ELIOT SCHOOL HISTORY FROM 1874

A Talk Given by Charles Fox for the Jamaica Plain Historical Society at the Eliot School
January 9, 2011

My intention has been to talk about the School's history, from 1874, when West Roxbury was annexed to the City of Boston and the School ended its commitment to use its endowment in support of the public high school, forward to the present day. But I have come to feel that most of the defining events, the effects of which carry through to the present time, actually occurred during the last years of the nineteenth century. And, though the School has been steered and enriched since then by the commitment, skill, and leadership, often over impressively long tenures, by a number of, mostly, men, one figure, Prof. Robert Richards, stands out as having conceived of and guided its evolution from a School based principally on what was then called an "English" or academic curriculum, to a curriculum devoted entirely to the manual arts.

But back to 1874 – I'm going to read here excerpts from a letter, dated January 10 of that year, to the Boston School Committee:

> "The Trustees of the Eliot School, having charge of a charitable fund given for educational purposes, have for some years past appropriated the income of the fund to the support of the Eliot High School of West Roxbury, …. and the school being under the joint control of the School Committee and the Trustees.
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> The arrangement was made under exceptional circumstances, was continued from motives of convenience, and was never entirely satisfactory.
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> The Trustees have now decided to terminate the connection and respectfully give notice that the agreement now in force expires February 1st, 1874, and will not be renewed.
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> The Trustees propose to resume possession of their brick schoolhouse on Eliot Street (occupied last year by the town as a primary school) as soon as it can be done without inconvenience to you.
>
> Respectfully,
> Francis V. Balch, chair
> Daniel A. Smalley, secretary "

The problem with the sort of cursory research I have been doing in the School's archives, now held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, is that it is forever

exposing new unanswered questions. – What were the "exceptional circumstances" which created the alliance in the first place? And what was so "never entirely satisfactory" about the arrangement anyway? I don't know. Perhaps the answers are buried elsewhere in the archives.

The Board then charged a committee to come up with a plan for the School's future. I'll read excerpts from the committee's report to the Trustees in June of 1874:

> "In looking over our present school system it would seem, for a moment, doubtful if there existed any lack which could be supplied by our proposed school. Excellent as is the system, it is nevertheless a serious question whether in its methods of imparting instruction it is the most successful, in giving to the pupil who comes within its trainings, a thorough practical knowledge of the sciences and studies it aims to teach…
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> It is perhaps necessary in the education of large bodies of pupils, that they should be taught by classes. This were well, were all of equal ability and keenness of perception, but these are not gifts conferred upon all: some are slow to learn. They do not readily comprehend the science or problem before them. The light breaks in upon them slowly. Such pupils need individual instruction by a teacher who not only has a thorough knowledge of the sciences he endeavors to teach, but has also a knowledge of human nature and knows how to adapt his instruction to his pupil….
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> In the judgment of your committee a thorough practical knowledge of the ordinary English branches cannot be over estimated. It lies at the foundation of all mental education…. And yet how many of the graduates of our schools have found on stepping out into the world to assume its duties and responsibilities, that they have acquired merely theoretical rather than practical knowledge of the studies they have pursued.
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> In view of the facts and suggestions here presented, your committee would recommend that the proposed Eliot School be an elective English school which shall be open to the youth of both sexes it being understood that our school is not a substitute for any existing school, but supplementary, or an intermediate between grammar and high schools.
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> It is also to be understood that our school is not to be an asylum for the indolent and indifferent pupil…but a school where youth who are in earnest in acquiring an education may perfect themselves in such English studies as they may desire…
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> Your committee are of the opinion that such a school is a felt necessity in our community, and would be gladly welcomed to a place among our educational institutions, by all who desire to see our youths thoroughly furnished with a practical English education."

There's no mention at all in this report of any need for manual training in what we now call the crafts. Though there is a suggestion that the public schools, in imparting "theoretical rather than practical knowledge" aren't preparing students for the real world. All in all, the proposal sounds pretty vague. It seems simply that the board was casting about for some way, any way, to be a useful adjunct to the educational system as it then existed.

At this point secretary Daniel Smalley resigned from the board to become Teacher (I took that to mean head) of the newly configured school. A Mr. Tead took over as secretary and, to my dismay, the handwritten text of the minutes became much harder to decipher.

The start of the new program must have been a rocky one, because in July of 1875 a vote was taken as to whether the School should be continued. Happily for us, the result was affirmative.

Various programs, apparently in response to requests from the community, started to be introduced. In 1875, for example, a Mr. Williams requested that funds be set aside to train needy young women in the art of sewing. And in December of 1876 the Board voted to devote space for an elementary school of art.

