

# HOPE VI Matthew Henson Historic Documentation Executive Summary

## Project Description

The Matthew Henson Public Housing Project (Matthew Henson) is located in south central Phoenix in an area bounded by 7th Avenue to the east, 11th Avenue to the west, Sherman/Grant Street to the north, and Buckeye Road to the south (Figure 1). The housing project consists of three adjacent building developments constructed between 1940 and 1960. Matthew Henson is slated for demolition to make way for new housing. The housing complex is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria (a) (event) and (c) (architecture). Matthew Henson is historically significant for a number of reasons. It was one of the first public housing projects built in Phoenix and is of architectural interest. It also has close ties to the city's African American community. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed by the City of Phoenix and the Arizona State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) (June 2003) detailing requirements to mitigate adverse effects to the housing project. One stipulation of the MOA is that Matthew Henson be documented in accordance with SHPO's Documentation Standards for Historic Properties (revised December 2000) in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The present report serves to satisfy this requirement.



Photograph 5. Father McLoughlin with Libbart Steele, Bennie Cook, Carl Sikes, and an unnamed altar boy in the early 1940s. (Courtesy of Katherine Ayers.)



Boy scouts at Matthew Henson including Scout Master William Everett Bass, and scouts (from left to right) Everett Munford Bass, Earl Swain, William Swain, and Homer Johnson, taken in 1942 or 1943. (Photograph courtesy of Katherine Ayers)

Designed by well-known Phoenix architectural firm Lescher & Mahoney, the original brick, one-story buildings, were constructed in courtyard configurations containing different combinations of one- to three- bedroom units. The City built 150 units in 1940-1941 called Matthew Henson Homes (AZ 1-3) between 7th and 9th Avenues and between Sherman Street and just north of Buckeye Road (Figures 2 and 3). In 1951, the 194-unit Matthew Henson Addition (AZ 1-4) was constructed adjacent to the existing housing on the west side using a similar configuration (Figures 2 and 4). In 1960 the construction of six two-story concrete-block buildings called Sydney P. Osborn Homes (AZ 1-7A) added 28 units along Buckeye Road to the south of the original buildings.



Photograph 2. "Before" housing of family moving into Matthew Henson Addition, 1951. (The Arizona Historical Society – Central Arizona Division)

Over the past six decades, Matthew Henson housing has provided numerous families with a safe and affordable place to live. However, the buildings have reached the end of their useful life. In an effort to revitalize the community, the City of Phoenix has obtained a HOPE VI grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The goals of the HOPE VI program are to assist public housing authorities in replacing severely distressed housing, increasing resident self-sufficiency and home ownership opportunities, creating incentives to encourage investment, and lessening concentrations of poverty by promoting mixed-income communities. The HOPE VI project at Matthew Henson will consist of a phased demolition of old units and construction of new units over a five-year period for a net gain of 240 units. The HOPE VI project encompasses the area between 7th and 15th Avenues and Grant and Pima Streets. New units will be larger and more energy-efficient and will include a variety of home ownership and affordable rental opportunities. The

City is relocating residents prior to demolition, and will provide them the option to return to the community when construction is complete.

## Methodology

This report documents the history of the Matthew Henson community from several perspectives. The cultural history section chronicles the social history of Matthew Henson, including the conditions that preceded the project's construction; the federal and local housing laws that provided for Matthew Henson's founding; the important events, people, and places associated with the housing community; and the changes that have occurred within the community over time. This section incorporates information acquired from a variety of sources, including newspaper articles, books, academic papers, administrative records, oral histories, photographs, and architectural drawings. The oral history section provides a summary of ethnographic interviews conducted with former Matthew Henson residents and others associated with the housing community. The architectural history section documents the significant aspects of the community's architecture and includes photographs and copies of original building plans. The use of diverse sources in documenting the history of Matthew Henson housing allows different voices and outlooks to be conveyed.



