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during the prolonged period of neglect that followed its abandonment in 1982. Although compromises on the interior were required for adaptability, the building remains an important architectural monument, especially given its working class surroundings. Its continued presence also attests to the vital role of the institution in both uniting and educating Nesquehoning's diverse immigrant population during the first half of the 20th century. As one of the coal mining community's most noteworthy architectural landmarks, the school symbolizes the general veneration and progress of public education in American during its period of significance between 1917 and 1952.

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**Statement of Significance**

*Introduction*

Nesquehoning High School is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A due to its association with the advancement of public education in Carbon County, Pennsylvania during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and, more specifically, in the coal mining community of Nesquehoning. The school demonstrates the increasingly central role of public education in the lives of this working class, immigrant community and, more broadly, the transformation of American educational philosophy in the course of the modern industrial era. Nesquehoning High School is also eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C as a well-preserved example of the type of school design promoted by the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century educational reformers. Furthermore, under Criterion C, the school is a noteworthy example of Classical Revival architectural styling—particularly within the context of its location—that found widespread acceptance during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The years 1917 to 1952 define the high school's period of significance which corresponds to the beginning of construction and to the *National Register of Historic Places* 50-year guideline for historic significance.

Although the need for a new high school in Nesquehoning was discussed as early as 1914, the planning and construction of Nesquehoning High School was delayed for a number of years. Contributing to this delay were local discord over the location and plan for the school, World War I, and the crippling and epidemic Spanish Influenza of 1918. The school was finally completed and dedicated in the spring of 1919, and in the fall of 1919 received its first class of students. For the next 45 years, the high school served both the community of Nesquehoning and the entirety of Mauch Chunk Township until the township's schools merged with the Panther Valley School District in 1964. The academic program and extra curricular activities supported by the school directly served the majority of the area's young men and women for nearly three generations. After its closure, the school building functioned as the town's police station until 1982. The school was then abandoned. After being neglected for nearly 20 years the school was in an advanced state of deterioration when its current owner, Nesquehoning School Associates, purchased it in 1997. Between 1997 and 2000, the school was rehabilitated with assistance from the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program and now serves many of its alumni as a low and moderate income apartment house and senior citizen's community center.

The Settlement of Nesquehoning, PA,

Nesquehoning's settlement began in 1831 as a consequence of the area's dominant economic enterprise, coal mining. The Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company (L C & N Company) was a leading supplier of the anthracite coal that made possible the American "industrial revolution" during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> In 1830, the

<sup>1</sup>Two studies that highlight the importance of L. C. and N. Company are Michael Knies, *Coal on the Lehigh, 1790-1827*:

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company began extracting anthracite at Room Run Mine in the hills of Locust Mountain to the south of the yet-to-be-founded community. One year later the "Town of Nesquehoning" was born.<sup>2</sup>

Limited by the steep topography of the Blue Mountains, L C & N Company surveyors laid out one of the few tracts of land under the company's control that was both suitable for development and within walking distance of Room Run<sup>3</sup>. The settlement was nestled in the narrow valley between Locust Mountain (elevation: 1,300 ft.) and Broad Mountain (elevation: 1,685 ft.). By the fall of 1832, several frame houses for company workers were under roof.<sup>4</sup> The nearest community of any size at that time was Mauch Chunk (today Jim Thorpe), the governmental hub of Carbon County. It was reached by a four-mile wagon road to the southeast along the rugged shoulder of Locust Mountain. This road created the spine of the settlement's layout and is known today as Catawissa Street, the thoroughfare on which Nesquehoning High School is situated.

