

Houston High School. Classes in this new building began in 1895.

Houston Schools Remembered

Throughout the city's history, Houston has tried to provide educational opportunities for its citizens, within the limitations of fiscal resources and of public support. According to the scant evidence available concerning education during Houston's formative years, the earliest schools were organized in 1838-1839. All were small, private schools, requiring that parents pay a fee for each enrolled child. One of the first was known simply as the School House, a two-story frame structure located on Travis Street. The facility was financed in part by the Odd Fellows' