

Cranford's School Days – The First Century

By Vic Bary

This time of year is often thought of as “back to school” time, a time viewed very differently by parents and children. With school about to start, it might be interesting to look back on the early history of Cranford schools.



The Old Red School House

The earliest school building we have a photo of (see p. 67, [Images of America: Cranford](#)) was the Old Red School House which stood at the corner of Lincoln and South Avenues. This 16' by 24' wooden structure was built in 1805 and stayed in use as a school house until 1867. Because Cranford did not exist yet as an incorporated town, it was considered District 2 of West Fields' 10-district school system (*Cranford Chronicle*, December 2, 1982).

The Old Red School House served all grades, and students sat on slab benches. Among its attendees were 19th century Cranford luminaries Judge Mendell and General John R. Myrick. It is understood that the plot of ground on which the Old Red School House stood was the site of two earlier school buildings, but we have no visual record of them. With a total population of only 60 in 1850, a single school house was all that Craneville needed. But the period of the Civil War and the subsequent purchase of farmland by real estate developers for the purpose of suburban development propelled rapid population growth. By 1871, the year the town was incorporated as Cranford, the population had grown to 600 (Bary, V., *Cranford Historical Society*, 2013). After the Old Red School House was replaced by the First Grant School, it soldiered on as Cranford's first church for the Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists (Glazer, C., 2013).



The First Grant School

In response to this burgeoning population, the School Board built Public School Number 1 between 1869-1870 at the corner of Holly Street and Springfield Avenue. This ornate, two-story, wooden frame Victorian structure (see photos pp. 68-70, Images of America: Cranford) was more formally known as the Grant School. It served all grade levels (Primary School, Grammar School [ages 10-14], and High School). According to the March 13, 1897 *Cranford Chronicle*, by 1897 the Grant School served 346 students distributed as follows: 226 Primary School students, 81 Grammar School students, and 39 High School students. The article also noted that 70% of the students were from the North Side of town, and that 15 of the Primary School Students were “colored”. Increased enrollments led to the addition of a brick wing to the Grant School in 1884. High School graduating classes ranged from 10-15 at the turn of the century, and often nearly all of them were female. This disproportionate percentage of female graduates continued to persist until a Business Studies curriculum was added in 1918.



The Second Grant School

As time passed, an aging physical plant, concern about fire safety in wooden schools, and increasing space demands led the School Board to decide to raze the wooden Grant School replace it with an all brick “modern” school building on the same site which would retain the name Grant School. A budget of \$24,700 was appropriated for this purpose. The cornerstone, taken from Grant’s Tomb, was laid June 4, 1898, and the school was in use the following year. (See photo p.75, Images of America: Cranford). Early reports (*Cranford Citizen & Chronicle*, February 2, 1900) called the new Grant School an impossible to heat “ice house”. By 1899, the School Board employed four Primary School Teachers, three Grammar School Teachers, and two High School Teachers, one of whom served as principal. This cadre of nine individuals served a total of 569 students. The brick Grant School remained in service as a Cranford public school until 1936, later serving Union Junior College. It was not razed until the 1960s.



The Sherman School

The same School Board appropriation that funded the new brick Grant School, also funded a Grades 2-4 Primary School on Lincoln Avenue to be named the Sherman School (we were still venerating our Union Civil War generals). According to a March 25, 1899 *Cranford Citizen* article, work on both the new Grant School and the Sherman School commenced in late spring 1898, but both came to an almost immediate halt due to five weeks of "continual and excessive rains". Work proceeded apace on the Grant School, but the Sherman School had a much rockier construction history. Initial construction was found to be unsatisfactory and required a rebuild. That construction company subsequently left town in the dead of night, and completion of the school was accomplished under its performance bond. The school opened on January 4, 1899 for Primary Grades 2, 3 & 4 (after which the students were passed on to the Grant School). Enrollment was cited as 81 (which was said to be the maximum capacity of the school) and handled by two teachers. An October 6, 1905 *Cranford Citizen* article listed 51 student's names distributed from Primary Grades 1 through 6. In spite of the initial plans for limited enrollment, the Sherman School obviously grew in size and grades served, as *Cranford Chronicle* entries show enrollments as follows: 1904 – 186, 1910 - 286, 1912 - 287, 1921 – 248. In time the original building proved inadequate in space, and quality, and classes were transferred to a newly built structure. The original structure continued as an Annex used as a warehouse. Approximately five decades after its original construction, both Sherman School structures were torn down and the property turned into a playground.



