A look back at Dunbar history

Paul Laurence Dunbar High School was originally conceived to educate younger grades. In 1931, the district purchased four and a half acres on Summit Street to construct a junior high school, named in honor of the world-renowned poet and Dayton native.

The building was completed in August 1932, but did not open until the next school year due to lack of funds. The city of Dayton celebrated the new school opening with four days of festivities. The school was the district’s first to allow “open enrollment” by any grade-eligible student throughout the district. Because of its immediate popularity, the school’s original junior high-only designation was abandoned one week before school started. Paul Laurence Dunbar High School opened with an enrollment of more than 850 students in grades seven through 10. The school’s first principal was Frederic C. MacFarlane, who came to Dayton from Gary, Ind.

The school grew to serve students through grade 12. The building was the site of many great milestones in district history, including the funeral viewing of Matilda Dunbar, mother of Paul Laurence, in 1934. Two years after her death, the Dunbar student body learned she did not receive a gravestone. Many fund-raisers later, a headstone was purchased and installed in 1940, where it remains to this day.

The Summit Street building became too small to serve a teeming student body of more than 1,200, so in 1961, a cornerstone was laid for a new Dunbar High School, at 2222 Richley Ave. That school, which opened in 1962, served grades nine through 12.

The former Dunbar building on Summit Street became MacFarlane Elementary School, in honor of Dunbar’s first principal.

Dunbar High School’s storied athletic program has produced an overwhelming number of city and state championships across all sports programs, including baseball, basketball, boxing, cross-country, fencing, football, softball, tennis, track and volleyball. Most recently, the school celebrated back-to-back state championships by its boys basketball team. The Wolverines took the title in 2006 and 2007, and one of its star players, Daequan Cook, now plays for the Miami Heat in the NBA.

The school also boasts a thriving alumni chapter. Since 1979, the Dunbar Alumni Association has been active in providing assistance to its alma mater through in-school programs, scholarship awards and grants, and hosting school events. The group also hosts regular all-class reunions, and is a leading participant in many area events commemorating Paul Laurence Dunbar, including the annual grave site memorial ceremony.

Memorabilia and other information graciously provided to DPS by Elona Beans (Class of 1965), Dunbar Alumni Association recording secretary; Hope Kelley (Class of 1967); and Sandy Lowery.