The production of anthracite coal throughout Carbon County rose exponentially during the time period just after the founding of Nesquehoning. As production grew, so too did the region's population. The need for laborers in the mines attracted individuals and families from Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe. Nesquehoning's population of 600 in 1860 increased to nearly 2000 by 1890.<sup>5</sup> Mauch Chunk Township experienced a parallel increase. In 1900 the township's residents numbered 2,896, while in 1910, 4,358 residents were counted. In 1920, the year Nesquehoning High School commenced its first full school year, the *United States Census* recorded the township's population at 6,191 residents—a 113 percent increase during the first two decades of the new century.<sup>6</sup>

*Education in the Coal Region and Nesquehoning*

The many illiterate and semi-literate immigrants who came to Carbon County and Nesquehoning for work in the mines encountered difficult circumstances. The conditions under which they had to work and live were highly primitive and survival was a family affair. Obligated to contribute to the family economy, most

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*beginnings and growth of the anthracite industry in Carbon County, Pennsylvania* (Easton, PA: Canal History and Technology Press, 2001) and Theodore Anthony Bryzinski, *The Lehigh Canal and its Affect on the Economic Development of the Region through which it passed-1818-1873*. Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Campion, *Smokestacks and Black Diamonds* (Easton, PA: Canal History and Technology Press, 1997), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas D. Eckhardt, *The History of Carbon County, Vol. I* (Lehighton, PA: Carbon County History Project, 1992), 333.

<sup>4</sup> Campion, 75-.

<sup>5</sup> Eckhardt, *Vol. I*, 333.

<sup>6</sup> Earl E. Smull, *A Survey of Mauch Chunk Township Junior-Senior High School, Nesquehoning, PA*. Practicum Study, University of Pennsylvania, 1928, n.p.; U. S. Dept. of Commerce and Labor-Bureau of Statistics, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population, General Report and Analysis* (Washington: GPO, 1921), 875.

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children in the coalfields attended only a few years of school before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most entered the coal economy by their teens. Several legislative initiatives between 1885 and 1900 both raised the age of mandatory school attendance to 16 years and made the employment of underage truants a crime; thereafter began a steady rise in secondary school enrollment throughout the coal region. Even so, as late as 1910 only 32% of Carbon County's 15 to 17 year olds were enrolled in school.<sup>7</sup>

Nesquehoning's first school actually predates the community's official organization under the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company layout, and, having begun instruction in 1830, has the distinction of being the earliest school organized in Mauch Chunk Township. This log schoolhouse, possibly a company school, was central to the mining town's layout at the corner of Catawissa Street and, appropriately, School Street.<sup>8</sup> Children of all ages were taught in this one room building, though it is likely that few if any stayed on to adolescence.<sup>9</sup> A surviving account of the schoolhouse describes it as crudely outfitted with little more than a few long board benches, a blackboard, and a potbelly stove for warmth.<sup>10</sup> Auxiliary quarters were provided across School Street by 1850, and, in 1866, an entirely new schoolhouse was under-roof. In 1882, the town's school relocated to larger quarters once again.<sup>11</sup> This, the town's third schoolhouse was known as West End School. The school building stood two-stories tall, was constructed of wood frame, contained four rooms and served two hundred pupils.<sup>12</sup>

The modest improvements in Nesquehoning's school facilities relative to its growth and regional economic importance is striking, yet demonstrates the experience of coal mining communities throughout Carbon County. Like West End School, schools were routinely log or frame, no more than a few rooms in size, widely dispersed, and ungraded. Not until after the Civil War did widespread school construction occur in the coal region, and only then did its architecture take on any semblance of permanence. For example, in 1869 the coal town of Weatherly built a large two-story frame and clapboard schoolhouse, Mauch Chunk a six-room stone schoolhouse in 1870, Lehighton a three-story brick school in 1873, and Summit Hill a three-

<sup>7</sup> Donald L. Miller, *The Kingdom of Coal: Work, Enterprise, and Ethnic Communities in the Mine Fields* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 124; Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Dept. of Public Instruction, *One Hundred Years of Free Public Schools in Pennsylvania, 1834-1934* (Harrisburg, PA, 1934), 23; *Twelfth Census of the United States: Population, General Report and Analysis* (Washington: GPO, 1902), 575;.

<sup>8</sup> Eckhardt, Vol. I, 337.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Brenkman, 118; *Town Plot of Nesquehoning*, 183; *Plan of Nesquehoning, 1854* (Publisher Unknown); *County Atlas of Carbon Pennsylvania* (New York: F. W. Beers and Company, 1875).

