

BUILDING WINCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL ON SKILLINGS ROAD

By Ellen Knight¹

The high school may be crowded, but the cost for a new one is too high and anyway there's no place to put it. Maybe the town can get by with the old one.

Sentiments like this were not only being said in 2010 when the high school was under study for replacement or rebuild but were also said back in the 1960s before the building was first built.



The Skillings Road high school when new

The high school building on Skillings Road was the third specifically built as a high school. When the town was incorporated in 1850, its first high school class was established in one room of the Center schoolhouse. As enrollment 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, giving School Street its name.

By 1900, this building was overcrowded with 245 students. In 1904, a new and thoroughly up-to-date high school opened on the hill overlooking Mill Pond. By the 1920s it was overcrowded. In 1931, the building was enlarged. A year later, the new junior high school opened across Main Street, and these two buildings served the secondary school population for many years.

Following the end of World War II, the population in Winchester boomed. The town had five elementary schools but steadily needed more and more classrooms. The new Parkhurst School opened in 1949 and 6 years later got an addition. Mystic was enlarged in 1950; Washington was renovated and enlarged in 1952. The new Vinson-Owen School opened in 1961; Muraco and Ambrose followed in 1967 and 1970.

Meanwhile the town was also dealing with secondary school growth. In the mid-1950s, after much debate, a referendum vote, and special Town Meetings, the junior high school was expanded with two new wings and reopened as the high school. The old high school was remodeled to be the junior high school.

Was it enough? Not at all. As soon as the remodeled 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, opened in 1961 and named Lynch while the old junior high was named for Gov. Samuel McCall.

This was not a lasting solution either. The League of Women Voters reported in 1964 on crowding in the high school building, noting that areas designated on the 1955 building plans as

“emergency rooms” were used immediately and that some rooms had been partitioned. The teachers’ lounge and a physical education instruction room were converted to academic classrooms. Science rooms doubled as labs with chairs placed between lab tables. The auditorium was used as a study hall. Four lunch periods were required.

*On Sept. 18, 1959 the Winchester Star published this photo of students waiting for a seat in the cafeteria. A second photo showed students jammed in the corridor while changing classes.
(Bill Ryerson photo)*



PERMANENT BUILDING COMMITTEE

In 1963, Town Meeting created a Permanent Building Committee (PBC) to study the situation and make recommendations. The PBC retained an independent consultant, John Marshall, to assess the needs of the whole system.

“Every change suggested to improve teaching and learning for tomorrow’s young people has a bearing on the space, comfort, equipment, and relationships that must be built into the secondary school of tomorrow,” Marshall reported. “Either the school fits the program, and these things can go on; or it places a ceiling on the imagination and resourcefulness of the teachers, and the best parts of the educational program cannot happen.”

In its 1965 report, the PBC outlined four main alternatives for a facility for 1,500 students:

- 1 build additions to the high school and one of the junior highs,
- 2 remodel and add onto the Lynch and make it the high school,
- 3 join the high school and McCall school together with a new addition between them (closing off that block of Main Street) and use that as the high school (similar to a proposal made in the 1950s) and build a new junior high, and
- 4 build a new high school on a new site.

Although Marshall, the PBC’s own expert, recommended option 3, the PBC itself recommended option 4, a new school. The committee considered it would best provide the needed kinds of spaces for a modern education program, readily permit internal changes of sizes and uses of spaces, best lend itself to additions, and provide adequate outdoor facilities. The high school could go back to being a junior high school, and the junior high could be an elementary school.

This was the most expensive option but, the committee opined, “really offers a superior solution on a long-range basis for the secondary school problem.”

The difficult question was, where to put it. The PBC thought 30 acres was required. The largest lots east of Cambridge Street included the Leonard Field-Tufts Road area, the land where the old Beggs & Cobb tannery had stood between Swanton and Main streets plus adjacent Town park

land, and the Town Forest. Up the hill west of Cambridge Street there were several tracts of land of suitable size.

The PBC recommended a location on the west side known as the Turkey Ridge tract, 46 acres stretching from Johnson Road to High Street. True, it was not centrally located, but no central site had comparable acreage. The committee rejected the Beggs & Cobb land and park land because the former was under development for apartments (Parkview) and the latter “includes the Aberjona river [and] is not suitable for playing fields.”

TOWN MEETING ACTION

But what the PBC put into its report in 1965 and what actually got funded at Town Meeting in 1968 were two different things. Townspeople reacted in various ways to the report. Some liked the Marshall plan. Some objected to the west side location and the need to bus. Still others objected to a new school entirely, saying it was too costly and might not actually be needed if the projected statistics did not hold true.

