

THE MCCALL SCHOOL

By Ellen Knight¹

It was school overcrowding that first led to the construction of a junior high school in Winchester. Since then overcrowding also resulted in swapping space with the high school across the road, building a second junior high, constructing building additions, changing class allocations among the school buildings, and more additions and renovations.



*The Wadleigh Grammar School,
located on the site of Chefalo Park*

When the town was young, children over elementary school age went first to the grammar school and then to high school. The town was very proud when a new Wadleigh Grammar School was built in 1901, and a new high school opened in 1904. By the late 1920s both buildings were overcrowded, causing the school committee to lament their “deplorable conditions” and suggest that a new building, a junior high school, be built.

The concept of junior high was new then. At a special Town Meeting in June 1928 one opponent called it “an education experiment and a fad which Winchester could not afford.” Yet the school committee recommended it and researched various sites, settling on Main Street near the fork with Washington Street as the best. It also published drawings of a suggested building.

At that time the Town, faced with other school expenses, voted against spending money to build a new school building. The School Committee did not give up.

“What is there about a Junior High School ... that anybody can object to? As long as our citizens are satisfied with what is being taught in the Wadleigh, what difference does it make to any of us what it is called?” it questioned in 1929.

In 1931, finally, plans went forward. The office of R. Clipston Sturgis was chosen as architect. The original plan was too ambitious for the lean times of the Great Depression, especially as alterations to the high school were being undertaken at the same time. The scope of the building was scaled back, though the design allowed for future enlargement. The school building committee reported in 1931, that it had been “very careful” to plan the building in such a manner that did not call “for any unnecessary things or for necessary things in an amount greater than is called for by wise economy.”



The construction contract was won by the Delaney Construction Company of Lawrence, which had previously built the Washington School. Since the lot rose above the level of the street, it had to be leveled to the grade of Main Street. The materials from the leveling and from the excavation were deposited over the bank onto the lower level, lowering the height of the banking and the steepness of the slope.



First junior high school under construction in the 1930s, viewed from the rear

“The building itself,” the Committee wrote, “is of red water-struck brick with cast-stone trimmings.... On the Main Street front the principal architectural features are the central facade which is entirely of cast-stone including the pillars, and the beautiful central tower which is of wood.”

The style of the facade, as evidenced in the central entrance with its triangular pediment and columns with Corinthian capitals, was neo-classical. The tower, the Committee reported, was “more than a decorative feature. It is the ventilating duct for the entire building and is full of vents for all of the ventilating units.” The lower level in the rear (the area of current attention) was occupied by the gymnasium, with shower and locker rooms and athletic storage space.

The structure was, the Committee was delighted to say, the “first entirely fireproof building. Even the inside trim is metal, with the exception of the doors. The roof is of slate.”

The building, which opened in the fall of 1932 and whose initial enrollment was 378, was planned

to accommodate 450. Since it was thought to be large enough for growth only “for about the next seven years,” it was designed to allow for future enlargement, including extension of the gym to make a double gymnasium, above which would be an auditorium with a seating capacity of about 875 and a cafeteria, plus the addition of classrooms above the wings at each end of the building, expanding the capacity of the building to 870.

HIGH SCHOOL

But when it did come time to enlarge the building, a new scheme was actually put into effect. In 1953 Town Meeting voted to alter the junior high building and convert it into a four-year high school, while the old high school became a two-year junior high.

At this time, following the plan of architect Louis Ross, two wings were added and the interior of the original structure was remodeled. The building was given a new gymnasium, an auditorium, and a cafeteria in the wings rather than in the rear.



Already at its opening in September 1956, the school committee reported that the building, now the high school, “was then operating over capacity.” Planned to accommodate 815 students, it was overcrowded with 1,000.



Ceremony held in the new high school auditorium on March 25, 1956, when it was dedicated as a memorial to the fallen servicemen of WWII

The solution then was to convert it to a three-year high school. Thus, more students than planned attended the junior high, and discussions began about a new building. A second junior high was built in 1961. At this time the existing junior high school was named for Gov. Samuel W. McCall while the new school was named for two Lynch brothers killed during World War II.

After the new high school on Skillings Road was finished in 1972, the former high school was altered and renovated for use again as a junior high (while the former junior high became the Lincoln Elementary School), with a capacity for 850 students.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Following the decision to convert the junior high to a middle school, in 1999 construction began on a 6th-grade wing containing classrooms and a library. Ten years later, a 12-room permanent addition was constructed. In 2018, a six-classroom expansion won voter support.

From the moment its construction was proposed, the McCall building, like other public buildings, has drawn heated discussion over its costs. Over its history debate has arisen over the merits of a junior high versus a grammar school and versus a middle school. Discussions continue over the size, the cost, the look, and the future of the building. Perhaps the only one point of contention that has passed is that the junior high school concept was a fad.

NAMES

Along with physical and use changes, the building has undergone several changes in identity. While under construction the school was known to the committee as the Main Street Building. When finished, its façade identified it as Winchester Junior High School.



Samuel Walker McCall

After the senior high and junior high schools swapped functions in the 1950s, the Main Street building was known as Winchester High School. After a second junior high school was built, the new one was named Lynch in 1961 and the other was named McCall. But the Main Street building was then still housing the high school, so McCall then was across the street from McCall now. In 1972, the new high school building on Skillings Road was finished. The Main Street building was renovated back into a junior high school and took the McCall name. (The old McCall became the new Lincoln Elementary School.)

At the end of the 20th century, McCall Junior High became McCall Middle School, bearing still the name of one of the town's most distinguished and respected citizens, Samuel W. McCall (1851-1923), a U.S. congressman and governor of the commonwealth from 1916 to 1919.

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