

# **The Schools In Charlestown**

## **An Historical Sketch**

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### **Pioneer Beginnings: The 1600's**

For the pioneer settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, education of the young ranked as a high priority. Within six years of the settlement of Charlestown and Boston, the General Court, in 1636, ambitiously ordered that a college be established at Newtowne (now Cambridge) that eventually became Harvard College. In that same year, the town fathers of Charlestown established the town's first grammar school. On June 3, 1636 Mr. William Witherell was engaged to "keep a school" for a twelve-month period, beginning in August. The teacher's salary of forty pounds was to be paid from voluntary taxation. Thus, a free public school was established in Charlestown, beginning a civic tradition that has lasted over 350 years, down to the present day. Charlestown's groundbreaking innovations in education are much in evidence over those years as problems encountered were solved in creative ways. Charlestown's 1636 action preceded by 11 years the passage of a law by the Massachusetts Bay Colony's legislature requiring all towns to maintain free public schools.

It is unclear where school was "kept" until the year 1648 when the first schoolhouse was ordered to be built on "Windmill Hill," (now Town Hill), and paid for by a "general rate." The schoolhouse was much in need of repair by 1666 according to the then schoolmaster, the "renowned" Ezekiel Cheever, who also complained that his salary was in arrears. In 1671 Cheever was succeeded by another "celebrated" teacher, Benjamin Thompson, whose annual pay of 30 pounds was to be supplemented by a tuition fee of 20 shillings per student paid by the parents. "Free" public education was no longer entirely so. Thompson was charged to prepare for college "such youth as are capable of it," evidence of an early "college preparatory" track.

In 1674, Thompson was, in turn, replaced by Samuel Phipps, also descended from one of Charlestown's "first families" who arrived with Winthrop in 1630. Apparently teachers were now to be selected on the basis of their moral character as well as their scholarship. The selectmen chose Phipps with the "advice and consent" of the town's two ministers. In 1679, the free school was reestablished and the schoolmaster's annual pay was raised to 50 pounds plus a "convenient house." The chief subjects taught were reading, writing, cyphering and Latin, foreshadowing the "Latin Schools" of a later age.

In 1682 a new schoolhouse was built "with a turret on it for the bell" to call the children to school, a necessity in an age when clocks were few and even the town hail did not have one until 1713. While the physical facilities were being improved the quality of teaching was apparently in decline. In 1691, Charlestown was cited in the county court for its "neglect" while searching for a competent teacher. Concern was also expressed by the officers of the Crown that youth were being insufficiently trained to be loyal British subjects and unless this was rectified, "there is no hope that this people will prove royal," a most prescient observation. Given the events of the succeeding century it is apparent that "twigs" of liberty and independence were being bent early on.

## **Growing Pains: The 1700's**

In 1697 the school received a great chair and new school bell. In 1702, the schoolmaster's yearly salary was back at 40 pounds where it had started in 1636. (Inflation was definitely not a problem in the 17th century.) Mr. Peleg Wissell became the new schoolmaster in 1704.

In 1712, the first women teachers appear. Children of the poor and those "whose parents are not able to bring them to school" were to be taught in "such woman's schools as shall be allowed by the selectmen." School overcrowding also had become an issue. The school had so many small children in need of attention that the "Latin scholars" could not be adequately attended to. Samuel Phipps (who was now a private tutor and a Captain in the militia) and Jonathan Dowse were appointed to "inspect and regulate" the matter. The first School Committee had been born.

In 1714, the need for a larger school was recognized and acted upon. After rejecting a site in the market square, the new building, 20 by 30 feet, was erected near the site of the old one atop Town Hill. In that Charlestown's boundaries extended far beyond the Neck in those days, tuition payments were instituted for the instruction of children near Reading, and in 1718, near Medford. After following this solution for a number of years, a second school building was finally built "beyond the Neck" in 1736.

Inflation was creeping into the economy: in 1718 the schoolmaster's annual salary was up to 60 pounds; by 1724 it had reached 80 pounds; and in 1748 was set at 100 pounds. Also in 1748, a permanent School Committee was appointed and tasked with quarterly visits to the schools to examine them and the children enrolled. In 1764, the Town Hill school once again was deemed inadequate in size and space in the old town house was converted to that use along with the hiring of an additional writing-master and reading-master. The days of the one-room schoolhouse and a single schoolmaster were over.

The continuity of Charlestown schools was interrupted by the American Revolution. On April 19, 1775, the day of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the historic record states, forebodingly, "the schools were dismissed." In June of that same year, the Charlestown grammar school "within the Neck" went up in flames along with the rest of the town as a result of British cannon fire during the Battle of Bunker Hill.

## **Immigration and Industrialization: The 1800's**

As the population returned and the town was rebuilt following the Revolution, new schools were needed. The first one was established on the now-traditional site of Charlestown schools: atop Town Hill. There, in 1801, the first Harvard School was built, a two story building. A second school followed in 1805, the Bunker Hill School on Bunker Hill Street to serve the east side of Charlestown. Both schools were enlarged and rebuilt on the same sites, the Harvard School in 1847 and the Bunker Hill School in 1845. When a new larger Harvard School was built on Devens Street in 1872, the former school on Town Hill became the Samuel Dexter School. It operated as such into the 1940's. Converted to condominium apartments in 1985, it is now part of The Courtyard complex.