The majority of Town Meeting favored a new school but rejected the proposed site and instructed the PBC to find a more central one. The solution was to use an almost 11-acre parcel of park land to the east of the railroad above Skillings Road and a 16-acre parcel to the west. These were not easy sites to develop. In the three years between the committee report and its request for an appropriation, the estimated cost about doubled. And the actual cost was higher still.

The year 1968 was another turbulent year for Town Meeting. It approved a proposal to spend over \$10 million on a new high school building at the start of the year. It had a motion to reconsider at the end of it. And just when the issue seemed to be settled, it was reopened in 1969.

In Feb. 1968, the Permanent Building Committee sponsored a warrant article requesting an appropriation of \$10,070,000 for a new high school building and playing fields at Shore Road. It got it by a vote of 155 to 24.

THE SITE

Back in Colonial times, the site used for the high school was meadow area which was flowed by the seasonal operation of the dam at Mill Pond. Industrialization ruined it. The railroad cut through it. Factories polluted the river water which passed through two, later one culvert under the railroad and swamped out to the east and west. The shores were used as dumps, and refuse from the Beggs & Cobb tannery was starting to fill the pond west of the railroad. In 1939, the railroad freight yard was moved to an acre near the west swamp. After the incinerator was built in 1960, incinerator ash was put there.

Beginning about 1917 through 1935, a park was developed east of the railroad by filling in the northern end of Judkins Pond over the course of several years. At that time, Shore Road ran all the way up to Spruce Street, and the field took its name from the road. The field was bounded by Shore Road, Nelson Street and, after it was built in the 1950s, Skillings Road.



1931 aerial photograph showing (right) the filling in of the north end of Judkins Pond to make a field and the swamping of the river to the left of the railroad tracks. Skillings Road did not yet exist.



*Shore Road Field on Nov. 22, 1963
(Bill Ryerson photo)*

As landscape architect Herbert Kellaway predicted in 1928, fill deposited on the soft mud there sank and required refilling. Football games annually ruined the field. In the 1950s, with the creation of the Skillings Bypass, the field was shored up and then in 1962 was compacted and reinforced as a playing field. It was supposed to be firm enough to build on.

To the west of the railroad, the river ran through land judged unsuitable for park land. It had been used to take refuse from the tannery, excavated material from the ponds, and incinerator ashes. In the first half of the 20th century, it was used as a town dump. To take it for the school, the PBC stated, “required the reclamation of otherwise unusable and unattractive land by putting the Aberjona River into a culvert [actually three culverts] and grading the area.”

The site, however, did have an access road. In the mid-1950s when the railroad tracks were elevated, Skillings Road was also created. The elevated tracks between the school and field sites required a third construction project, a tunnel to provide access between the two school properties.



GETTING STARTED



Once the \$10M appropriation was voted, the PBC hired Richard White Sons, Inc. to do the playfields (on the opposite side of the railroad from Shore Road Field). The river was channeled into three culverts and covered with ash and other materials. The tunnel was dug.

The PBC also chose the firm of Crimp, Brown & Fisher to design the school. This firm specialized in high school and college buildings. Their architects designed several schools in Lexington, the Massasoit Community College in

Brockton, and other buildings throughout Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

But one Town Meeting vote did not settle the matter. Opposition to what some considered a luxury continued and led to a special Town Meeting that November to reconsider the appropriation. Proponents acknowledged the price was high, but it was supposed to solve the secondary school space problem once and for all. The proposal to reconsider failed 175-4.



Model of the proposed school



Secondary School Building Subcommittee, Joseph Gibson, Andrew Nichols, architect Frank Crimp, Philip Tesorero, & Arthur Dunbar, addressing a precinct meeting in Oct. 1969

Yet another Town Meeting vote was needed in 1969. Early that year the PBC opened the bids. They came in about \$3M above budget. The PBC tried to cut costs (e.g., taking out a planned swimming pool) but had to ask Town Meeting for an additional \$3.1M.

In October, Town Meeting voted approval. Opposition persisted. A referendum petition led to a town-wide vote in November. That vote supported the Town Meeting vote 3,209 to 2,048. In January 1970, a new round of bids came in, and the project went forward.

THE NEW SCHOOL

The White Construction Company was awarded the contract to build the school. Although a concrete-trucking strike interrupted the work, the contractor was able to manage things to stay ahead of schedule. Despite retiring from his firm, architect Frank Crimp continued to supervise the construction phase directly. Construction continued through 1971 and reached substantial completion in January 1972. In April 1972, the building was first occupied by students.²



A scene from the dedication of the high school on Skillings Road



Two views of Winchester High School on Skillings Road

In the foreground above is the site of the future Jenks Senior Center next to Judkins Pond and the Town Hall parking lot. The photograph to the right was taken after the Center was constructed.



¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Dec. 29-30, 2010. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² Since this article was first published, the school has been rebuilt on the same site, using the same steel structure and retaining the original shape, with the exception of a few small additions.