

HIGH SCHOOL ON THE HILL LINCOLN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By Ellen Knight¹

Sitting prominently displayed on a small hill overlooking the town center, the building now known as the Lincoln Elementary School, the town's oldest and, some may say, most handsome school building, was designed to be a fine and impressive structure. A century and more later, townspeople continue to regard it as a visual sign of the value the community places on education.

During its lifetime, the building has served the youth of Winchester as the high school, a junior high school, and an elementary school. It has been altered to serve a growing population of students and meet evolving educational standards.



HIGH SCHOOL

“The first thought of every citizen is to build a handsome high school,” wrote a Special Committee on Additional School Accommodations while contemplating a new high school in 1900.²

At that time, the town had just built a new elementary school and was about to build the Wadleigh Grammar School. Economy was important. As the School Committee in 1902 observed, “Schools are unavoidably expensive; good schools, moreover, are very expensive.”

Nevertheless, when it came to the new high school, the committee expected to spend more, not only because of “the necessity of an assembly hall, laboratories, library, offices, etc.” but also “because the town will naturally desire, and should desire, to have its high school an ornamental structure, a credit to the town in future years.”



*High School on School Street, later
Prince Elementary School*

In the year the town was incorporated, 1850, Winchester's first high school class was established, with one master, in one room of the Center schoolhouse. As enrolled increased, the need for a separate building had to be met. In 1866, the town purchased a lot of land between Church and Dix streets and there built a high school. By 1900, this building was overcrowded with 245 students. In 1902, Town Meeting voted to build a new school and appropriated \$110,000 for the purpose.

The site was chosen first. Tradition holds that the location was originally the apple orchard of the first settler, Edward Converse. During the nineteenth century, the entire triangle containing the school building and field was residential, with nine houses standing there in 1898.

The largest lot, stretching between Main and Washington streets, was bequeathed to the town in 1891 by Nancy Symmes Howe. Though her intent was that the town use this land for a new town hall and library, before she died the town had built its combination Town Hall and Library. The town kept the Howe lot in mind for a new school.



School site on Walnut Street across Mill Pond

At the end of that same decade, the Metropolitan Park Commission took the land between Walnut Street and the Howe lot, removing the houses there, in order to widen Walnut Street to become part of Mystic Valley Parkway. In 1898 the Town acquired the land not used for the parkway from the Commission. Combining its lots, the town had a site for a new school, prominently situated overlooking the Mill Pond and town center.

In 1902, the borrowing authority was approved and a building committee appointed. Plans for a new high school on the Howe lot went forward.

DESIGN



Architect Herbert D. Hale of Boston designed the building "with the idea of including in its general arrangement all that is needed by a modern High School. Its style is that of the Georgian period, and it is constructed, above the granite base, of gray brick with light terra cotta trimmings."

The School Committee report of 1903 dwelt at length on the “rich and beautiful design,” the brown ash finish, maple floors, quartered-oak library, the mosaic floor and marble stairs of the vestibule, and the pilasters and cornice of classic design in the entrance hall.



The building was designed not only to be handsome and useful but also to be healthful. Set on a hill, the first floor was elevated above the dirty ground. There were doors at either end of the main corridor so that air could be flushed through, and many large windows let in both sunlight and fresh air. The windows were high “to give a maximum amount of light” and the walls painted olive green, “the color which is the least harmful to scholars’ eyes.”

In its report, School Committee emphasized the heating plant, which could supply either heated or cool air into each room. “The fan system is used, the air being taken from outside the building into the cold air room; from this point it passes through heated steam coils and is forced by the fan into the various rooms at a required temperature. The warmed air enters each room near the ceiling and the foul air is taken away by separate ducts near the floor. By the same system cool air is supplied in hot weather. This plan conforms with the requirements of the state laws.” The committee also noted that “the cornice and base boards are curved, after the manner of hospital finish, so that there may be a minimum of dust.”

Exercise was also part of the new hygiene, and the building had a drill hall with adjacent locker rooms for boys and girls. There was also a separate lunch room to keep food separate from other areas.

The committee evidently took pride in every aspect of the building. It had state-of-the-art systems, including a master clock in the principal’s office regulating all the schoolroom clocks and a “telephone exchange affording communication with all parts of the building.”



On the first level was the entrance to the two-story drill hall and gymnasium, plus the locker rooms, mechanical room, and a bicycle room. The first and second floors each had four classrooms and two recitation rooms, the latter for the use of small classes, plus offices for both the principal and superintendent. The library (*pictured left*) was located on the second floor, as was the assembly hall, located over the gym. The third floor contained science labs, a drawing room under a skylight with an adjacent area “for casts,” and a photographic room with a dark room across the hall.



Original auditorium

Ground was broken in November 1902. The basement was excavated closer to Washington than Main Street since it was then thought that left sufficient land for a future public library. The cornerstone was laid the next May. It bears the date 1903, since the contract with the H. P. Cummings Company called for the building to be finished that November. However, difficulties obtaining the required brick and slate prolonged the construction period. The building was completed and opened for inspection by the public on May 30, 1904. Two days later it was dedicated, and the new high school opened for classes the next September.

