

# THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

Vol. No. XXXVIII



Spring, 2007



*The Field School opened in 1950 as Weston High School and has served the community as a high school, junior high, and upper elementary school. Its future is now under study.*

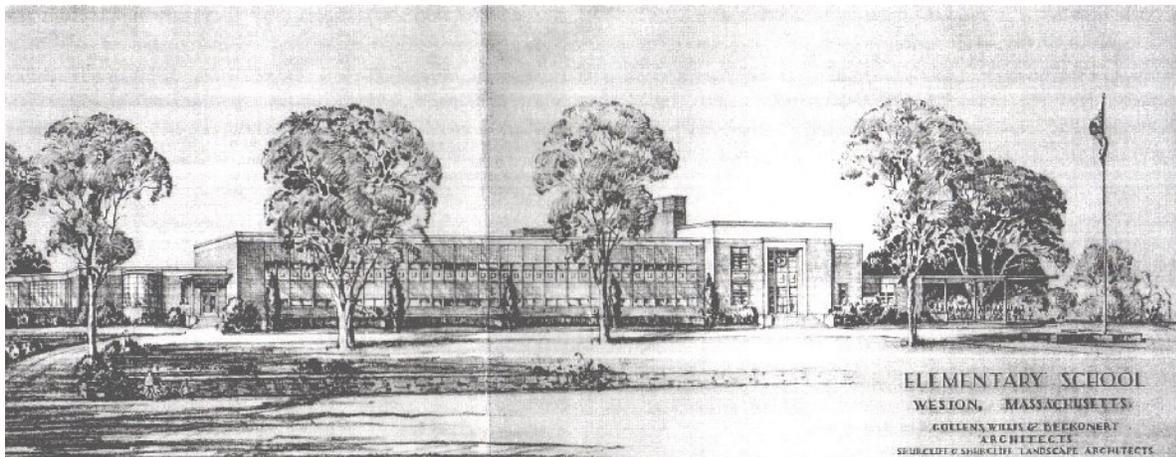
## A History of Field School

The building now known as Field School was planned as an elementary school to accommodate the baby boom clearly on the horizon at the end of World War II. At that time, elementary students were housed in what are now the Brook School Apartments A and B. The 1946 *Town Report* records the recommendation of the Finance Committee “that a building committee . . . give serious consideration to the rapid obsolescence rate of school buildings and accordingly build an appropriate and adequate school plant with a minimum of superficial appointments to keep the cost at a minimum and with an interior design that permits of flexibility.” A suitable site was needed, and in 1946, 46 acres of land in close proximity to the existing school complex was purchased from Harvard Uni-

versity for \$10,000. The land had been given to Harvard's Arnold Arboretum only a few years earlier by Louisa Case, sister of Marion Case.

The Building Committee began work in September 1946. They hired Weston resident Harold B. Willis (1890-1962) of the Boston firm of Collens, Willis and Beckonert to design the new school. Willis designed many notable buildings in the Northeast, including the Newton City Hall, Hammond Castle and Stillington Hall in Gloucester, and the Cloisters Museum in New York City. In Weston, his work included his own home at 49 Concord Road (1921), the original Meadowbrook School (1924), the brick mansion at One Townhouse Road (1929), and the Sears Memorial Chapel at First Parish Church (1930). According to committee member John Brooks, Willis "put his whole heart into doing this and doing it right." For site planning and landscape design, the committee engaged Arthur A. and Sidney N. Shurcliff, a well-known firm with long ties to the town.

According to the Report of the Elementary School Building Committee, printed in the 1947 *Town Report*, the architect was instructed to design a building "of sound, permanent, modern construction without useless decoration" that was "flexible in layout to provide for changing views on educational programs over a long period of years." Single-story and two-story structures were considered; and a two-story layout was finally selected as "the most appropriate to the contours of the site, the most economical to operate, and the most adaptable to expansion." According to the report, "a suitable exterior design was chosen from various alternatives of conventional and simplified treatments." In a letter dated March 17, 1947, from Harold Willis to Ed Hubbard, Chair of the Building Committee, Willis writes "The talk I have heard seems to be away from a Colonial scheme, and rather in favor of the least expensive and most efficient type of modern school building."



