

West High School History A Long Search for Home

The now-threatened West High School building is the product of more than a century of public ambition, effort, and investment. As we consider this building's future, we should also remember its past. Specifically, we should fully understand what it took to build and then sustain this remarkable building for 101 years. We must also ask if we, as a society, should throw away all the heritage West High School represents by demolishing it at some point in the coming years.

West High School (called Salt Lake High School from its founding in 1890 until the establishment of East High School in 1912) is Utah's oldest public high school. West High's establishment ultimately stemmed out of Utahns' late 19th-century struggles to establish effective systems of governance, create lasting institutions, and achieve statehood.

Before 1887, most of Utah's schools were managed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This changed with the 1887 Federal Edmunds-Tucker Act which, among many other things, gave Utah's Territorial Supreme Court power to appoint a "commissioner of schools" to oversee curriculum and integrate Mormon students and teachers with their non-Mormon counterparts. The subsequent 1890 Free School Law further ordered that free education be provided to all of Utah's students. The separation of Utah's school system from Mormon control, and the establishment of free public schools were critical to Utah's statehood efforts.

Perhaps not surprisingly, neither the Edmunds-Tucker Act or the Free School Law compelled political leaders to use tax funding to build new public schools throughout Utah. Funding high school construction at this point in history was especially difficult. Some university officials considered high schools as competition for the education they offered. Furthermore, many late 19th century Utahns saw high schools as an unnecessary public expense. A Salt Lake Tribune article published on Dec. 19, 1920, affirmed that:

At its inception, the high school as an institution supported by taxation, was vigorously opposed on the ground that it was an unnecessary step between the grade school and the university, and because of this, it was considered an extravagant waste of school funds.

Nevertheless, Salt Lake School District's first superintendent, Jesse Fonda Millspaugh, committed himself to establish a high school in Salt Lake City. In an article published in the September 3, 1891 edition of the *Salt Lake Herald*, Superintendent Millspaugh noted that:

“We [Salt Lake City School District officials and staff] are laboring under the same disadvantages as last year, which makes the work doubly hard. We have insufficient buildings and rooms to accommodate the pupils and to enable us to make a proper classification. We have already secured as many rooms as are available, and more will be secured after the school’s open.”¹

The available rooms found to house the first incarnation of West High included the 1883 14th Ward Building, also known as the Fremont School, which stood on 139th South and 2nd West and the basement of the 1885 Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church which stood on 4th East & 2nd South.² In just two years, West High had outgrown these spare rooms and consequently decamped to occupy the 57 West South Temple Street Clayton Block, later known as the Sharon Building, and a number of small business buildings on Richards Street. West High School filled these buildings for the next five years, but ultimately found them unsatisfactory.

In 1897, West High moved to a building on Pierpont Street initially built as the headquarters of the Oregon Shortline Railroad Company. To adapt this building to West High School’s needs, the Salt Lake City School District expanded the building. Ultimately, however, this third school site proved inadequate, and West High School moved yet again in 1901 to occupy University of Deseret (now University of Utah) buildings which stood purposeless after the university moved to Fort Douglas in 1900. West High School occupied this fourth site, and gradually began

¹ Perhaps many of Superintendent Millspaugh’s inner sentiments were expressed by Alfred Bond, who, in an op-ed published in the Dec. 22nd, 1891 edition of the *Wasatch Wave*, asked:

“Would it not be well for the legislature to come to our aid by establishing high-school districts in every county in the territory where the population demands it? . . . We cannot afford to go another year without a much-needed central school. It is the missing link in our educational system. It is a duty we owe ourselves, our children, and our God.”

² The Superintendent’s Report given to the Salt Lake City Board of Education on July 31st, 1900 included history on West High School’s earliest days. Per this report:

In September, 1890, the first high school was organized in Salt Lake City, and, strange to say, two were brought into existence at the same time; one, the larger, being located in the new 14th ward building, now the Fremont, and the other found a home in the basement of the Scandinavian Lutheran Church on the corner of 4th east and 2nd South Street. The reasons for such an anomalous condition could doubtless be traced to the desire of the people in the two sections of the city to maintain separate schools; but the unwisdom of such a course was so apparent that in less than four months they were brought together in the west side building and consolidated into one school, the two sections wisely burying their jealousies, if any such ever existed, in a commendable endeavor to make one good school which should command the confidence of the public.

For more information about West High School’s development, see “The Story of Salt Lake High School’s Growth Pictures Striking Contrasts: Academic Paths Rough, Rocky,” December 19, 1920, *Salt Lake Tribune*.

construction on auxiliary campus buildings including a gymnasium and a remodeled “union” building.