The Training Field School, later called the Winthrop School, was built on the Training Field in 1827. It was moved across Common Street to its present site in 1847 and continued to function as the Nahum Chapin School until well into the 20th century. A new Winthrop School was built at Lexington and Bunker Hill Street in 1847, serving as such until 1874 when it was converted to

other municipal uses. An imposing 3-story brick and sandstone “modern Gothic” building, named the Frothingham School in honor of Richard Frothingham, state representative and noted historian, was built on Tremont Street, corner of Prospect Street, in 1876. It is now gone. The 1845 Bunker Hill School was abandoned and replaced by a school of the same name on Baldwin Street in 1866.

The 2-story Warren School was built on Salem Street in 1839-40 and replaced by a 3-story building on nearby Summer Street in 1868. The Prescott School of 1857 was built on a site off Medford Street at the far end of the Bunker Hill Burying Ground. Both these long-gone schools gave their names to the modern Warren-Prescott School which occupies the site of the former Warren School.

Charlestown’s first high school was constructed on Monument Square in 1847-48. It was replaced by a second larger high school on the same site in 1870. Finally a third and still larger granite high school with neo-classic features was built in the same location in 1907 and served well until a modern high school was built on Medford Street on the site of the former Prescott School in the 1970’s.

In all, over fifteen public schools were constructed in Charlestown in the 19th century, each one larger than the last. This was a symptom of the town’s growth due to the migrations of job seekers to urban industrial plants and the waves of foreign immigration, especially during the period of the Irish potato famine in the 1840’s. Schools were transformed from teaching only the three “R’s” (plus Latin for the college bound) to preparing both boys and girls for their roles in a modern industrial society through practical courses in domestic sciences for the girls and technical and mechanical subjects for the boys.

### **Technological Change: The 1900’s**

After 1900 the pace of new school construction in Charlestown abated. Only two new schools were built in the first half of the 20th century: the Oliver Holden Elementary School (late 1920’s) and the Clarence R. Edwards Middle School (1932). Schools in the 20th century were challenged by the demands of rapid technological change, the turbulence of world wars and human rights struggles, and massive demographic and social changes including new immigrations. Educating for needed technical skills as well as essential cultural and human values has often meant that the Internet and Shakespeare got equal time in the classroom.

The momentum provided by urban renewal programs in the 1960’s and ‘70’s generated the construction of three large modern school buildings to replace the several smaller obsolete and inefficient school buildings surviving from the 19th century. This initiative produced the Warren-Prescott School in 1963; the Harvard-Kent School in 1972; and the new Charlestown High School in 1978. Most of the former schools were renovated into apartment houses enjoyed by their occupants for their roominess, high ceilings, large windows and historic character.

### **Private Schools**

Private schools have long been an important part of the educational scene in Charlestown. The earliest evidence of a private school in the town is the complaint lodged by town schoolmaster Ezekiel Cheever in 1666 that the selectmen had suffered a “Mr. Mansfield to teach and take away his scholars.” Samuel Phipps, noted schoolmaster appointed in 1674, perhaps worn down by his

assignment's demands, had turned, by 1686, to the easier task of tutoring two or three students in his private grammar school. In 1749, the selectmen allowed one Matthew Cushing to "keep a private school in this town."

Charlestown's willingness to adopt innovations in education blossomed again in the 1820s and 1830s with the founding of two of the earliest boarding schools in the country for the intellectual training of young ladies. The movement to offer young women education beyond the grammar school level had been gathering momentum since 1814 when Catherine Fiske began the Young Ladies Seminary in Keene, N.H. This pioneering effort was followed in 1821 with the establishment of the Troy Female Seminary by Emma Willard in Troy, N.Y. In 1828, Boston's Catholic Bishop Benedict Fenwick founded, in Charlestown, the Mount Benedict Academy, a Catholic convent and finishing school for young women. The Academy was built just north of the Neck in an area that is now part of Somerville. Staffed by Ursuline nuns, it gained an excellent reputation and was attended by the daughters of both Catholic and Protestant families. To Charlestown's great shame, an intolerant mob burned the Academy in 1834.

A second school for young women, the Charlestown Female Seminary at 30 Union Street, was established in 1831. Founded by two First Baptist Church pastors, Dr. William Collier and Dr. Henry Jackson, it gave its name to Seminary Street.

Charlestown again adopted innovative educational practice in 1833 when the doors of the Infant School Society were opened on Warren Street. The Society provided an early version of day care, Head Start, and kindergarten for the care and education of the children of poor working mothers. A similar Society had been established in Boston in 1828. The Society's school, supported by the town's Protestant societies, was still active as late as 1887.

With the rapid growth of the Catholic community in Charlestown in the latter half of the 19th century, three parishes were eventually established. Each parish church founded its own parochial school: St. Francis de Sales in 1891, St. Mary's in 1892, and St. Catherine's in 1911. All contributed mightily to the education of Charlestown children over the past century. One consolidated parochial school now serves Charlestown: the Charlestown Catholic Elementary School established in 1993 and located in the former St. Catherine's School.

The most recent innovative private school to appear in Charlestown is the Holden School on Pearl Street. Founded in 1976, it renovated and occupied the city's former Oliver Holden School building in 1980. Sponsored by a private non-profit organization, the school provides special education classes for adolescents.

### **Cherish the Schools**

Charlestown's striving to educate its young has been attended by great effort and expenditure, strong community support, many innovations and much success. Reunions of old schoolboys and schoolgirls occur annually to celebrate happy memories and youthful achievements. Perhaps Rev. Thomas Shepard of the Charlestown church said it best in 1672: "Let the schools flourish; this is one of the means whereby we have been, and may be still preserved from a wilde wilderness state, through God's blessing upon the same. Cherish them!"