

CLASSICAL AND ENGLISH HIGH SCHOOL (WORCESTER HIGH SCHOOL)

1845 – 1892

HAPPENINGS

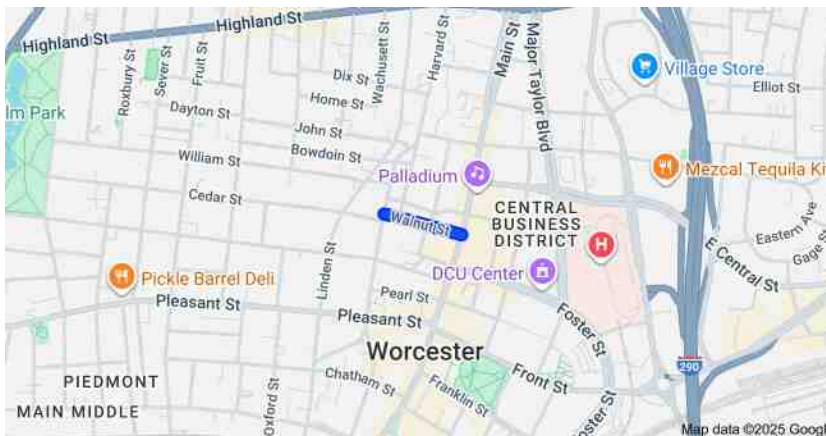
THE FOUNDING AND THE 1840'S

The following quotations come from an 1892 book entitled “History of Classical and English High School, 1845 – 1892. The book’s author was Alfred Roe, one of the principals at the high school (1880-1890). Not only did Roe do all of the research and writing, he also self-published the book.

On one of Jerry Morse’s trips to Worcester, he visited the Worcester Public Library to conduct some genealogical research. There, he found a box of books which the library offered to anyone who might want them. The 1892 book’s binding had all but disintegrated, but he was able to find all the pages. The book is now held together with a binder clip.

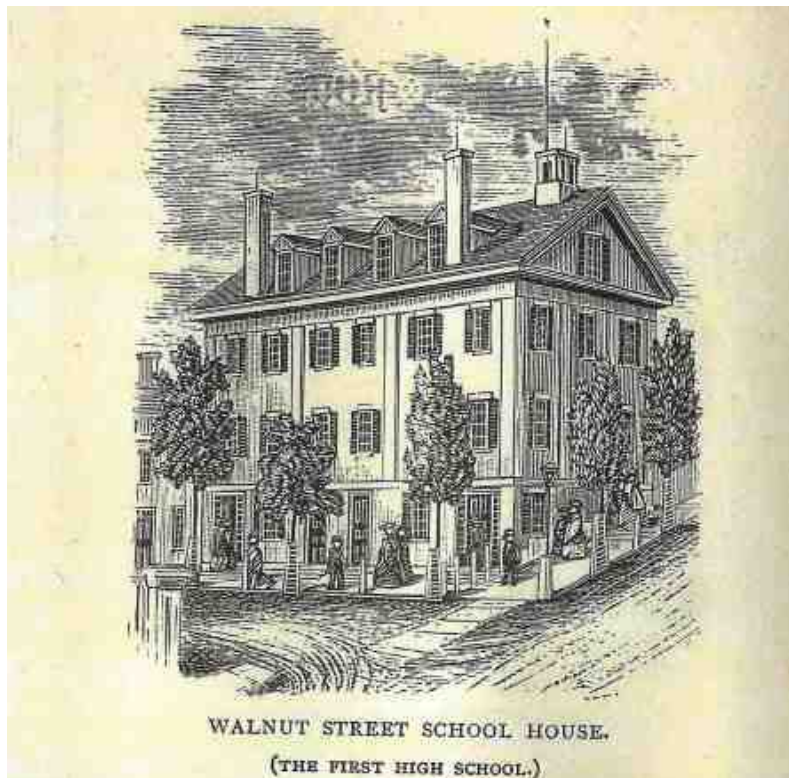
THE FOUNDING

The Latin Grammar School - First Master, John Adams; Last, Elbridge Smith.” Thus wrote Thomas Chase on the black-board in the old Thomas Street School house in August 1845. But the death of the old simply heralded the birth of the new, for on the same day, August 5, the boys of the Latin School and the girls of the English High School occupied the then sumptuous building just finished for their use on **Walnut Street**. It was, when opened, the finest edifice for school purposes in the State. It had been thoroughly and faithfully constructed, was the pride of Worcester and the wonder of strangers who came from near and far to behold its graceful proportions and excellent appointments.



