English High School

The Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, seeing the need for a public high school, urged the town to build one modeled after the Royal High School in Edinburgh, Scotland. English High School, located originally on Derne Street and called the English Classical School (1821), was one of the first public high schools in America and has the oldest Alumni Association in the Country. In 1824 the school was renamed and relocated to the corner of Pinckney and W. Centre (now Anderson Street) and is still standing. The first class of 101 students were taught under the motto: “The aim of every English High School boy is to become a man of honor and achievement.”

The first School Committee, chaired by Samuel Adams Wells, grandson of Governor Samuel Adams, was given the responsibility of establishing a high school. The School represented a progressive step in education and attracted many important Bostonians; the school’s first headmaster was Dr. George B. Emerson was a leader in educational reform and early advocate for women’s education. Although the English School only admitted boys when it first opened, with the aid of Dr. Emerson a separate high school for girls was quickly established in 1824.

Unlike the Latin School, which was for the college bound, the English School was for young men bound for careers in commerce, mechanics and engineering. The curriculum emphasized math, philosophy, rhetoric, ‘belles lettres,’ history, and French. Other classes included English, surveying, navigation, geography, logic, and civics. Some influential graduates include JP Morgan, Charles Hayden (Planetarium), Leonard Nimoy, and Lawrence Berk.

In 1844, the High School moved to Bedford Street, where it remained with Latin School until 1880. It moved again to Montgomery Street in the South End in 1881. Almost a century later the Boston English High School began to admit girls as well as boys.