

Brief History of the Eliot School

A Brief History of the Eliot School – The First Two Hundred Years

by Charles Fox, *Eliot School of Fine & Applied Arts Newsletter*

In 1689 John Eliot apostle to the Indians, translator of the Bible into the Algonquin language, and pastor of the First Church in Roxbury, bequeathed in his will seventy-five acres along what is now Eliot Street in Jamaica Plain to a fledgling school to, as Eliot put it, “do away with the inconvenience of ignorance.” The school, described simply, in D.S. Smalley’s 1886 *History of Eliot School*, as “a school on Jamaica or Pond Plain,” had been founded in 1676 to provide an education for area children of both the Puritans and the Indians and was funded by a modest gift of land and a commitment from area inhabitants of annual contributions in money or corn.

The first school building was located at the intersection of South and Centre Streets on land donated by John Ruggles that later, in 1871, became the site of the Soldiers’ Monument. The Eliot bequest put the school on a sound financial footing. It moved twice (once to a house at the corner of Centre Street and what is now Green Street) to increasingly larger quarters until, in 1831, the trustees of what was by then called The Eliot School commissioned the construction of its present building at 24 Eliot Street. The specifications for that building, signed by the trustees, called for “a foundation 18” thick of such stone as is usually found in Roxbury” and capped with “one course hammered granite stone 18” high” and exterior walls “of good hard burnt brick.”

Between 1831 and 1874 the school went through transformations so numerous and far-reaching they only can be touched on here. Population growth, changing educational theories, access to increased funds from the eventual sale of the John Eliot property, and the evolving notion that education was the responsibility of the public through local government all had their impact. The West Roxbury School Committee became a partner to the trustees in running the school. In 1840 it became a high school in which the genders were separated into two departments. In 1855, the Girls’ Department was moved to Village Hall (on land currently the site of the city parking lot behind Blanchard’s). In 1858, the Boys’ Department joined it there, and the building at 24 Eliot Street was leased to the town, which used it as a primary school. In 1868 The Eliot High School, as it was then known, moved to a new building on Elm Street (on the site currently occupied by the old Jamaica Plain High School building, which was constructed some thirty years later).

In 1874, the town of West Roxbury was annexed to the city of Boston. The trustees of the Eliot School terminated their connection with the high school and reoccupied the building at 24 Eliot Street. Having been, for two centuries, central to the education of the children of the region, the Eliot School needed, suddenly, to redefine its mission. No longer involved in the operation of the principal educational facility of their community, the trustees redefined the school as an independent institution providing educational services auxiliary to those offered by the public schools. A 1905 history of the school describes courses offered as “reading, English Grammar, penmanship, arithmetic, bookkeeping, physiology, algebra, history, natural philosophy, and political economy.” Free-hand drawing, painting, plain sewing, embroidery, cooking, stenography, and typewriting were added over the next several years.

During these years the Arts and Crafts movement, in which hand work and design were increasingly seen as antidotes to the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution, was sweeping the country. In 1889, the school made some modifications to its building and embarked on a pioneering program to provide training in woodworking, woodcarving, mechanical drawing, and home economics for children in area public schools. Five years later, in recognition of the importance of this training, the city of Boston accepted financial responsibility for its continuation, and the Eliot School redirected its curriculum to private school students, teachers from the public schools, and other adults.

During the last one hundred years, the Eliot School has continued with a curriculum along these lines, varying from time to time according to public demand and the availability of excellent instructors. A 1939 Annual Report from the principal indicated that basketry, bookbinding, China painting, block printing, carpentry for builders, engraving, hammock making, lamp shade work, mathematics, mechanical drawing, millinery, printing, psychology, shoe cobbling, and willow work had been discontinued, and that popular demand for “crafts work” and trade courses continued for dress making, decoration and crafts, frame making and gilding, metalwork and jewelry, plumbing, sewing, wood carving, and woodworking.