<sup>11</sup> George, Pauff, *Nesquehoning Remembered, Volume 1-3* (Nesquehoning, PA: Nesquehoning Historical Society, 1996), 121-131.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred Mathews and Austin N. Hungerford, *History of the counties of Lehigh and Carbon in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Published by Authors: 1884), 793.

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story masonry building in 1875. Relative to the school buildings that these new structures replaced, all were noteworthy for their size. They were also noteworthy for their Victorian styling typified by steeply gabled roofs, mansard roofs, bell and clock towers, cupolas, towering chimneys, and ornamental woodwork. None of the above buildings survive.<sup>13</sup>

In 1890, Nesquehoning built an additional schoolhouse to accommodate its increasing enrollment. Positioned in the borough's eastern sector, the new school appropriately took the name East End School. The two story clapboarded schoolhouse provided the necessary room to expand Nesquehoning's curriculum to include, for the first time, high school instruction of three years. The school employed a faculty of six. Along with the schools in Lehigh, Summit Hill, Tresckow, and East Mauch Chunk, Nesquehoning graduated its first high school class that same year (1890). An additional year of instruction supplemented the high school curriculum in 1908, making Nesquehoning one of only two schools in Carbon County with a four-year high school curriculum. In that year, seven students were graduated.<sup>14</sup>

Though East End School offered much needed space, it was severely out-dated relative to emerging theories about school instruction by the time it was constructed. A new program for the nation's public high schools had taken hold in America because of the efforts of reformers such as John Dewey and E. P. Cubberly. Dewey, Cubberly, and numerous others promoted the public school as the one-best-tool for inclusive social reform, a centerpiece of the Progressive Movement that, in part, defined American political debate at that time. By reaching beyond the three R's and the traditional teacher-centered and rote approach to schooling, New Education's philosophers believed the public school system might effectively reverse the destructive effects of the increasingly diverse and divided nature of American society brought about by industrialization. Reformers promoted a compassionate and child-centered approach that, in addition to traditional subjects, encouraged creative enterprise, vocational and life skill training, physical activity, and social interaction. They promoted the creation of a distinct division of "high schools" to properly address the needs of young adults, and encouraged students to participate in shaping the direction of their studies. Reformers also felt strongly that the American school system should function as a social service agency thereby creating a community sustaining institution within every American neighborhood. To support this redefined mission of the American school, reformers encouraged, the consolidation of schools and a new model of school design, thereby providing the necessary nucleus for a fully modern and diversified curriculum. The call of reformers ignited a period of rapid school construction across America, including the coal regions of Pennsylvania.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas D. Eckhardt, *The History of Carbon County, Vol. II* (Lehigh, PA: Carbon County History Project, 1996), 511-528.

<sup>14</sup> Pauff, 128-131; Common Schools of Pennsylvania, *Report of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the year ending 1900* (Harrisburg, PA, 1900), 103; *Mauch Chunk Democrat*, December 6, 1890; Common Schools of Pennsylvania, *Report of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the year ending 1908* (Harrisburg, PA, 1909), 27.

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The tenants of Progressive education here described formed the heart of the official Commonwealth philosophy of public education as codified in the Pennsylvania School Code of 1911.<sup>15</sup>