Residents donated many of the furnishings, including books and furnishings for the library, a stereopticon, two pianos, clocks, gymnasium apparatus, and kitchenware. An appeal by the committee for decorations resulted in a long list of donated artworks, reproductions of paintings, busts, and statues, photographs, and original artworks by local artists W. H. W. Bicknell and Helen Pressey.



Class of 1910

The educational program was designed to match the fine new building, and both were alleged to improve the students. "The High School occupies the most expensive building in the town; the teachers are nearly all college graduates, and the cost of instruction is much greater than in any other of our town schools," Superintendent Robert C. Metcalf reported in 1905. "We are able to report improvement in several lines of work and are hopeful of still greater improvement in the future. The general tone of the school, its morale, is good. Our boys seem more manly, our girls more womanly."

The building committee predicted a long life for the building. "The building as it stands will easily accommodate 450 pupils, and nearly one hundred more with slight crowding, so that it should answer the needs of the town until its population reaches eighteen or twenty thousand," it reported. "Furthermore, provision is made in the plans for a future enlargement, in architectural harmony with the original structure, that will care for more than two hundred additional pupils."

With the population not surpassing 20,000 until 1960, the school capacity should have lasted for a half century. However, the 1903 concept of crowding was different from that of today. The classrooms, measuring 26 by 33 feet, were meant to accommodate 42 desks each, twice as many as teachers want now. Not simply unsuited for today's educational standards, already by 1930 the building was not considered "a complete scholastic and athletic plant" and was ready for the first of its alteration projects.



1930S EXPANSION

A recurring theme in the history of Winchester's schools, the outgrowing of its schools, is documented in the building overlooking Mill Pond more than any other school building. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the town had a new grammar school and high school, both including "all of the modern improvements and conveniences, complete in every detail" and both expected to house the school population for a good long time.



By the late 1920s both buildings were overcrowded, causing the school committee to lament their "deplorable conditions" and to suggest building a new junior high school and enlarging the high school. The need for space was considered so acute that, despite the advent of the Great Depression, the building committee reported that the citizens desired the new school "and are equally insistent that our high school should be added to and altered to make a complete scholastic and athletic plant."

The aspect of the high school considered particularly inadequate was "that part devoted to physical exercises." The original building had, within the footprint of the present library, a drill hall on the ground floor with an assembly hall above it.

Under the direction of the School Building Committee of 1931, architect Ralph Harrington Doane designed a new auditorium with a seating capacity of 750 and a gymnasium, with separate boys' and girls' entrances, to lie side by side behind the original structure.

This required taking more land. Through 1931, the high school was still sharing the triangle between Main and Washington streets with a half dozen residences. In March 1931, Town Meeting authorized taking five of the eight privately owned lots by eminent domain (with the last three being acquired in the 1940s). (*Construction took the building right up to one of the old houses.*)





1946 aerial view of the high school

The former auditorium wing, given two new floors, was used for two new large study rooms and four new classrooms. In addition, the library was enlarged and various new storage, locker, and rest rooms were added. A new cafeteria was created in the basement. Reportedly, the building had a classroom capacity for 700 pupils.

The committee stated in its 1931 report that both junior and senior high schools “furnish a complete layout” without calling “for the expenditure of money for any unnecessary things or for necessary things in an amount greater than is called for by wise economy.” But both projects ran over budget. The original high school building had been built within its appropriation of \$110,000. In 1931 Town Meeting appropriated \$30,000 for the alterations and \$120,000 for the addition. The bids came in high, and “a considerable portion of the high school was rebid.”

The alterations produced a deficit of \$8,000, and the addition ran \$4,000 over budget. There were a variety of complications. “The financial embarrassment of several of our contractors considerably increased our problems,” the committee reported in 1932. A sprinkler system, advocated by the Insurance Committee, was added. “Extras” were ordered by consulting engineers. Certain sections of the foundation had to be broadened or strengthened.



“We have well in mind the need of economy,” the committee wrote, but also expressed its belief that it had good plans for a building that was not only adequate and attractive but also economical in cost. The committee asked Town Meeting for additional funds and got them. Despite all the problems, the work proceeded at a satisfactory pace and the school opened on schedule in September 1932. An estimated 3,000 visited the school (and the junior high) during a public open house.

1950S - JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Thirty years later, the town wanted to expand its junior high school. Further, it decided to alter it to be the high school and adapt the existing high school to be a two-year junior high school. Thus, in the 1950s, Winchester’s high school building underwent another modernization and its first identity change.

While cost concerns were prominent in the 1930s reports, schedule problems stand out in the

official 1950s reports. Delays on the old junior high caused delays on the old high school, which was a particular nuisance since students from both schools had to attend school on a double session in the high school during a large part of the reconstruction of former junior high.

Designed by architect Jerome Bailey Foster, remodeling of the old high school began after the close of school in June 1955. The next January, junior high school students moved into the building, then considered adequate for 640 pupils.

