

Olde School (Boys' Dormitory)

Overview

The Olde School, originally constructed as the boys' dormitory, is one of the earliest and most historically significant buildings at the South Dakota School for the Deaf (SDSD). Completed in 1886 under Superintendent James Simpson, the building established the school as a residential institution.

Expanded in 1912 under his son, [Superintendent Howard Simpson](#), the structure evolved into a combined dormitory and academic facility. Over time, it adapted to changing needs, serving as housing, educational space, and later apartments. Today, it remains in use as a residential building, representing over a century of continuous adaptation.

History

Original Construction (1885–1886)

The boys' dormitory was constructed during a period of rapid growth at the Dakota Territorial School for the Deaf.

- Funding authorized in 1885 through territorial appropriations led in part by [Richard F. Pettigrew](#)
- Completed in 1886 as a 2½-story structure with basement
- Located approximately 125 feet north of the Main Building

The building featured:

- Construction of [Sioux Falls quartzite](#) with Pipestone Jasper trim
- Well-lit and ventilated rooms with transoms
- Two large study halls
- Basement playroom with cement floor

Notably, the east wall was intentionally left unfinished, anticipating future expansion.

Early Improvements (1886–1910)

As the school developed, the building was upgraded with heating systems, fire escapes, and improved entryways. Interior spaces were adapted for bathrooms, washrooms, and a temporary hospital ward, while the building was connected to city water and sewer systems. Ongoing repairs were also made to flooring and roofing due to heavy use.

These updates reflect the building's intensive use in student life.

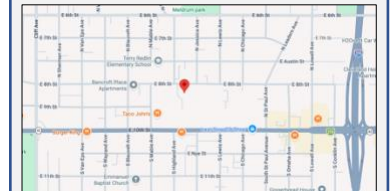
By the early twentieth century, growing enrollment placed increasing pressure on the existing dormitory. What had once been a modern facility was no longer sufficient, and the need for additional space and expanded educational functions made enlargement of the building necessary. The original design had anticipated this need, making expansion a natural next step in the school's development.

Expansion Under Howard Simpson (1912–1913)

Purpose and Planning

By the early 20th century, increased enrollment created overcrowding in the boys' dormitory.

- State appropriations funded a major expansion
- Architect [John C. Chapman](#) was commissioned for the project.



Location: [Sioux Falls, South Dakota](#)

Coordinates: 43° 32' 53.14" N
96° 42' 12.04" W

Name: Olde School (originally Boys' Dormitory)

Authorized: 1885

Constructed: 1886

Major Expansion 1912
(completed 1913)

Superintendents: James Simpson (construction)
Howard Simpson (expansion)

Architect (Original): Likely [Wallace L. Dow](#)

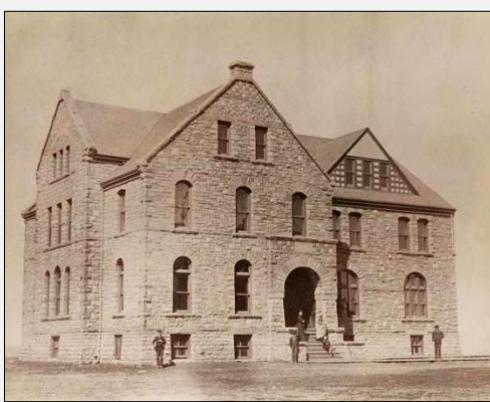
Architect (Expansion): [John C. Chapman](#)

Material: [Sioux Falls quartzite](#) with Pipestone trim

Original Use: Boys' dormitory

Later Uses: Classrooms, assembly space, teacher housing, apartments

Current Use: Apartment housing



Early view of the boys' dormitory (Olde School), completed in 1886, prior to its later expansion and decades of change.



Construction of the 1912 addition to the boys' dormitory (Olde School), showing early stonework and structural framing during the expansion under Superintendent Howard Simpson.

Construction and Design

Construction began in 1912, utilizing the east wall originally designed for expansion.