*Nesquehoning High School*

The Superintendent of Public Instruction's year-end report for 1896 highlights the inadequacy of high school instruction in Carbon County. It states, "all but one of our high schools have no apparatus except books, charts and maps [and] some...do not even have maps and dictionaries."<sup>16</sup> Cramped conditions in Nesquehoning were eased somewhat by an eight room addition to East End School in 1908, but by 1914, growing enrollment rendered even these enlarged quarters insufficient.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the newly adopted School Code, the Commonwealth's operating educational policy, provided added impetus for a new school building.<sup>18</sup> On November 6, 1914, the local press detailed for the first time a discussion by the township school board of plans for a new high school. Between 1914 and 1917 a series of disputes between Nesquehoning's residents, the local school board, LC & N Company, and the Commonwealth Board of Education over the location, design and cost of the proposed school, delayed the start of the facility's construction. During that three year period several sites were adopted and then abandoned, two competing architects were commissioned to draw up plans, several contracts for construction were awarded then rescinded, and a threatened law suit by LC & N Company was averted. LC & N Company petitioned the Commonwealth Board of Education to stop construction of the school as originally designed and approved by the Mauch Chunk Township School Board. The company claimed that the school building then being proposed was both inadequate to provide for the township's educational needs and too expensive. Furthermore, they asserted that the plans, work of Philadelphia Architect Clyde Adams, were not submitted to the Commonwealth as required by the School Code.<sup>19</sup> As the largest taxpayer in the region, the company's declaration bore weight. In an uncharacteristic display of agreement between the LC & N Company and its workers, the township's residents concurred with the company's position. The school board yielded and the plans prepared by Mr. Adams were abandoned. Meanwhile overcrowding forced Nesquehoning's more than one hundred high school students to curtail their studies to part time.

<sup>15</sup> Joel S. Spring, *The American School, 1642-1985* (New York: Longman, 1986), 112-184; John J. Donovan, *School Architecture: Principles and Practice* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1921), George D. Strayer and N. L. Englehardt, *Standards for High School Buildings* (New York City: Columbia University, 1933) and journals such as the *Pennsylvania School Journal*, give informative insight into the need for specialized buildings to support a modern school curriculum.

<sup>16</sup> Common Schools of Pennsylvania, *Report of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the year ending 1895* (Harrisburg, PA, 1896), 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Pauff, *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *One Hundred Years*, 39-41.

<sup>19</sup> "School Buildings," 118-127, in Common Schools of Pennsylvania, *Biennial Report of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1928-1930* (Harrisburg, PA, 1930).

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Plans prepared by the architectural firm Simpson, Tucker and Marsh, of Newark NJ, were finally approved by all parties and acted upon. After long delay, on May 29, 1917, the construction of Nesquehoning High School began. By the end of 1917, the Shamokin Lumber Company had the school under roof, and work began on the facility's interior. Following the disputes that marked the pre-construction period, progress on the school was further impeded by war in Europe and the widespread influenza epidemic of 1918; not until March of 1919 was the school completed. It cost approximately \$134,000. Nesquehoning High was officially dedicated on May 30, 1919. The ceremony was carried out in flamboyant and patriotic style with speeches by local dignitaries and recently returned war veterans, and a parade of marching bands. The new school was decked out for the occasion in red, white and blue bunting. According to an account in the local press, as the "most colossal temple of education in the county," the Nesquehoning High was on par with Pennsylvania's "city" schools, a reflection of both the impact of Progressive school reforms and the initiative of local residents.<sup>20</sup> Many surrounding communities also constructed new high schools around the time that Nesquehoning proudly dedicated theirs. Summit Hill (1911), Lansford (1916), Lehighton (1917), Coaldale (1922) and Palmerton (1923) all opened "modern" schools before 1925.

Nesquehoning High School received its first student body of 175 students in the fall of 1919.<sup>21</sup> The new school was a notable improvement over the old East End School and contained 22 rooms. These rooms included a library, gymnasium, a large 600 seat "community" auditorium with a balcony, and a variety of specially outfitted spaces to accommodate the type of diversified curriculum urged by New Education Reformers in the Commonwealth School Code. The latter included an "electrified" manual training shop and mechanical drawing room at the basement level, a room for home economics on the second floor, and rooms for commercial courses and a science laboratory on the third floor. These spaces supplemented the traditional course work carried out in the other classroom spaces within the new school. The building was able to support an up-to-date curriculum and its design promoted the type of "healthy" environment also emphasized by reformers. The building was safe by standards of the time; its structural terra cotta construction made it fire proof and its spacious hallways and stairs provided adequate means of egress. The school featured modern indoor lavatories, a centralized physical plant, and its large windows provided ample light and ventilation for the classrooms. In addition, the schools extracurricular spaces (i.e. gymnasium and auditorium) provided for physical and mental health and exercise.