Photograph 3. "After" photograph of family moving into Matthew Henson Addition, 1952. (The Arizona Historical Society – Central Arizona Division)

## Report Summary

### Cultural History

The cultural history of Matthew Henson is closely tied to the history of the African American community and to that of Phoenix in general. For many residents in the early 1900s, Phoenix exemplified the promise and opportunity associated with the West. However, for African Americans and other minorities in the city, prospects were less bright. Legal and de facto segregation translated to poverty, lack of jobs, and substandard living conditions. Most minorities lived in the southern part of the city, often in flimsy and dangerous homes. The Great Depression exacerbated poverty and brought social inequities to the forefront. On national and local levels, reformers pushed for housing law, and with enactment of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937, public housing became a reality. Opponents, calling public housing "socialistic," resisted its construction for decades to come.

Matthew Henson housing, built for African Americans in 1941, was one of the first three public housing projects constructed in Phoenix. Despite political opposition, the project was expanded in 1951 and again in 1960. Although today's image of public housing is sometimes unfavorable, the new and well-built homes of Matthew Henson provided a step up for many families. The project became a focal point for the small but vibrant Black community in Phoenix and produced a nurturing environment for nascent politicians, civil rights workers, and community activists during the long struggle for civil rights. Unity and perseverance engendered by the Matthew Henson community were crucial when the project tenants' council confronted the Housing Authority with charges of neglect. The resulting rent strike forced improvements in maintenance and produced eventual changes in the way the City managed its housing.



Bedroom of a family living in substandard housing prior to moving into Matthew Henson housing, 1951. (The Arizona Historical Society – Central Arizona Division)

The closeness of the community meant many families socialized together in each other's homes and in nearby parks. Many local businesses, organizations, and churches have also formed an integral part of the neighborhood. St. Monica's Mission (now St. Pius X Church) and its founder Father Emmett McLoughlin played an important role both spiritually and socially in the development of Matthew Henson. Dunbar Elementary School, constructed as a Black school during segregated times, has also been a focus of the community. Although integration in the 1970s through the 1990s changed the face of Matthew Henson housing, many former residents continue to maintain strong ties to the community.



Same family in their new Matthew Henson kitchen, 1952. (The Arizona Historical Society – Central Arizona Division)

### Oral History

Historian Jean Reynolds summarizes and provides detailed logs of oral history interviews she conducted with ten people associated with the Matthew Henson community, including former residents, a maintenance worker, a teacher from Dunbar Elementary, a City councilman, and a City housing official. Each provides a unique perspective on life at Matthew Henson. The housing project, particularly in its earlier years, was a tight-knit and supportive community. Those interviewed describe Matthew Henson as a friendly refuge in a segregated city where families could find safe and secure housing and a sense of belonging.

## Architectural History

Architect Robert Graham describes the architectural history and significance of Matthew Henson housing. Prominent Phoenix architectural firm Lescher & Mahoney designed Matthew Henson using a repetitive courtyard concept. The complex combined several city blocks to create a "superblock" development. The site mixed duplex and four-plex apartment units arranged in a serpentine pattern that allowed access to a front entry courtyard and a back service courtyard. Although not unique, the design was unusual and less institutional than the usual strip or row developments. The design of the complex reflected the sprawling nature of Phoenix as compared to dense urban centers in the East that favored compact mid-rise buildings. Matthew Henson homes were built in a simplified Ranch style, relatively new to the Phoenix area. The rectangular red brick buildings were clean, simple, sturdy, and economical-appropriate to the low cost mandated by the federal housing program. Expansion of the project in 1951 continued the general pattern established in 1941. The Matthew Henson Housing Project is architecturally significant for its unusual planning concept in the early days of U.S. public housing and for its early use of the Ranch style in Phoenix. It retains a remarkable degree of design integrity.

One courtyard grouping in Matthew Henson will be preserved from demolition. The City of Phoenix plans to use the information detailed in the report as a foundation for developing cultural and historical exhibits and interpretation on the site.

To see the results of the entire Historic Property Documentation, contact the HOPE VI site office at 602-534-3561.