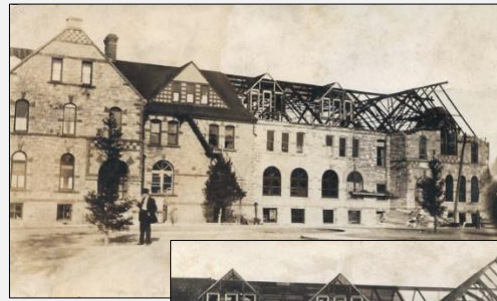
The addition included:

- 11 classrooms
- Principal's office
- Two basement gymnasiums supporting physical education and student recreation
- Assembly hall used for school programs, performances, community gatherings, and later as a roller skating rink
- Additional instructional rooms on the third floor

The building:

- Maintained quartzite exterior to match original construction
- Used fire-resistant tile interior construction

The expanded structure was completed and occupied in February 1913.



The Olde School expansion nearing completion in 1912, illustrating finished quartzite masonry alongside exposed roof framing prior to final construction.

Impact



Students gather in the Olde School's assembly hall during a George Washington celebration, illustrating how the 1912 expansion created a central gathering place for school programs, celebrations, and community events.

The 1912 expansion transformed the Olde School from primarily a boys' dormitory into the center of student life at SDSD. In addition to residential space, the building houses classrooms, a large assembly hall, basement gymnasiums, and instructional rooms, making it one of the school's principal educational buildings for decades. Students gathered here for daily classes, physical education, assemblies, celebrations, and community events.



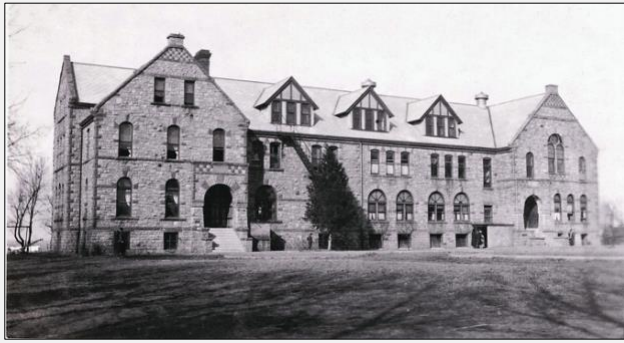
One of the classrooms created during the 1912 expansion, where generations of SDSD students received their daily education. The addition transformed the Olde School from primarily a boys' dormitory into one of the school's principal academic buildings.



The basement gymnasiums became an important part of student life, serving daily physical education classes and hosting boys' and girls' basketball games following the 1912 expansion.



These photos above are digitally restored for better view.



The Olde School, circa 1925, reflecting its early appearance before subsequent years of institutional use, modification, and modernization.

Later Modifications (1913–1970s)

Mid-Century Changes

- Dormitory rooms subdivided into smaller living spaces
- Areas converted for teachers' housing and specialized student use
- Ongoing upgrades to plumbing, heating, and electrical systems
- Chimneys removed and safety improvements implemented

Fire Incident and Student Response (1928)

In February 1928, a serious fire broke out within the school building, threatening both the main structure and the adjoining boys' dormitory.

The fire was discovered at approximately 10:40 p.m. by members of the boys' and girls' basketball teams, along with [Superintendent E. S. Tillinghast](#) and several staff members, as they returned to campus from a game. Flames were observed in a hallway where six wooden lockers were burning intensely.

Students acted immediately. Within minutes, older boys had deployed two lines of hose and multiple fire extinguishers, bringing the fire under control before the city fire department arrived. The fire was largely under control before the fire department arrived, and the danger passed quickly.

The fire caused approximately \$200 in damage, largely confined to the hallway area. However, the intensity of the heat cracked glass in doors and transoms and damaged plaster, requiring repairs.

The incident highlighted both the risks present in older institutional buildings and the effectiveness of fire-resistant construction, which helped prevent the fire from spreading to the entire structure and the adjoining dormitory.

Several individuals were recognized for their actions:

[Lester Chizek](#) and **George Call Him** were commended for taking the lead with fire hoses.

[Bennie Soukup](#) was first on the scene with fire extinguishers.

Mrs. Willard ensured the safety of younger students.

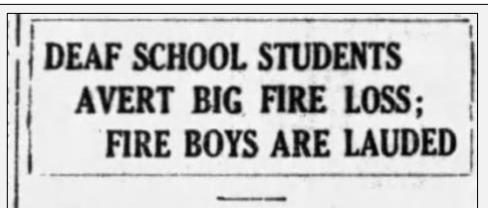
The fire was believed to have been caused by oil-soaked rags left in a locker following floor maintenance, despite prior instructions to properly remove such materials.