<sup>20</sup> *The Daily News, Mauch Chunk Times*, November 6, 1914; November 19, 1914; December 9, 1914; March 3, 1915; March 12, 1915; March 24, 1915; April 3, 1915; July 1, 1915; July 31, 1915; September 9, 1916; October 3 1916; July 13, 1916, August 24, 1916; September 9, 1916; September 14, 1916; September 15, 1916; November 8, 1916; April 3, 1917; April 23, 1917; April 24, 1917; May 18, 1917; November 20, 1917; July 13, 1918; March 2, 1919; March 26, 1919; May 10, 1919; May 26, 1919; May 30, 1919; Eckhardt, Vol. II, 511-528.

<sup>21</sup> Pauff, 135.

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When it opened its doors in 1920, the school served as both a junior high school and senior high school supporting grades seven through twelve. Shaped by reform efforts, and in stark contrast to the previous offerings at East End School, a two-track curriculum was implemented in the new and adequately equipped school. The curriculum included academic and vocational tracks, and teachers sought to match student interests and talents with the proper course of study. Through the 1920's, the division of students in their senior high years was roughly equal between the academic and vocational tracks. Courses such as mechanical drawing, auto-mechanics, bookkeeping, typing, shorthand, and industrial printing probably attracted many students who otherwise might have headed for the mines before graduation.<sup>22</sup>

Following a graduating class of 12 in 1920, the number of teachers, student enrollment and graduation figures grew steadily for Nesquehoning over the ensuing two decades. In its peak year of 1940, Nesquehoning High School supported a faculty of 27, a student body of 928, and a senior class of 153. The high school's history, however, paralleled the beleaguered anthracite industry, which by 1940 was in steady decline. With the downturn of anthracite, the growth that characterized Carbon County before the Great Depression was reversed as families left its many coal towns in search of employment elsewhere. Following 1940, Nesquehoning High began a two-decade trend of decreasing enrollment and graduation figures. By 1950, the student body numbered less than half that of 1940. The last class to graduate from Nesquehoning High School, the Class of 1964, included just 55 members. Along with Nesquehoning, the Carbon County communities of Summit Hill, Lansford, and Coaldale closed community high schools in 1964, which like Nesquehoning High were products of educational advances made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Together the four institutions formed Panther Valley High School and occupied a campus style school newly completed for the merger.<sup>23</sup> Coaldale High School was lost to demolition, but the Summit Hill, Lansford and Nesquehoning school buildings survive. Of the three survivors, only the former Lansford High School still serves as a school. Since 1964, it has served as the township's middle school.

Perhaps equal in significance to the education that Nesquehoning High School provided was the community-building role it played by bringing together an ethnically and religiously diverse group of students and their families. By doing so, the institution fostered close friendships and other relationships that proved vital to those who chose not to leave Nesquehoning during the difficult years of the coal industry's decline. As survival in the earliest years depended upon the contributions of each member of a family, survival in the lean years of decline was reliant upon a collective responsibility of entire neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup> Though the modern educational curriculum emphasized the individual, many of the extra curricular activities supported

<sup>22</sup> Smull, n.p.

<sup>23</sup> Pauff, Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



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by Nesquehoning High found their core value in the combined efforts of groups of individuals. Clubs, such as Glee, Dramatics, Homemaking, and Senior Orchestra and projects, such as the publication of school newspapers *The Peptimist*, *The Chief*, and Nesquehoning High yearbook, *The Arrow*, are a few of the many activities beyond the school's academic curriculum that brought young people together. On Fridays, weekly lyceums offered a variety of entertainment produced by the school's faculty and students for the enjoyment of the entire community. The lyceums continued until the school's closing in 1964 when the last production staged was "The Atomic Blonde," directed by Miss Ella Evans.<sup>25</sup>

