

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Chet Orloff

On December 6, 1851, the following advertisement appeared in *The Oregonian* newspaper:

In pursuance of a vote of the Portland school district at their annual meeting, the directors have established a free school. The first term will commence on Monday, the 15th inst., at the schoolhouse in this city, near the City Hotel. (John Outhouse, teacher.) The directors would recommend the following books to be used in the school, viz.: Sandler's *Series of Readers and Spellers*, Goodrich's *Geography*, Thompson's *Arithmetics*, and Bullion's *Grammar*.

John Outhouse, the schoolteacher, was paid 100 dollars a month. The school was held in a schoolhouse at the corner of First and Oak Streets, in what is now downtown Portland and had just 20 students at first. Abigail Clarke was hired at the beginning of the third term in 1852, due to increased attendance. Miss Clarke was paid 75 dollars a month, and taught at a new school building, on First and Taylor Streets. By the third term, 126 students were enrolled in all, and an average of 90 showed up each day. Clarke was known to "thrash" boys who made a sport of rapping on the windows of the school, which faced out to the street. She continued to teach until the summer of 1853, when she moved to Oregon City. *



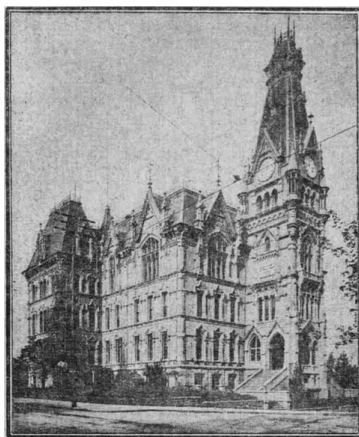
**Central School, where today's
Pioneer Courthouse Square sits.**

In 1858, only seven years after the first school opened and when free education was still a new concept, yet a new schoolhouse was built, financed

* For an early history of Portland's public schools, see <https://www.pps.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=344&dataid=414&FileName=Centennial-School-History-1876.pdf>.

by canceling all classes for a year! The building, located at Southwest Sixth and Morrison and named the Central School, later served as the location of the Portland Hotel and today's Pioneer Courthouse Square. Students and teachers were afforded daily views of the construction, across Sixth Avenue, of the new Federal Building, today named Pioneer Courthouse. As Central School's students progressed through the grades, demand for classes serving older students grew and Portland High School was opened in 1869. The high school began in two rooms of the old North School located at NW 11th and Davis Street. The first graduation exercise was held in 1975 when five students received their diplomas.

In the 1860s, the school budget was very low, about \$10 per student per year. Mayor William S. Ladd (known for being so thrifty that he'd take a letter he'd received and write back between the lines!) raised objections to the school paying for supplies such as ink, requiring students to instead make their own by boiling oak bark and carrying it in animal horns. Portland schools were further questioned in 1880 by Harvey W. Scott, editor of *The Oregonian* newspaper and brother of suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway, regarding the practicality of public high schools. He called public instruction "education for drones." (Let's bear in mind that the yearly cost to educate a student in 1879 in Portland was \$24.06, to give us a sense of what education was worth to 19th-century Portlanders!)



The 1885 high school building at SW 14th and Morrison Street that, in 1909, became the first to take the name Lincoln High School.

A compulsory education program was enacted in Oregon on February 25, 1889, and by 1891 the district contained 95 teachers, seven elementary schools, one high school, and one night school. The first building dedicated solely to high school education was built in 1885 and named West Side High School (photo above) on land purchased by the school district for \$30,000. (For more on this elegant building's architectural history, see William Hawkins' accompanying article.) The new school building proudly stood on the block bounded by 14th, Morrison, Lownsdale (now 15th), and Alder Streets.

Other school districts in East Portland were added to Portland's district when the cities of Portland, East Portland, and Albina were re-incorporated as one city in 1891. This added nine elementary schools, 74 teachers, and 2698 students to the system. By 1909 there were three high schools in Portland: Portland (or Westside), Albina, and Eastside. On February 12, 1909 (the centenary of Abraham Lincoln's birth), the school district renamed them, respectively, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington. Over the next 30 years the city added several new schools to its inventory, at the same time adding new fields, playgrounds, and trails to its growing park system. In 1912, Lincoln High School moved from SW 14th and Morrison to SW Market Street on the South Park Blocks. Today, the building is Lincoln Hall on the Portland State University campus.



Lincoln High School circa 1920, now known as Lincoln Hall at Portland State University.

By 1919, 60 portables added to the school buildings already in place and evening classes were being taught at Benson High School, Girls' Polytechnic (later merged with Benson), Commerce, Jefferson High School, and Lincoln High School. A new administration building opened at 7th and Clackamas in the Lloyd District.

In 1930, the Great Depression caused a decrease in the number of elementary students enrolled, but an increase in both men and women in the

high schools. Parents were out-of-work and many went back to get their high school diplomas. With the nation's entry into World War II as a provider for European allies, the district trained a large number of defense workers in the national defense program. About 10,000 men were trained in 1941 in airplane construction, shipbuilding, and other fields. By 1942, there were 63,238 school-age students, with 54,655 registered, and 1,613 instructors in 76 buildings. Many schools boasted "Victory Gardens," vegetable plots where students grew food to help with the war effort.

