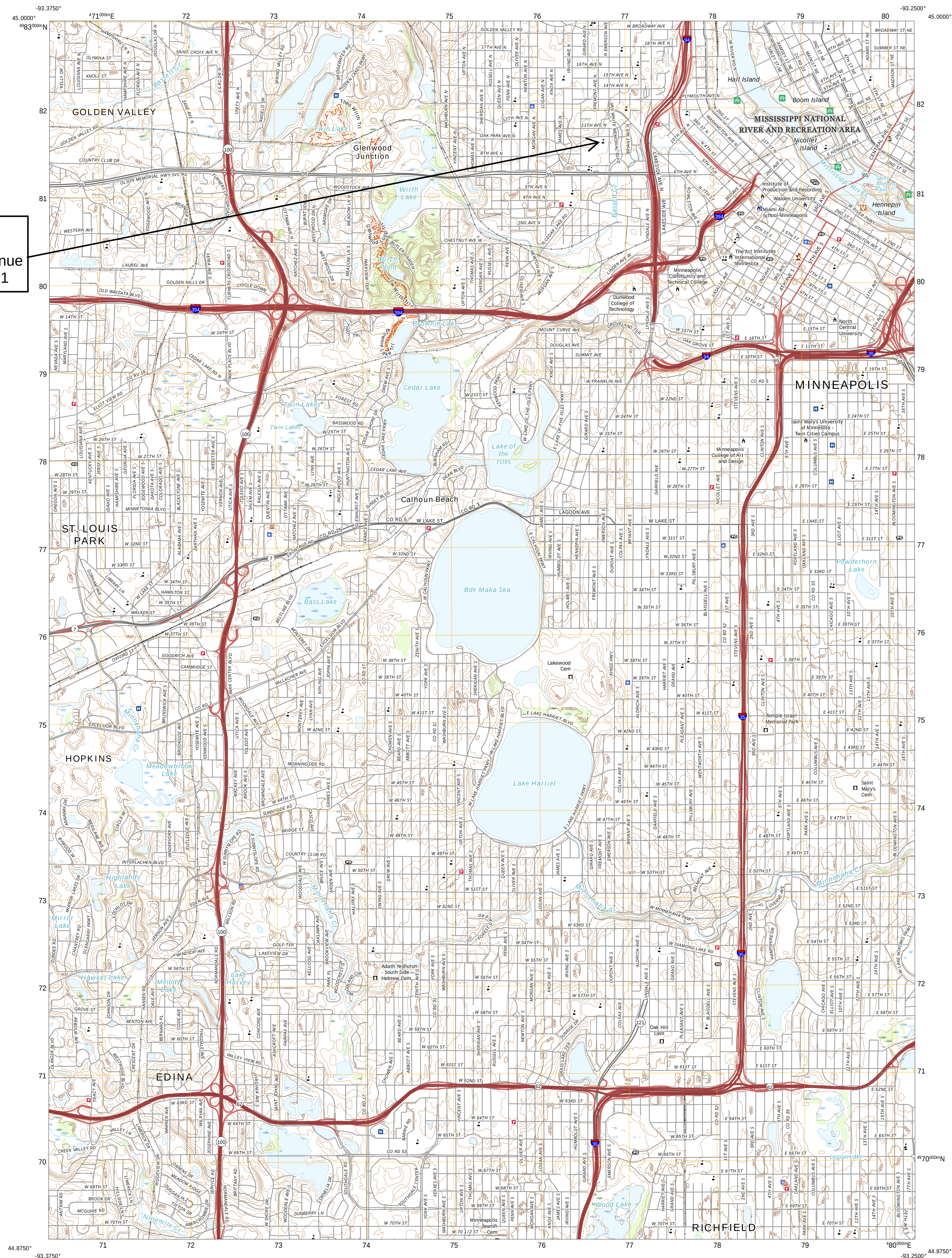
Section number Figures Page 7

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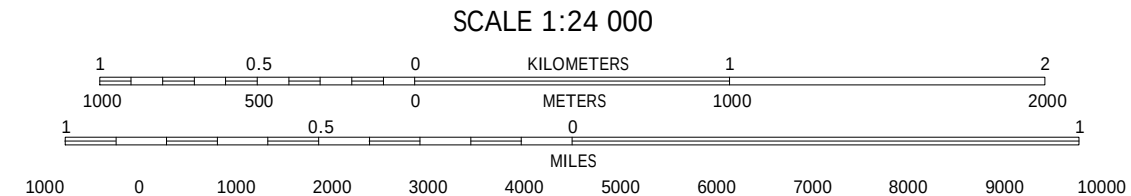
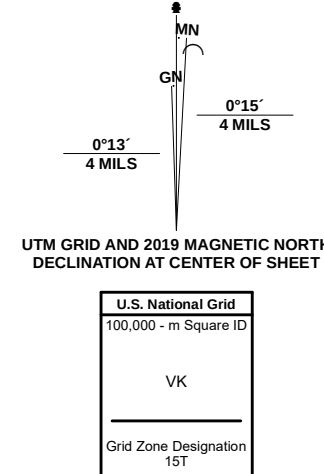
Figure 7. Meeting at the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, undated. Image courtesy of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

Phyllis Wheatley
Community Center
1301 North Tenth Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55411



Produced by the United States Geological Survey
North American Datum of 1983 (NAD83)
World Geodetic System of 1984 (WGS84) Projection and
1 000-meter grid/Universal Transverse Mercator, Zone 15T
This map is not a legal document. Boundaries may be
generalized for this map scale. Private lands within government
reservations may not be shown. Obtain permission before
entering private lands.

Imagery.....NAIP, October 2017 - November 2017
Roads.....U.S. Census Bureau, 2016
Names.....GNIS, 1980 - 2021
Hydrography.....National Hydrography Dataset, 2001 - 2019
Contours.....National Elevation Dataset, 2016 - 2018
Boundaries.....Metadata file 2019 2021
Public Land Survey System.....BLM, 2020
Wetlands.....FWS National Wetlands Inventory, 2010



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9

1 Osseo
2 Minneapolis North
3 New Brighton
4 Hopkins
5 Saint Paul West
6 Eden Prairie
7 Bloomington
8 Saint Paul SW

ROAD CLASSIFICATION		
Expressway	Local Connector	
Secondary Hwy	Local Road	
Ramp	4WD	
Interstate Route	US Route	State Route