In April of 1877, the School's endowment stood at $56,800, but interestingly, it still continued to gain income from mortgages and from property it owned well into the twentieth century. In a board meeting as late as 1951 the Trustees voted that (trustee) Elliot Grabill be appointed agent and attorney to foreclose on property for which it held the mortgage at 20 Alveston Street, Jamaica Plain.

In 1877 the School started to advertise itself as a preparatory school for entrance into commercial business, or for admission into the scientific and technical schools such as MIT and Amherst Agricultural College (now UMass Amherst). Instruction was free to inhabitants of Jamaica Plain, subject to entrance exams in English and grammar, geography and arithmetic. Also the School was, by that time, offering instruction in drawing, embroidery, and ceramic decoration, to prepare students applying to the Lowell School of Design. In 1881 an evening class in political science was proposed. I don't know whether it ever ran.

By 1880 Professor Robert Richard's name appears among the Trustees. He lived in the house, still extant, at the corner of Eliot and Dane Streets, and was married to his more famous spouse, Ellen Swallow Richards. He was a member of the first class to graduate from MIT and was, for 41 years, head of its department of mining engineering. In addition to his academic work he invented several metallurgical devices and wrote numerous texts in the field.

He became acquainted with a new system of educational handwork, which had been developed at the Imperial Technical School in St. Petersburg, Russia, and introduced

in the US at the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876. This approach emphasized the intellectual and social development associated with the practical training of the hand and the eye. In its most basic sense, it was the teaching of wood and metal working, with the accompanying argument that this teaching improved perception, observation, practical judgment, visual accuracy, and manual dexterity; and taught students the power of doing things instead of merely thinking about them, talking about them, and writing about them. Manual training was not, however, intended to teach a specific trade. This was perceived as too narrow and limiting for a general education. *

In July of 1886 Professor Richards and a Mr. Ross recommended that the School discontinue entirely its so-called "English program" and devote itself wholeheartedly instead to programs in mechanical and freehand drawing, cookery, and carpentry. I read here an excerpt from the minutes of August 19, 1886:

> "Whereas there is a deadlock in the affairs of the Trustees of the Eliot School, three of the seven trustees being in favor of maintaining a school for tuition in English branches as heretofore, and three being in favor of giving up tuition in English branches and trying the experiment of industrial education, and the chairman, who has the casting vote, declining to favor any scheme in which the trustees are not harmonious, and whereas there is a difference of opinion among the citizens of the region interested in said School who claim as proprietors a right to be heard in the matter, and the Board are in doubt whether they have such right, and have no means of getting their direction if right they have, except through court, voted that counsel be employed to lay the matter before the Supreme Court and request their instructions."

I don't know whether this matter went before the court, but in 1888 the Board did vote to establish a school for manual training in carpentry, and Professor Richards embarked on a tour of other institutions to seek guidance as to how this might be accomplished. He visited: The North Bennett Street School here in the North End, Lincoln School in Brookline, Philadelphia Manual Training School and Philadelphia Industrial Arts School, and The Hebrew Technical School, and Pratt Institute, both in New York. He had previously visited Worcester Free Institute and Washington University in St. Louis, and schools over seas in London, Birmingham England, Paris, Freiberg, and Berlin. He proposed a system, which would, he said, "teach the use of, and encourage the delight in, tools, thus turning green boys into handy boys." Professor Richards goes on to say in his proposal, that, given practical constraints, students should concentrate on learning specific tasks – how, for example, to construct specific joints cabinet joints, rather than tackling complete pieces of furniture. Images of early student work make it clear this approach was quickly abandoned.

Some of the photographs cycling on the screen are from the 1901 show, at the School, of student work. Here are excerpts from a contemporary news article written about the show:

> "The Eliot School may be said to be founded on those lines so ably advocated by the late William Morris and his school.... It was remarkable that the male (students) had as much interest in embellishing the boudoir as their sisters had in furnishing a bracket for the smoking room." It goes on to say: "The growing numbers (applying) for admission…means there is a pressing demand for space. Here is an opportunity for our citizens of means to help on this most worthy work. Let it not be said that this… historic institution, situated as it is in a district noted for its prosperity and affluence, should look in vain for encouragement from those who are well able to sustain it."

This was a pitch from the local newspaper a hundred and nine years ago, which we could aptly make today.