Walnut Street Today

Note: Jerry was able to find a Worcester street map that shows how streets were configured in 1845. Above is a piece of a 2025 map that shows how the first high school would be situated vis a vis Main Street and Pleasant Street.



When the question of finishing the interior arose, a request was made that it be grained, but Mr. John W. Lincoln, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, said, “What is the use? The boys will tear everything to pieces.” Mr. Lincoln, after looking the school master over and remarking, “Young man, your experience with boys is not so long extended as mine,” to Mr. Smith’s continued desire for the finish, said, “**Grain it,**” and grained it was.

Note: "To grain an interior" means to apply a decorative painting technique (known as "graining" or *faux bois*) that imitates the natural grain pattern and appearance of expensive wood on a less expensive or non-wood surface, such as soft pine, plaster, metal, or drywall. This was a very common practice in the 18th and 19th centuries, allowing people to achieve the look of costly woods like mahogany or walnut in their homes or on furniture at a fraction of the cost.

At the same time that the school house was in progress, Mr. Lincoln was superintending, as Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, the construction of the new Court House, and prosecuted both measures with his accustomed vigor. He was a thorough friend of every progressive measure, but seemed to have a chronic fear that boys were, by nature, vandals, for when the elm trees were asked for in front of the school house, he objected, saying that the boys wouldn’t let them grow.

Sometime after the building had been opened, Mr. Smith met the Chairman in the street and asked him if he had seen the new school house in use? Receiving a negative answer, Mr. Smith invited him to go up and look it over. To this, Mr. Lincoln readily assented and expressed himself as delighted with all he saw. “Why,” he said, “this is in much better plight than the Court House, yet I took more pains with that than with this. Here everything is neat and orderly. There I have provided spittoons and all possible conveniences, yet the men will spit on the carpet and in fact everywhere but where they ought.”

His opinion of boys was decidedly improved. As they came out of the house, Mr. Smith reminded him of the trees. “Yes, yes!” he responded, “they ought to be here, and must be set out.” So neat was the house in all respects, that when the Rev. Dr. Smalley of the Union Church, after some repairs had been made upon that edifice, had remarked to his congregation concerning the manner in which a church should be respected and

used, he said, "If you wish to know just how I would like to have this building treated, visit the High School and see how that is kept."

In the days of the Latin Grammar School, it had not been thus, for when in January, '45, Mr. Smith took charge of it, he found the stove hearth piled high with apple cores and other refuse, while the floor and the spaces beneath the desks were littered with the accumulations of many days, if not weeks. One day he gave his boys a talk on the subject of tidiness, and his words bore good fruit, for in a few days, as he came into the room, he found it literally swept and garnished. Everything was in apple-pie order.

Of course, he was profuse in his expressions of pleasure and thanking the boys generally, asked for the special one to whom thanks were due. No one answered, but Lucien Harrington turned to William F. Wheeler, afterwards a brave officer in the **Rebellion**, who modestly hung his head. "But how did you get in?" said Mr. Smith. "Through the window," was the answer. How many Worcester boys of today would climb in at a window to sweep a schoolroom gratis?

Note: At this time, the citizens of Worcester never used the words Civil War or War Between the States to describe the conflict of the 1860's. The only term used throughout this book for that conflict is "the Rebellion."

The proposed union of the two schools made a deal of talk in the town, the measure having, as all measured do, its advocates and its enemies. Horace Davis, a son of Honest John Davis, calling on Mr. Smith one evening said: "They say so much about the refining influence that the girls will have on the boys. I don't believe a word of it; I haven't been by their school this winter without being snow-balled." As the girls' school then was located on Main Street, just at the head of Thomas Street, he and others had to pass it often. He may have been snow-balled, but he certainly ought to have had his face thoroughly snow-washed at the fair hands of the girls for his ungallant remark.

