

Cranford School Days Part II:

The Next 30 Years and the High School that Almost Wasn't

by Vic Bary

In the Fall issue, we reviewed the first 125 years of Cranford schools, ending with a period of frantic building between 1898 and 1914. First, the old wooden Grant School was replaced by a new brick building of the same name, and the new Sherman primary school was completed, both in 1898. The two buildings are gone today. By 1912, the Grant school was becoming over-crowded and the new Cleveland School was built to accommodate the overflow; the building survives today as Cleveland Plaza. Two years later, the Lincoln School was completed to accommodate an anticipated growth in the Southside elementary school population due to the planned Lincoln Heights and Lincoln Park developments. It continues serving that population today. Cranford's school population had grown from slightly more than 300 at the beginning of this 17-year period, to nearly 1,500. It would have appeared that school-building could take a breather. It could, but not for long.

The Columbia University Report

Ten years after the Lincoln School opened, the Township called upon Teachers College of Columbia University to survey its current and projected school population and to rate its existing school's ability to serve those needs. They issued a "REPORT of the SURVEY OF THE SCHOOLS of the Township of Cranford, New Jersey: SCHOOL YEAR 1924-1925". The report estimated that the school population would grow from 1,748 in 1924 to 3,848 by 1940. Specifically, it recommended that:

- "A new high school site of from ten to twenty acres should be purchased."
- "... the building to be erected on this site be a junior-senior high school" (grades 7-12).
- "... the Cleveland School be used for elementary school purposes, and that the Grant School be used to house the Board of Education Offices and for elementary purposes."
- "... the sites of both the Lincoln and Sherman Schools be increased in size."
- "... the West End and Orange Avenue sites now owned by the Board of Education be held for locations for elementary schools

The report felt that acting on these recommendations was well within the capability of Cranford, stating "On the basis of a comparison of taxable wealth in relation to the number of pupils attending school it appears that Cranford can afford to finance the program recommended." (As we will see, able, and willing, are two different things.)

The review of Cranford's current schools was mixed. Based on a possible score of 0 to 1,000, with a score below 500 considered unsatisfactory, the Sherman School (716) and the Lincoln School (630) were considered satisfactory. Not so the Grant (437) and Cleveland (493) schools. This is what they said about these two schools.

Grant School: "...the Grant building is extremely unsatisfactory as a place in which to house school children and only the absolute necessity of the case forces the survey staff to hesitate in recommending that it be abandoned for school purposes. Among the more serious and irremedial (sic) defects of the building are – the utter inadequacy of the site and the impossibility of enlargement; the location of the auditorium on the third floor with a wide expanse of open windows in the forward end of the room; the utilization of low ceiling roof space for classrooms; the extreme inadequacy of the lighting of all the classrooms, more than half of which have less than one-half the required glass area; and the placing of all toilet service of a three-story building in the basement."

Cleveland School: "The Cleveland School, scored as a high school building, fell below 500 points out of 1,000. Its score of 493 points places it below the limit of acceptability. As a high school plant, it is extremely inadequate and because of the limitations of the site, it cannot be enlarged in a way to make it at all satisfactory." The Cleveland School was found particularly inadequate in the categories of Special Rooms, General Service Rooms and Administration Rooms, in which it received one-third of the possible points.

So Cranford had no suitable high school space, and one of its elementary schools was deemed inadequate. The Cleveland School inadequacies cited in the Teachers College report would come back to haunt the township forcefully in a State review ten years later.

Roosevelt School

Space requirements for a growing elementary school population were recognized as early as 1919, and voters approved the purchase of land on Orange Avenue for that purpose (Source: *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, January 15, 1920). In 1926, voters approved building an addition to the Lincoln School (at a cost of \$268,000 plus \$6,000 for the land), and a new Roosevelt School on Orange Avenue (at a cost of \$314,000 plus \$6,800 for the land). Both were completed in mid-1928 (Sources: Cruikshank, A. E., Dedication Speech for Roosevelt School., 1928, *Cranford Chronicle*, October 7, 1926). The construction contract for Roosevelt School was awarded to W. D. Bigelow with a completion date of March 1, 1928 set in the contract (Source: *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, April 7, 1927). The architect for the school was Harold B. Brady of Elizabeth (Source: *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, November 18, 1926).