*The choice of the fashionable Modern style for Weston's first post-war school was appropriate for both aesthetic and practical reasons. Modernist ideals, particularly the emphasis on functionalism and the omission of "superfluous" ornament, dovetailed well with the town's financial concerns during this time of rising taxes and exponential growth in the school-age population. The building exemplifies characteristic features of the style, including the "ribbon of windows," a term for the long expanses of windows that give the building the horizontal orientation so typical of Modernism.*



*The football field behind Weston High School (now Field School) can be seen in this aerial view probably dating to the 1950s.*

Plans changed dramatically after a disastrous April 7, 1948, fire that gutted the Weston High School (now Brook School Apartments C). At a Special Town meeting a few weeks later in May, Town Meeting took quick action, voting to abandon the idea of a new

elementary school and to adapt the architectural plans to a new high school for grades 7 to 12. The burned high school was reconstructed as an elementary school.

The building committee and architect reworked the earlier plan to meet the needs of older students. Dr. Homer G. Anderson, Superintendent of Schools in Newton, was consulted on the basic layout. A gymnasium was added, along with a cooking room, automotive shop, woodworking shop, and mechanical drawing area. The new building had twenty classrooms, three more than the old high school, and a total size of 56,286 square feet. According to a brochure printed for the dedication, the building could accommodate 400 students, with 300 being the size of the initial student body. The report of the Special School Building Committee, dated September, 1948, noted that future expansion could be accomplished by adding a wing attached to the gymnasium.

Because of the emergency situation created by the fire, the town received dispensation from the state legislature to let the contract on a cost-plus basis rather than putting it out for public bid. The contractor, Farina Bros., Inc., began work in September, 1948. Classes began in the new building on January 5, 1950 and dedication exercises followed on March 25. After the ceremony, the building was opened to public inspection and some 1300 people reportedly came to take a look. The final cost of construction, furnishing, and landscaping, along with design fees, was approximately \$925,000. Furniture and equipment salvaged from the burned school were used wherever possible.

All accounts of the new building emphasize the natural light. Rather than having all metal sash windows, the town spent an estimated \$5,000 extra for some 6,720 glass bricks designed to increase the uniformity of classroom light. The exterior contained a



*Above: Weston High School students with mathematics teacher Miss Helen Green, who taught in Weston from 1916 through the late 1950s. Below: Cheerleaders, 1955-56 school year.*

reported 10,096 square feet of glass area, including both clear glass and glass bricks. According to a newspaper article in *Boston Post Magazine* of September 11, 1950, the new high school was a “marvel of modern science,” that was “85% glass” on the exterior,

The building was aligned in an east-west direction to minimize the need for window shades. Because of the sloping grade, usable classrooms with natural light could be located on the lower level. The building employed a new technique of constructing floors. Interior walls were not permanent but could be moved at will and locked in place at any eight-foot interval. Colors were chosen to “give a soft, restful effect to take best advantage of the good natural light and to reduce contrast to a minimum. The *Boston Post Magazine*

article noted that such color tones would “control irritability and distraction.”

In the decades that followed, as additional school buildings were constructed, the use of the 1950 building changed. In the fall of 1955, 7th and 8th grade students moved into the former Brook School Building A, available because of the 1955 opening of Country School. In the fall of 1961, the new high school on Wellesley Street opened and the 1950



*Weston High School prom, 1953-54 school year.*

high school became a junior high. In September, 1970, after completion of the present junior high school in 1969, the former junior high was remodeled and made ready for occupancy as an elementary school christened “Field School” following the rural naming theme already established with Country, Woodland, and Brook. At that time Field was used as an “intermediate” school for grades 4, 5 and 6.

In 1981, with the continuing drop in school enrollments, Field School became the second Weston school to close, after Brook in 1976. Field was leased to organizations that could use existing classrooms, thus preserving the possibility of reopening the school if enrollments increased. It housed a variety of educational and recreational programs including Weston Wing, a day care center, and the Children’s Center, an after-school program.

In 1994-95, Field School was renovated to house grades 4 and 5. The town appropriated \$1.86 million and the renovation committee worked with Todd Lee-Clark-Rozas Associates, Inc. to bring the building up to code, remove asbestos, and make it handicapped accessible, including installation of an elevator. In May 2005, the Town approved a warrant article for a feasibility study of the Field School, “to establish a comprehensive plan for building improvements including capital needs, space reconfiguration and programmatic upgrades.” (2005 *Town Report*, p. 84). The feasibility study also looked at options to replace the school.

*by Pamela W. Fox, with thanks to John Brooks, member of the Special Building Committee from 1946 to 1951.*