However, the schools were united and have continued thus for forty-seven years, with none of the misfortunes that many presaged. There are many interesting stories told of the Latin Grammar School, its pupils and teachers, and their history may someday be told.

1846

The first colored member of the school came in 1846. The ferment which her admission created would hardly be credited today. "Keep her out, if possible," said a pastor of a prominent church to Mr. Smith. A member of the School Committee said to his associates, "If you reject her because she has a black face, I shall certainly object to ____ because she has red hair."

The girl passed her entrance exams, and Mr. Smith said he would assume responsibility of her admission, a willingness on his part which lifted a great load from the minds of at least some of the Committee. He asked the parents of the girl that she should not be sent to school the first half day.

He then took the opportunity to recite to the other pupils a ballad descriptive of a poor wanderer among African tribes who was in danger of his life on account of his complexion. His captors pitied and liberated him, thinking it wrong to punish him for no other than his white face. In a few words, Mr. Smith made the application to the case in hand, just reverse of the ballad, though the black face was not among savage Africans, but in the midst of Christian whites.

In the afternoon, the girl appeared and says Mr. S., “I was only fearful that they would do her a positive injury by excess of kindness.” The crisis passed. There was scarcely a ripple created after the examination and from that day to this, colored children have stood, like all others, on their merits in the Worcester High School.

1848

As a manager of a school, Mr. W had a reputation of being pretty strict. The old boys will tell of the incidents of those times in the Forties when new and seemingly unreasonable laws and regulations were promulgated. Tough times change, and we change with them. The boys and girls who take our places are not so very different from ourselves, and we may reasonably conclude that those of 1848, etc. objected to what their elders deemed reasonable only as do the pupils of the days more than forty years later.

However, there was one incident well worth recalling. The pupils had been told that they must not talk in going down the stairs from the upper floor. All sorts of measures were resorted to, to bring about compliance. One teacher, subsequently a learned D. D. had to take his place to carefully watch, and he was succeeded by a teacher who afterwards achieved eminence as a lawyer and professor of law, but all to no purpose. The trouble continued to the extent that several of the pupils were publicly **raw-hided** and at least one expelled for a time. The School Committee had to interfere and a compromise was affected so that peace again reigned. This affair is characterized by those familiar with it as “The Blue Laws Rebellion.”

Note: To raw-hide someone is to punish severely with a whip made of rawhide. The term comes from slavery when masters punished their slaves. In the days of slavery, rawhide was dried animal skin that had not been treated and turned into leather. It is not known what Worcester High School teachers used for corporal punishment.

1849

The pupils in the Forties were good ones without doubt. The boys could be followed much more easily than the girls, for they have not changed their names. Many of the young men who, in this period of school history, took pride and pleasure in sand-papering the floor and waxing their desks, became famous in the stirring times of the Rebellion.

Note: Throughout this book, the author notes when an individual participated in the Rebellion. A significant number of teachers, former high school students and in a few cases, high school seniors participated in the Rebellion. The participants are too numerous to mention. I will discuss Worcester High School participation further when the 1860's are covered.

The plan that Mr. Smith inaugurated, of keeping a model school room in the matter of neatness was fully followed by his successor, and middle -aged men of today will tell you with great glee of the way in which they **holy-stoned** the school house floors and stairs; how they waxed their desks till they shone .and how carefully they put **oxalic acid** on every ink spot, and then sandpapered the place where the spot was. The boys had to wear slippers in the school rooms. Such lessons in nicety have not been without their beneficial effect to the students in later life.

Note: Holystone is a soft and brittle sandstone that was formerly used in the Royal Navy and US Navy for scrubbing and whitening the wooden decks of ships.

Oxalic acid is an organic compound found naturally in plants like rhubarb and spinach, and it's a white crystalline solid used as a household cleaner, particularly for rust, stains, and mineral deposits. It is toxic if ingested and can cause skin irritation, so it must be handled with care.