The completed school had a large auditorium/gymnasium and stage with adjoining dressing rooms, which would be used for theatrical and school system events until the completion of the new high school ten years later (Source: "Roosevelt School Very Near Completion", *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, April 12, 1928, p.1). It also contained the lovely Flint Faience and Tile Company kindergarten room fireplace, rescued at the time of the school's demolition in 2010, and recently installed in the Cranford Community Center. Roosevelt School opened its doors to 413 students in September, 1928 (Source: "Full Complement of Teachers and Everything Ready for the New School Year", *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, September 13, 1928, p. 1).

The High School

While the new Roosevelt elementary school, opened in 1928, was a resounding success, the inadequacy of high school facilities, first pointed out in the Columbia University study, continued to

fester. By 1932 the Cleveland school student population had grown to 597 against a rated capacity of 494. The Board of Education argued for a new high school building at a cost of \$568,000, submitting architect's elevations and floor plans. Cranford voters responded by rejecting proposals for a new high school, proposing band aid solutions like building an addition to the Cleveland School (which stood on a property inadequate to the purpose) and renting overflow space on surrounding streets. (Source: Board of Education – Township of Cranford, NJ, “The Cranford High School Problem”, undated – probably late 1932 or January, 1933.)



It all came to a head when the State Commissioner of Education issued a sharply critical report on the Cleveland School which, while commending the quality of teaching delivered at the high school, stated:

1. The overcrowding has reached a limit of safety.
2. That the school may be dropped from the accredited list of Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools because the school library has become “crowded out of service.”
3. That the basement rooms used for cooking and shop work are a definite menace to the health of the pupils.

The report also found the third floor auditorium and gymnasium “entirely unfit for either use” ... and “actually ‘distressing’”. It saw the only solution to the enrollment problem in the forthcoming school year to be increasing the length of the school day and staggering programs. (Source: The New High School Committee, “State Report Finds Health Menace In Cleveland School”, February 9, 1933).

The School Board proposed the building of a new Junior-Senior High School on West End Place at a cost of \$568,000 (Source: *Cranford Chronicle*, December 12, 1932). Cranford citizens continued to dither and reject proposals for an adequate high school building, no doubt in part due to the financial hardships brought about by The Great Depression. It wasn't until 1935, and the availability of grants through the Public Works Administration (PWA), that “Cranford finally launched a successful program for a new high school building. The total cost of this school, including equipment, grading, and replacement of our Athletic Field,” (on which it was to be built on West End Place) “of \$850,000, comprised of the government grant of \$352,000 and the township bond issue of \$498,000 (Source: Plummer, J. A, “Greetings from the President”, *Cranford High*

School Dedication Journal, January 3, 1938). In March, 1935 the Board of Education made application for federal grants and loans and it received an approval in early October (Source: *Cranford Chronicle*, March 15, 1935 and October 4, 1935).

The applications for PWA grants exceeded the available funds and it was critical that applicants dot all their I's and cross all their T's, and have their paperwork in order and submitted on time. Cranford, however, nearly managed to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory.

“October 22, 1935 was set by PWA as a dead-line date for the completion of plans and December 15th for the commencement of actual construction....”

“Shortly after the plans had been submitted to PWA, it was discovered that a portion of the property intended for a site was not available. This situation caused a serious condition and at one time jeopardized Cranford's chances of receiving the Federal Grant. ...The Board of Education promptly met this obstacle through the utilization of an existing athletic field. ... Bids were taken and contracts signed for the superstructure on June 9th, 1936”. (Source: Poggi, C. G architect & Bragdon, W. B., Associate, “A History of the Building”, undated.)

Groundbreaking was held in December, 1935 (source: “Scenes at Ground-breaking for New School”, *The Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, December 19, 1935) and the dedication ceremonies held January 3, 1938 due to delays caused by weather and jurisdictional disputes. The result was the beautiful high school building still serving our community today. But in true Cranford fashion, the path to that lovely school was a nail-biter, never straight nor assured.

Sources:

1. Board of Education – Township of Cranford, NJ “The Cranford High School Problem”, undated (probably late 1932 or January, 1933)
2. *Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, various
3. *Cranford Chronicle*, various
4. Cruikshank, E. A., speech “Dedication for Roosevelt School”, 1928
5. Plummer, J. A., “Greetings from the President”, *Cranford High School Dedication Journal*, January 3, 1938
6. Poggi, C. G. architect , Bragdon, W. B. associate architect, “A History of the Building”, undated
7. Strayer, G. D., Director, “REPORT of the SURVEY OF SCHOOLS of the Township of Cranford, New Jersey SCHOOL YEAR 1924-1925, Division of Field Studies, Institute of Educational Research, Teachers College, Columbia University
8. The New High School Committee, “State Report Finds Health Menace In Cleveland School”, broadside dated February 9, 1933