It's important to note that during this period the School maintained a sort of on again off again relationship with the public schools. It trained men and women to teach various manual arts in the public schools. Often in the past it sent teachers into the Boston public schools, other times teaching their students at its Eliot Street site. West Roxbury High School in 1905 indicated that it would henceforth teach its own course in manual training. In 1907 Archival records mention an experiment in industrial training in the elementary schools, to be started by sending Agassiz School students to the Eliot School. I am happy to say that this long-standing relationship has been reinvigorated with our School Partnership program under the able leadership of Nicole Murray.

Also in 1907, the School considered, and then abandoned, a plan to develop additional classroom space in its attic.

Superintendant Frank Leavitt, in his 1906 annual report to the board, indicated that charging a one dollar tuition fee, instituted to minimize a trend for students to sign up for courses, then simply not show up, had backfired, in that enrollment declined as a result. Mr. Leavitt, incidentally, simultaneously held an administrative position in the Boston Public Schools. This was not unusual. In the 1936-37 catalog, for instance, seven of the eleven listed faculty were also teachers or instructors in Boston or Brookline public schools.

In 1912 The School's curriculum included Wood Carving; Metal Working and Jewelry; A Manual Arts Course to train teachers in the public schools; Manual Arts for children; Sewing; and Mechanical Drawing and Mathematics for men in the mechanical trades.

In 1914, John Brodhead, the Principal (as the head of the School was then called) was given a leave with pay of three months to join a commission of educators travelling to Bavaria to study industrial education under the auspices of the US Department of Education.

From about 1917 to 1932, gardens were maintained on the school grounds. One was tilled by the Eliot School janitor, the other by students from the public schools.

From time to time the School has offered overtly pre professional training, particularly in woodworking and plumbing, but this has not always proved to be a sustainable approach. In 1904 unions refused to accept Eliot School training in lieu of an apprenticeship. In his 1948 annual report to the Board, Superintendant George Hatch says …. "Our courses this year have been set up for those interested in the healthful relaxation of the activity, and for the pleasure of making things. We have not pretended to meet the requirements of the vocational fields…". Then, curiously, he goes on to say: "But we have attempted to give a basic training to those interested in supplementing an income." Much more recently, Superintendant Charlie Sandler told me that our facility, even extensively upgraded, could not be made to meet union standards for training to the trade. All that having been said, there continue to be students who seek training, say in gilding, upholstery or woodwork, who study here to gain professional skills, or who, having studied here, become inspired to pursue a new direction professionally.

In 1925-26 The School offered courses in Woodworking; Wood Carving; China Decorating; Basketry; Leathercraft; Manual Arts for Children; Sewing; Plumbing; and Millinery

In 1944, Professor Richards, having been active on the board for over sixty years, most of that as chair, was made Trustee Emeritus. He died in 1945 at age 101.

In 1961 – 62 Millinery and Leatherwork had disappeared from the curriculum, to be replaced by Hooked Rug Making; Upholstery; and Elementary and Advanced Dressmaking.

A list of Trustees, including such names as Weld, Bowditch, Williams, Curtis, Brewer and others, down through the years can read like a Jamaica Plain street directory. In a reflection, in the Archive, on the tenure of Nat Young, board chairman who relinquished that position in 2000, it is said that, when he joined the board, all of the Trustees were men, all of whom had graduated from Roxbury Latin School. Such had been the general makeup of the board over all of those years – certainly men of honor, energy and commitment who worked very hard to do good things and to live up to the ideals expressed by John Eliot in his 1690 bequest, and their achievements have been significant, but there is a slight underlying whiff of noblesse oblige inevitable in the efforts of such a homogenous group seeking to provide service to such a diverse community. Under Nat's tenure the board hired a director, a woman, Helen Hummell, thus doubling the administrative staff, with the intention of increasing outreach into all the various communities we are here to serve.

I am not an historian, and I have been dogged while preparing this talk by the question, 'What constitutes the history of an institution such as this, anyway? Is it a time line listing the names and dates of all the people who have served the School,

and of the courses offered?' That certainly would be a document worth compiling, but would make for a pretty dull talk. Or should the history of the School be looked at as a microcosm of, and an active player in, the larger history of our community and its culture, sparked as it has been by the generous bequest of a visionary man several hundred years, and counting, ago?

Not speaking for David, what I have offered here is fragmentary at best. There is certainly much more to be culled from our Archives at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and Abigail Norman, our fine director, has often spoken of our need to start a program of interviewing people with a personal knowledge of recent years. We need to get going on that.

At any rate, the story of the Eliot School continues to evolve in exciting ways. Please stay tuned, and thank you for listening.

* taken from online account at www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/manualtr.html