The quick response of students and staff, along with the rapid arrival of the fire department, prevented what could have been a devastating loss to the school.

Transition in Use (1947–1979)

Following construction of a new boys' dormitory in 1947, the Olde School gradually evolved from primarily residential use into a flexible academic and support facility. Classrooms were remodeled, new educational programs introduced, and modern safety and utility improvements allowed the historic building to continue serving generations of SDSD students.

When the Berry/Wright Building opened in 1979, nearly a century of educational use in the Olde School came to an end, marking the close of one of the most significant chapters in the building's history.



A February 1928 Argus Leader article credited SDSD students with preventing a major fire through their quick response before the fire department arrived.



The Olde School as it appeared during its final years as part of the SDSD campus in the late 1970s. Following nearly a century of service, students moved to the new Berry/Wright Building in the fall of 1979, bringing the building's original education role to a close.

Closure, Community Ownership, and Redevelopment (1979–Present)

End of Campus Use

- The building was idled in 1980 following relocation of the school

Purchase by the Deaf Community (1993)

- In December 1993, the property was acquired by the South Dakota Association of the Deaf (SDAD) in coordination with Communication Service for the Deaf (CSD)
- Approximately nine acres were purchased to preserve and reuse the historic campus

Redevelopment Vision (1994–1995)

Plans included:

- A Deaf Cultural Center
- Office space for deaf organizations
- Low-income housing and community development

Grant funding in 1995 allowed initial renovation work to begin.

Adaptive Reuse (1995–2000s)

- 1995–1996: Renovated into apartment housing
- Later used for a mix of residential, office, and storage purposes
- Portions of the building became underutilized over time

Redevelopment Planning (2014)

A new redevelopment phase began:

- Partnership formed with Lloyd Companies
- Plans proposed a mixed-use redevelopment of the former campus
- Historic buildings, including the Olde School, were targeted for:
 - Preservation
 - Conversion into affordable housing

Present Use

Today, the Olde School is operated as an apartment building, commonly known as the Olde School Apartments.

The structure remains part of the historic SDSA campus landscape and continues to serve a residential function more than a century after its construction.

Preservation

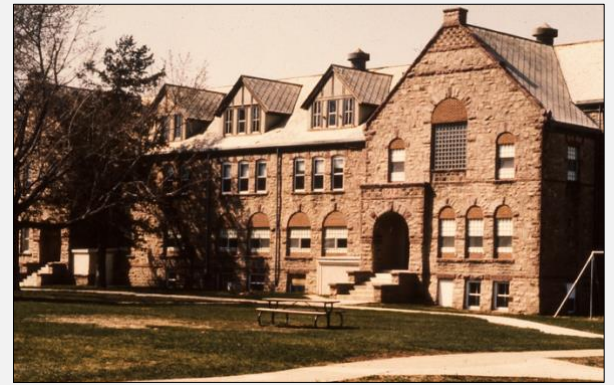
The Olde School is one of the fortunate survivors of the original SDSA campus. Twice, demolition was seriously considered. In 1975, the South Dakota Association of the Deaf adopted a resolution recommending demolition of the aging building and construction of a new school. Fortunately, plans changed, and the building survived. When the historic campus was sold in the early 1990s, its future again became uncertain. Thanks to preservation efforts by the deaf community, the Olde School still stands today.

Significance

The Olde School reflects the full evolution of the SDSA campus, from its establishment as a residential institution in 1886 to its expansion in 1912 and continued adaptation into community housing today.

It reflects both the legacy of the South Dakota School for the Deaf and the ongoing efforts of the deaf community to preserve and adapt historic spaces.

[View full historical record](#)



The Olde School in the mid-1980s, shown sitting largely idle following the school's relocation, with visible alterations including replacement block windows and modifications beneath the central arch.



By the late 1990s, the Olde School was being renovated into apartment housing, beginning a new chapter of community use after years of dormancy.



Present-day view of the Olde School, now operating as apartment housing with additional use as a photography studio, reflecting its continued adaptation and preservation more than a century after its