By the 1910s, there was little to no resistance in funding purpose-built high schools with tax funds.³ East High School was constructed in 1913 with great community support, and much smaller communities were constructing their own high schools. Core elements of the Granite High School campus were built between 1910-1921, Jordan High School likewise appeared in 1914, and Cypress High School in 1918. Each of these schools helped to open the door to constructing a new West High School.

A \$2,100,000 bond passed by Salt Lake City residents in early 1919 funded West High School. \$1,100,000 of this bond was designed to build a new West High main building, as well as an auditorium, gymnasium, central heating plant, and an expanded technical building. Various architects competed for the privilege of designing the new West High, with the contract ultimately awarded to Lewis Cannon and John Fetzer, the principles of the well-known Salt Lake City-based firm Cannon and Fetzer. With Salt Lake School Superintendent H.A. Smith, Lewis Cannon toured schools on the East and West Coasts of the United States to identify the best features to include in West High School.

In 1921, local newspapers highlighted the results of nearly two years of planning. West High’s design was described by these papers as reflecting the then-popular “school Gothic” style, a style intended to recall elite educational campuses on the East Coast of the United States and in the United Kingdom. The school featured a brick, terra cotta, and concrete exterior, and an interior of “steel and reinforced concrete; in other words, fireproof.” The construction bid was issued to William G. Reed at a price of \$618,000.⁴

When the school’s construction ended in the fall of 1922, many commemorated the vision reflected in the new West High School. School and district leaders were heralded for their vision, others gave credit to the skill of architects and builders, and politicians were credited with making West High School a reality. Perhaps the most poignant of all the statements made on West High’s completion highlighted the effort of students who worked to make the

³ Salt Lake School Superintendent G.N. Child asserted that high school was essential to individual interests and to larger societal aims. In a December 19, 1920 Salt Lake Tribune article, Superintendent Child confirmed that:

“A high school education is the birthright of every American boy and girl. Moreover, it is an essential preparation for happy social living and good citizenship . . . High schools are the colleges of the people. They provide a cosmopolitan sort of education, and are the nation’s hope for the production of citizens able to think straight, to live well, and to serve effectively.”

⁴ “School Building Contract is Let: Board of Education Awards New West High School Construction to W.G. Reed,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 Jun 1921.

school a reality. This statement, published in the *Salt Lake Telegram* on Dec. 16, 1922 and represented in its entirety below, asserted that:

In the new West Side High School, Salt Lake has an institution devoted to the cause of education which is not to be excelled anywhere in the country. It is one in which every resident of Salt Lake can take pride, constituting as it does a standing credit to the community. In the rush of progress, we are sometimes inclined to forget those responsible for progressive movements.

In this connection, it is well to remember the efforts made by former students of the West High to obtain this improvement. Long before there was hope of this building, the West High students were agitating the question. We recall vividly a parade or two that these students staged with the sole object of acquainting the general public with the needs of the west side.

The third campaign of the students for a new building was launched in 1918, under the auspices of the staff of the Red and Black magazine, the high school publication. Possibly the new structure would have come without this effort, but the fact remains that this is where the movement gained impetus. Many of the leaders of the movement were seniors serving their last year in high school.

For them there could be no selfish interest. They could not possibly receive any personal reward for their activity. Many of these young people are now engaged in business pursuits, while others are finishing their college careers. It must be a personal satisfaction for them to view the new high school structure and to know that its inception was had in the lively and determined interest of students.

The rest of the citizenship should be proud of this young blood. The future of the city is safe in the hands of youngsters who could devote themselves to this unselfish service. The same spirit carried into community life can do much to right wrongs and correct evils which now exist. The new West High School which is a source of pride to every citizen of Salt Lake means more to the young men and women who attended the institution a few years ago. It is a monument to their loyalty and perseverance as well as a tribute to their ideals of progress. The fact that no scroll bears their names cannot alter the credit which is due their initial efforts.

Over the ensuing century, West High School has grown into one of Salt Lake City's landmark institution, known nationally for its excellent academic programs. West has launched tens of thousands of students into adulthood, many of whom have become leaders in their fields, thanks, in part to the foundation they gained at West. This school has helped to shape Utah history and has come to link generations to one another.

West High offers its students a distinctive and unique learning environment, offers insights into local heritage, and encourages respect for the past.

The last decade has transformed Salt Lake City and other communities throughout Utah. Even in the past five years, scores of historic buildings which should have been retained have instead been demolished. Many of these buildings were privately owned. Unlike those other buildings, however, West High is publicly owned. Collectively, we can save West High School. If we don't, then we must continue to bemoan destruction that we have allowed to happen.