On June 30, 1949, there were 73,972 school-age students in the district boundaries, with 49,825 registered for school. The district had 1,828 teachers and 76 buildings. From the early 1950s the growth of population led to the growth of school-age children and of schools in Portland. A new building for Lincoln High School was added to the schools' facilities. To students used to "older" school buildings (i.e., built in the late 19th or early 20th century) the "new" Lincoln High School building was an architectural wonder. It was modern, with wide hallways, well-equipped science classrooms, a large library, a complete woodworking shop, state-of-the-art athletic facilities, and an excellent auditorium that supported the music and drama departments. "The new building was a treasure," recalls Dave Gilmore, a member of the first class to go all four years through the new building (1952-1956). For some, however, the "newness" of the building on Salmon Street was a disappointment, the old building on the South Park Blocks having the feel—according to these young architectural critics—of a "real" high school, while the new one looked to them like an office building or a suburban business complex.

Portland's first urban renewal project was launched in the late 1950s and called for clearing a large area of "blighted" buildings and homes in the blocks just south of what is now Keller Auditorium. The neighborhood, composed of many Jewish and Italian families, was home to many of Lincoln's diverse student body. Because Lincoln was the "downtown" high school on the west side of the Willamette River, the student body ran the full spectrum of Portland's socioeconomic culture. Some students still lived in coldwater apartment flats while others came from the homes of Portland's business leaders.

More schools were built during the latter decades of the 20th century than at any time in the city's history. Yet, by 1981, three high schools were voted to close: Jackson High School in southwest Portland, Adams High School in northeast Portland, and Washington-Monroe High School in the inner eastside.



Opened in 1952, Lincoln High School's current building had been the first new high school to be built in Portland since 1929.

In the 1970s Portland's population of the city had begun to shift to the suburbs. Enrollment declined until just a few years ago. Now, slow growth is projected. Faced with some very small schools (200–350 students) the district has undertaken what is intended to be a continual process of “Enrollment Balancing” to deal with anemic programs in some schools and overcrowded buildings in others. The new building for Lincoln High School is one project to address these programmatic and infrastructural challenges.

For a more-complete history of Lincoln High School, see:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_High_School_\(Portland,_Oregon\)_-History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_High_School_(Portland,_Oregon)_-History)

Chet Orloff, Director Emeritus of the Oregon Historical Society, graduated from Lincoln High School in 1967.

PORTLAND HIGH SCHOOL
A Short History of Lincoln High School
Chet Orloff
(*The Oregon Encyclopedia*)

On December 6, 1851, the following advertisement appeared in *The Weekly Oregonian* newspaper:

In pursuance of a vote of the Portland school district at their annual meeting, the directors have established a free school. The first term will commence on Monday, the 15th inst., at the schoolhouse in this city, near the City Hotel.

The building, located at Southwest Sixth and Morrison and named the Central School, later served as the location of the Portland Hotel and today's Pioneer Courthouse Square. As Central School's students progressed through the grades, demand for classes serving older students grew and West Side High School was opened in 1869. The high school began in two rooms of the old North School located at NW 11th and Davis Street. The first graduation exercise was held in 1875 when five students received their diplomas.

The first building dedicated solely to high-school education was finally constructed two decades later, in 1883-85, on land purchased by the school district for \$30,000 on a block defined by Alder, Twelfth, Lowndale (later renamed Thirteenth), and Morrison). It was dedicated as Portland High School. More uptown than previous schools in the growing city, the school stood between the highly residential areas of Northwest Portland and old South Portland but was confined by the still-existing gully of Tanner Creek, to its west and northwest.

The stuccoed brick and stone building immediately became the pride of the city. It was more impressive than any other public structure in the city – certainly more than the federal Customs House/Post Office Building (Pioneer Courthouse) and the Multnomah County Court House or any previous public-school buildings. Within its 140 x 200-foot parameters there were seventeen classrooms, as well as a magnificent assembly hall, sufficient to hold the entire student body, as well as host major events. There were, in addition, a library, a museum, a science laboratory, an art room, principal's office, a full basement, and an attic floor, probably housing large exercise facilities, popular at the time. At the center of the building was an open atrium with a round "rotunda" over it, to provide interior light and to help ventilate the building.

The cost of this structure was \$30,000 for the property and \$130,000 for the building. (The latest iteration of this school is costing \$242 million, on land already owned by the school district.) The school's architect, William Stokes (1854-1935), was highly regarded for his school buildings constructed across the state.

The architecture was described as "Transition, or Semi Norman." It was more than that, expressing high regard for both British Victorian architectural as well as educational tradition, best illustrated in the structure's clock tower, over the main entrance. It was the building's most elaborate feature, being 168 ft. high, topped by a steeply pitched and

finialed turret, and boasting a large clock face on each side, similar to Westminster Palace's "Big Ben" clock tower in London. (Alas, the clock was a mere painted mural, not a working clock, with its hands painted permanently at 9:00. "Time to get to class!?) Atop the clock tower was an extensive flagpole, as was typical of all school buildings.

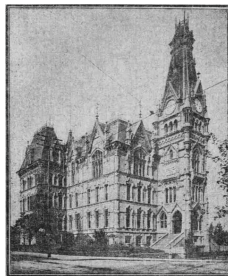
From 1885 to 1912 this building was Portland's singular west side high school, only to be replaced in 1912 by the new Lincoln High School on Portland's Park Blocks. The 1885 building remained in use as a girls' trade school until it was torn down in 1929.

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For an early history of Portland's public schools, see

150 YEARS OF LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL, Cress, Dana and Orloff, Chet, eds., Friends of Lincoln High School, Portland OR, 2019

<https://www.pps.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=344&dataid=414&FileName=Centennial-School-History-1876.pdf>



The 1885 Portland (or West Side) High School at SW 14th and Morrison Street that, in 1909, was given the name Lincoln High School. (OHS Photo)