

# The Quest

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Alive  
at  
125

Allison & Hallam Avenues

Washington School District

Washington, Pa. 15301-6994

## 125 Years and Still Going Strong



First Public School in City was located on Franklin Street, between Main and Beau Streets.

### The Early Years 1795 - 1867

Five young ladies receiving diplomas from the old Union School on May 17, 1867, marked the genesis of one hundred twenty-five years of educational excellence for Washington School District in graduating students. But even before this time, Washington School District had a rich educational history and was the benchmark for many other districts in the state of Pennsylvania.

From 1795 until 1809, the only schooling available to Washington youngsters was through private tutoring as offered by Nicholas Charles Visineer who advertised his services in the local newspaper. Then in 1796 William Porter opened his Red School on the corner of Wheeling and College Streets on a private basis until the 1830's when it became part of the public school system which began, for all intents and purposes, when the Washington County Commissioners appropriated \$100 for the education of poor children.

In April of 1809, the Pennsylvania Legislature passed "an act to provide for the education of the poor gratis," and the County commissioners were directed to list all children between the ages of 5 and 12 whose parents were too poor to pay for education. These children were sent to the most convenient "subscription" schools, taught by a young man, hired by a

group of parents who combined their monies to pay his salary. Bills for tuition and supplies were sent to the County for payment.

Some twenty-one years later, because of concern for the sorry state of education, due to poorly educated and/or incompetent teachers and complaints about the distinctions made between "rich and poor" children, a town meeting was called in December, 1830, to discuss common school instruction and to determine whether a better system could be created. A committee of eleven citizens was appointed to study the situation, the result of which was that the group played an integral part in persuading the legislature to pass the Public School Act of 1834.

As a result of this legislation, the first School Board Meeting in Washington was convened on September 25, 1834, and continued to meet until April 25, 1843. The members of this board included Col. James Ruple, Dr. John Wishart, John L. Gow, who became the board's first secretary, Jacob Slagle, James Shannon, and James Reed. On November 29, 1834, the first district meeting with citizens in attendance was held to discuss financial matters. At that time, the board recommended the assessment of \$600 in additional taxes to support the schools for the coming year. It was not until the December 6, 1834 meeting that the decision to raise taxes was finally allowed to pass.

Another important decision by this school board occurred on April 24, 1835. A female school was to be opened in the rooms of the Market House which stood on the corner of Main and Beau Streets for the rental fee of \$25 per year. At the next meeting in June, the citizens approved \$1,000 to be used to operate the schools for the year beginning April 1, 1836, because in those days, the school year began in May or June and lasted for about five and one-half months. It was also agreed that

no child under 5 years of age would be admitted to borough schools. The Reverend Charles Wheeler was appointed to teach at the female school at the annual salary of \$450, out of which he hired and paid his own assistant. George Freeby was also appointed at this meeting as principal of the male school at a salary of \$300 per year.

In May of 1836, the school board decided to build its first schoolhouse, and in August it approved a bid by Joseph Martin to erect a 28 x 60 feet building for \$725 on South Franklin Street. The first school building continued in use for some 19 years until the Union School was completed in 1855.

By July, 1837, the Washington School Board presided over five schools. No. 1, located in the rented basement of the Methodist Church on West Beau, had an enrollment of 100 students and was run by Henry Williams at a monthly salary of \$33.33. No. 2, the new building on South Franklin Street, was taught by Charles Wheeler at the same salary of \$33.33 per month and had 72 students in attendance.

At the corner of East Wheeling and South College Streets stood No. 3, which housed 72 students, and it was administered to by Miss Catherine Ashbrook whose salary was \$14 per month. The fourth school located on West Cherry Alley had 80 students enrolled, and they were taught by Miss Rebecca Wheeler at \$12.50 per month. Phillip Potter taught at School No. 5 on West Pine Alley at a monthly salary of \$20; there were 30 students on the roster there.

The curriculum in the 1840's of the borough schools included such courses as orthography, spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, natural philosophy, geography, and elocution at a cost of 75 cents per month, per student. Texts in use at the time were Murray's *English Reader and English Grammar*, Cob's *U. S. Spelling Book*, and Osgood's graded readers. It was not



until the 1860's that McGuffey's readers were used in Washington.

Co-education in Washington began quite by accident due to the illness of one female teacher and the incompetence of another, leading John L. Gow to combine several schools in town, and to grade them "according to advancement and without regard to age or sex." The plan met with protest and resistance, yet it continued from 1848 until 1853 until everyone became used to the idea.