The spirit of friendship and community provided by Nesquehoning High School was particularly strong in the area of athletics. The Nesquehoning High School Athletic Association offered basketball for young men and women in 1916 and soon grew to include football (1923), baseball (c.1930) and later gymnastics and track. High school football attracted the entire community and was more popular than any of the other school sports teams. Contests between archrivals Nesquehoning and Tamaqua brought out students, parents, teachers, and the general public united for a single spirited cause—victory.<sup>26</sup>

Like the modern curriculum and extracurricular activities of Nesquehoning High School, the school's architecture defines the building's era particularly well. Its Classical Revival style architecture is a reflection of the dominant mode of architectural design for civic buildings during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The classic temple form, restrained in its massing, symmetrical, and dressed in classical ornamentation, finds expression in the full height columns, cornice, entablature and rusticated base of Nesquehoning High School. The 1917-1919 building stands in stark contrast to the often awkward styling seen in the pre-1900, Victorian school buildings of Carbon County. The Classical mode of design was promoted by many nationally influential architects as the fitting choice for buildings intended for a civic function, and their ideas were carried forth by countless lesser-known practitioners such as Nesquehoning High School's architect John T. Simpson. Between c. 1911 and c.1930, several schools of this variety, all variants of Classical Revival, were constructed in Carbon County. These include Summit Hill (1911), Lansford (1916) and Coaldale (1922) High Schools, the other three institutions that united to form Panther Valley High School in 1964. With its three-story frontal colonnade, rusticated base, terra-cotta frieze and cornice, Lansford High School, now Panther Valley Middle School, was the building most similar to Nesquehoning High School. Coaldale High School was also the work of Nesquehoning High School's architect John T. Simpson, but in this building, while still Classical Revival in its form, Simpson utilized a "stripped" variant of the style by minimizing reference to archeologically derived ornamentation. The Summit Hill High School, which like Nesquehoning survives as low and moderate income apartments, presents an Italian Renaissance mode of

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.<sup>26</sup> *The Daily News*, 14 November 1916; Pauff, 88-89,135-138; Ms. Marie Borelli, Interview by Author, July 2001.

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design.<sup>27</sup>

Nesquehoning High School was the first, and most likely the only building in Nesquehoning built in the Classical Revival Style. Little has changed in the outward appearance of the town of Nesquehoning since the decline of the coal industry. While its population of 3,364 is far below its coal era peak, the town still has the relatively dense urban fabric of modest, two-story frame and brick structures typical of the mining towns of Carbon County. Within such a context, the high school stands out as a landmark structure. The only other structures that approach the school's monumentality are a few churches, in particular, St. John the Baptist Russian Orthodox (1935) with its blue onion dome.

*Conclusion*

Nesquehoning High School remains a vital contact with the community's past. The school is a product of educational reforms that took root in Pennsylvania at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and succinctly symbolizes the progress of education in Carbon County. Whereas the single room school house was the accepted standard as late as the close of the Civil War, the large and fully integrated school building with library, gymnasium, auditorium, and other specialty spaces was considered the "model" form for up-to-date education by the end of the First World War, less than 60 years later. The grand school building with its monumental colonnade, Classical Revival, and programmed layout of interior spaces in support of a diversified curriculum, demonstrated the increasing value of public education in the minds of all Americans, including the residents of the coal region of Pennsylvania. While few children attended school for more than a few years in Nesquehoning before 1900, by 1940, the peak year of Nesquehoning High School's enrollment, more than three quarters of the community's young adults remained in school through age 17.<sup>28</sup> The school building is an excellent example of the Classical Revival style used increasingly for public buildings during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its efficient design creatively exploited a sloped site that was very limited in size. In addition to the opportunities Nesquehoning High School gave to the community's young adults for 45 years, the school is one to the town's most important architectural structures and is the town's only school building that survives.

<sup>27</sup> Eckhardt, *Vol. II*, 511-528.

<sup>28</sup> *Sixteenth Census of the United States: Population, General Report and Analysis* (Washington: GPO, 1941), 38.

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**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
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Tax Records. Carbon County Courthouse. Jim Thorpe, PA.