The newspaper report following the public open house stated that “if the comments heard thus far are any criterion, the many persons who shared in carrying this project to a successful conclusion deserve the thanks of the community.” Further, the writer said, “their success goes far to prove that, with proper planning and a judicious use of materials, an old building can be successfully remodeled.”



While a similar claim was made prior to the latest renovation of the building, it is ironic that the first two remodelings praised in 1956 were the very ones condemned during the latest project. “The visitors of Sunday were pleased to see that the architect has preserved the best features of the old school while adding greatly to its comfort, beauty, and efficiency. The dignified lines of the original structure are still there, but a sense of newness has been gained by three small additions - the attractive bay window facing Mystic Valley Parkway, the automobile canopy on Washington street (*pictured left*), and the lounge lobby on the Main Street side.”



All three features are now gone. The lounge lobby, with a mural by WHS graduate Donald Warren, was a casualty of overcrowding before the latest renovation. The bay window was eliminated during the renovation, as was the automobile canopy with its sloping roof, “designed to baffle the noise from the traffic of Washington Street,” considered an eyesore by the end of the century.

The reporter in 1956 also praised the use of old blackboards for walls at the side entrances, spacious rooms with “luminous ceilings,” the durable vinyl floor tiling, and the desk chairs designed “for more strength and book room and for better posture.” The cafeteria was reduced in size to permit construction of a suite of wood and metal working and drawing shops. In the cafeteria the writer supposed that “mothers will drool at the glittering display of stainless steel equipment.” The school had a new feature, a teachers’ workroom. Also noted were the use of the auditorium balcony for a music room, the new acoustical ceiling in the gym, the economics suite with rooms for sewing and cooking replacing the old study halls, and the science rooms.

LINCOLN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

As soon as the remodeled junior and senior high schools opened, the school committee was again considering changes because of overcrowding at the junior high. The eventual solution was to build a second junior high, which opened in 1961 and was named Lynch while the existing junior high was named for Gov. Samuel McCall.

But two junior high schools did not solve the town's secondary school building problems for long. In 1972, a new high school was opened, the former high school reverted to being a junior high school (now McCall Middle School), and the building that had been successively the Winchester High School, Winchester Junior High School, and McCall Junior High School became an elementary school. It took its name from the former Lincoln Elementary School which had been located between Chester and Florence streets and was in use from 1925 to 1972.



Lincoln School in 1978

RENOVATION

At the end of the twentieth century, the identity of the Lincoln School building almost changed again. By the 1990s, the building was in dire need of repair and was outmoded according to modern educational standards. In 1996, the new Educational Facilities Planning and Building Committee (EFPBC), charged with creating a master plan for school building improvements, recommended that a new elementary school be built at the site of the Mystic School and that the Lincoln building be used for swing space during the renovation of the other schools. A new building then appeared to be more economical than renovating the old school. Voters, however, voted down the override that would have provided funding for the new school.

That fall the committee was given a new charge to scale back the building project for the Lincoln district. The next spring town meeting voted funding for immediate repairs, including a new roof and cornice, while the fate of the building was being studied. The task of scaling back the renovation plan for Lincoln was given over in June 1997 to a Lincoln subcommittee, while the full committee was occupied with the renovation/expansion of the middle school. The subcommittee was able to scale back the Lincoln renovation project and address building code compliance so that its estimated cost appeared to make renovation a viable option to the new school.

After HMFH Architects developed architectural plans for both sites, a cost estimate indicated that the renovation would be the less expensive option. At a public hearing held in November 1998, residents overwhelmingly supported the renovation. In addition to advocating the cost savings, speakers pointed up many of the features that had distinguished the building over the years, its handsome presence and proximity to the town center, the auditorium which was used by the community as well as the school, the amount of natural light and the importance of physical

environment to study and the students. The committee then voted for the renovation.

Voters passed an override to pay for the school in March 1999, and HMFH Architects completed the designs. Bids came in high. As in 1931, the building committee went back to Town Meeting, which voted an additional appropriation so that the entire project could be funded. The construction contract was awarded to the Seaver Construction Company.

The Lincoln School building was again made larger, with a small addition containing new art and music classrooms and with a new parkway entrance lobby. It was given new systems (including air conditioning), repaired, renewed, and brought up to code. Though not entirely finished, the building reopened and classes resumed in September 2002.

Not only renewed, the building entered its second century with much of its architectural integrity restored. The roof-top balustrade, the central entrance facing the parkway, and the square-cut porch entrance on Washington Street (actually a remnant of the original porte-cochère) were brought back. Though the original features were not exactly replicated, the additions were brought into harmony with Hale's design.

Thus the building that was originally the pride of the Winchester school system and was called a "grand old lady" when the choice to renovate was put to the public continues its life in the civic center, a continuing symbol of the central position education holds in the life of the town.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Oct. 2 and Oct. 4, 2002. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² Committee and educator quotations are taken from the town's annual reports.