On May 2, 1853, the Washington School Board decided to build a new school to house both primary and secondary students. The Union School was considered to be a model for its time, because it was designed to meet with Gow's co-educational plan where students were assigned to grades according to achievement. Work began on the new school in 1853 at a projected cost of between \$9,000 and \$10,000, but when it was completed on the corner of East Beau and North Lincoln Streets in 1855, the three-story building had a price tag of \$16,000, and the furnishings were another \$2,500.

Six hundred citizens attended the dedication of Union School on July 3, 1855, with Professor E. C. Wines, D. D., delivering the address. Alexander M. Gow was principal, and there were eight teachers who fulfilled the needs of students: William Blair, Rebecca Turner, Mary Lindsey, Sarah Hull, Elizabeth Warrick, Catherine Sisson, Martha Smith, and Mary Kaine.

Before Union School was completed, in May, 1854, John L. Gow was elected as Superintendent of Washington County schools — the first to be elected. He found that directors were derelict to duty, "school houses were ill-adapted to their purpose." There were many incompetent teachers, poor textbooks, and a universal apathy on the part of parents for schools. Gow noticed that teachers' time was used to "keeping order, listening to complaints, settling quarrels, doing the necessary licking, and showing how to do sums." The new superintendent was dedicated to making the new Union School a model for education, which it became throughout its forty-four history until it was destroyed by fire on Sunday, February 12, 1899. Not only was the new school a model for education, but also it won many architecture awards for its design and practicality. Union School was the only school in Washington until a population explosion demanded more room, and in 1885, another building containing eight rooms was erected on the same lot.

From 1855 until 1867, there were a series of principals who came and went:

1855-1857 - Alexander M. Gow

1857-1859 - John L. Lowry

1859-1861 - Capt. Alexander Wishart - left for duty in Civil War

1861-1862 - Reverend L.P. Streater

1862-1866 - Capt. Alexander Wishart - returned after being injured in war

1866-1868 - David F. Patterson



*First Washington County Schools Superintendent and founder of co-education in Washington.*

## The First 25 Years 1867 - 1892

Which brings us to spring, 1867, and the first graduating class in Washington School District's history. High school graduation was begun at that time to "stimulate pupils to increased diligence;" so a lithograph of the school was designed and provided at a cost of \$85 to serve as the document of distinction — the diploma. It was given to five young ladies on May 17, 1867 for the first time.

By 1870, under the supervision of Reverend W.J. Wilson, principal, nine students, four boys and five girls, graduated from Union School. This year also marked an increase in teachers' pay to \$350 per year. Two years later in February, Mr. Wilson was shot by a student in the schoolyard while trying to discipline the boy.

Fifteen students, six boys and nine girls, graduated in June, 1874, and in 1875, there were two boys and six girls who received a diploma. In the latter year, graduation exercises were moved to the town hall because the meeting hall of the school needed to be partitioned off and used as

classrooms due to increasing numbers of students.

It was during the tenure of W.C. Lyne, the school's ninth superintendent, that Union School won distinction for educational excellence and exhibited the result of school work in the form of two bound volumes at the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia in 1874 and 1875. The following year twenty-five graduates left the school, five of which were boys.

Innovation continued in the Washington School District with the introduction of vocal music and geometry to the curriculum in 1876. Two years later, the board agreed to meet monthly, when it began to reorganize the elementary school. It created a new division to accommodate the younger children who had only been permitted to attend school for half a day. The primary grade students were moved to a new school which was erected on the corner of East Chestnut and Lincoln Streets where they were to attend for the entire school day. It was during the 1875 school year that epidemics of measles and smallpox broke out, nearly closing Washington schools. The school board agreed that shutting down the schools may not work because "children turned loose all day might spread the diseases further," so the board for the first time required vaccination records for each child and prevented those, who had infected families, from attending school until a doctor judged that it was safe for the youngsters to return to school.

Three more principals — J.W. Gibbons, 1877-1878, W.L. Welsh, 1878 - 1882, and Frank E. Sanford, 1882 - 1884, — continued to oversee the success of Union School until finally a Washington native was elected for the position. A.C. Braden graduated from Washington High School in 1876 and from Washington and Jefferson in 1881. He served the school district as principal for 13 years until 1897 and became one of the most beloved educators in Washington history.

### THINGS OF SUMMER

Swimming is fun.  
And I like to swing.  
I like hamburgers.  
Flowers smell pretty.  
I like ice cream.  
And after a long fun summer day, it's  
time for bed.

Jamie Gatewood - Kindergarten  
from *The Treasure Trove*