The former Ross School on Ordway Place is East Nashville’s oldest surviving school building. Built between 1907 and 1908, it is a fine example of urban public-school architecture from the early years of the twentieth century. Construction on the school began in 1907, and it opened in September 1908 to serve the growing number of families in the Lockeland Springs neighborhood. The school was named for Marcus M. Ross, a former teacher and principal who had worked in East Nashville public schools.

June 13, 1908 Nashville Banner headline and photo. The school’s exterior was largely finished, although interior work was still underway.

When the school opened in 1908, Ordway Place was then known as Grove Street, and the section of North 14th Street that runs along the side of the school was known as Ordway Avenue. However, within a few years, the street names would soon change to those names that still exist today. A 1908 map of East Nashville shows how the area was changing the year the school opened. The larger country estates were beginning to be divided up for the development of smaller, single-family houses for Nashville’s growing middle class. Spurred by the expansion of the streetcar system, Lockeland Springs in the early twentieth century was fast developing as a desirable middle class suburb of Nashville.
A *Nashville Banner* article from 1907 boasts that the Ross School will “be not only one of the handsomest but one of the most substantial school buildings in the city.” The city allocated a sum of $17,000 for the school’s construction. Although the name of the architect or builder responsible for the building’s design is not known, a 1908 *Nashville Banner* article states, “The building is constructed after the ideas of architects versed in modern school building.”

The two-and-a-half story school is in the NeoClassical style, an architectural style popular at the turn of the twentieth century, especially for schools and other civic buildings. The symmetrical façade, rusticated stone quoins, and square proportions are all hallmarks of the NeoClassical style, as is the lighter beige brick color. The raised arched entryway with recessed doors provides a stately entry for the school. The hipped roof was covered originally in clay tiles, and the brick chimneys have been lost over time, but the school building still retains key NeoClassical features and is remarkably intact.
c. 1925 photo of the Ross School, showing its now-gone clay tile roof and chimneys. Photo from the Nashville Public Library, nashville.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/nr/id/2274.

The school board intended for the new Ross School to relieve the crowded conditions at the Warner School in Edgefield, which had about 1,000 students at the time. The Ross building originally had four rooms, but was designed to be expanded with an additional four rooms to the rear; the school planners correctly surmised that the Lockeland Springs neighborhood would continue to grow rapidly. By 1910, just two years after the school opened, the school had already outgrown the original Ross building, and construction on the rear addition began. As a Tennessean article from 1910 stated, “This became necessary under the large increase in attendance there.” The addition was designed by Asmus & Norton, a prominent local architectural firm best known for the design of the Cathedral of Incarnation. It is possible, although not confirmed, that Asmus & Norton also designed the front part of the school as well. The addition, which doubled the capacity of the school, was completed for the start of the 1911-1912 school year.
1914 Sanborn map of the area, showing the Ross School after the addition was built. It also shows that the Lockeland Springs streets were filling up with new houses. A two-story brick residence stood at the corner of Ordway and North 14th Street, but was demolished in the 1930s, and the school took over the lot for its school yard.

After the 1916 fire that devastated the Edgefield neighborhood of East Nashville, the Ross School was used to continue the teaching of the upper grades of the Warner School, which was completely destroyed in the fire. The Ross students were educated in the morning, and the Warner students attended classes in the afternoon. The 1933 tornado, which caused widespread devastation in much of Lockeland Springs, thankfully spared the Ross School of major damage. A Nashville Banner article from the time stated that the school suffered about $1,500 damage (in 1933 dollars), but it was easily repaired.
Map of the path of the 1933 tornado shows that the area of the Ross School only suffered “Moderate Damage.”

The school was further expanded in 1951 with the construction of the auditorium and cafeteria to the right of the school.

A 1957 Sanborn map shows the Ross school, with the addition of its auditorium and cafeteria.

Ross was not one of the first Nashville schools to be integrated in the late 1950s after the Brown v. Board of Education United States Supreme Court decision. Nashville, like many southern municipalities, was slow to integrate its schools. The first eight schools to be integrated in Nashville were chosen because they had African American students within their areas that lived closer to the white schools than the African American schools they attended. Hattie Cotton on
West Greenwood and Bailey on Greenwood were the two East Nashville schools chosen for the first integration attempts.

By the mid-1980s, the Ross School building was no longer able to accommodate the number of students enrolled in the school, and the school board planned to shutter the old Ross building and construct a new Ross School on McFerrin Avenue. The 1987-1988 school year was the Ross school’s last year on Ordway Place, with the new school on McFerrin opening for the 1988-1989 school year. Thankfully, by this time, the Ordway building was protected from demolition through its inclusion in the Lockeland Springs-East End Neighborhood Conservation Zoning Overlay. It was also listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 as part of the East Nashville Historic District.

The school system subsequently used the old Ross School building for a Head Start preschool program. Most recently, it was home to the Classical charter school, and starting in August 2020, it will be the proud home of the Episcopal School of Nashville.

c. 1949 photo of the Ross School, from the Metro Archives, digital.library.nashville.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/nr/id/150/rec/1
1933 Nashville Banner feature on the Ross School Christmas Play.
The boys of the class of Mrs. W. H. Binns of Ross School, shown above, engaged in a physical and health drill at the East Nashville High School Friday night, as part of a demonstration in which all the classes of the school were represented. The exercises displayed methods of maintaining health by group exercises.
1937 Eighth grade photo of Ross students. Photo from the Nashville Room of the Nashville Public Library, taken here from the book, *East Nashville: Images of America* by E. Michael Fleener.