The Cleveland School

By 1912, both the Grant School and the Sherman School were at or near capacity, with 489 and 287 students, respectively, (*Cranford Chronicle*, October 24, 1912) and enrollments showed every sign of increasing in the ensuing years. A block behind the Grant School stood the spacious 1864 "Marlborough Place" mansion of real estate developer Alden Bigelow. In 1913, Bigelow's widow offered the property for sale to Cranford. An appropriation of \$90,000 (\$76,655 for the structure alone) was quickly approved for the building of a modern, "sanitary", fireproof 19-room combined Grade and High School. The building was to have the capacity for 526 pupils, of which 336 would be Grade School students, and featured a ground floor plus three additional floors. The top floor housed an auditorium and offices. Work began on the school in 1914 with dedication services held August 13, 1914. The Cleveland School (named after President Grover Cleveland) served both High School and Primary School students until the new High School was built on West End Avenue in 1938. Thereafter the Cleveland School continued as an Elementary school (the distinction between Primary and Grammar school grades was no longer in use) until 1971, when it was sold to the township for \$1. The converted building still stands today, as Cleveland Plaza (Strazdon, M., Cranford Historical Society, 2013).



Lincoln School

At the same time (1913) that the Cleveland School was planned in the North Side, a new Primary School – to be called Lincoln School – was planned for the corner of Centennial Avenue and Lincoln Avenue, perhaps in anticipation of the South Side growth the planned Lincoln Park and Lincoln Heights developments' 215 building lots would spark. The *Cranford Citizen* (February 13, 1913) reported that voters approved a \$33K bond issue to fund the school. Bids later submitted by 10 contractors, however, ranged from nearly \$38K to \$78K, all of which were rejected (*Cranford Citizen*, May 9, 1913). One month later, the township went back to the voters for authority to increase the funding in order to accept the \$37,838 bid from C. L. Bell (*Cranford Citizen*, June 26, 1913). The new building would be 80' by 61 ½' with 8 classrooms which could serve approximately 300 students. It included a space which could later accommodate a gymnasium, and the property itself was large enough to allow additional wings or structures (*Cranford Citizen*, March 2, 1913). A new wing was added in 1928.

Work on the school was not without incident. The *Cranford Citizen* (November 16, 1913) reported that two workers died in a fall from scaffolding on the building. The following April, two more workers fell from scaffolding, with one breaking three ribs (*Cranford Citizen*, April 30, 1914). In spite of these missteps, Lincoln School was successfully completed and dedicated jointly with the Cleveland School (*Cranford Citizen*, September 17, 1914). It remains in use today, Cranford's oldest continuously occupied school.

Looking Backward

Over this roughly 125-year period, Cranford schools grew in number, enrollments and expense. Enrollments stood at 305 in 1895, and had grown to 525 in 1904 (plus an additional 95 students in the McKinley School in Garwood, which Cranford managed with funds – not always forthcoming or adequate - from Westfield). Enrollment stood at 943 in 1915 and had grown to 1,491 by 1921 (sources: various *Cranford Chronicle* and *Cranford Citizen* articles). School budgets grew apace as well. Cranford ran its schools for \$3,477 for the 1874-5 term (*Cranford Chronicle* September 10, 1925). The cost of running our schools had risen to \$261,242 by 1926. Nor were schools spared from impacts other than funding and voter support. In the fall of 1916, school openings were delayed until early October because of a polio epidemic. Two years later, the influenza pandemic delayed school openings until October 24, 1918. Both schools and townships live within larger contexts, which sometimes disrupt their best-laid plans.

Sources:

1. Bary, Vic, "Summer and Cranford, Perfect Together", *The Mill Wheel*", Cranford Historical Society, Summer, 2013
2. Burditt Index, various

3. www.cranfordschools.org/chs/history/html
4. *Cranford Chronicle*, various
5. *Cranford Citizen*, various
6. *Cranford Citizen & Chronicle*, various
7. Fridlington, Robert & Fuhro, Larry, Images of America: Cranford, Arcadia Publishing, 1995
8. Glazer, Christine, personal communication to V. Bary,
9. Strazdon, Maureen, "Neither Rain Nor Snow Nor Heat Nor Gloom of Night...", *The Mill Wheel*, Cranford Historical Society, Summer, 2013

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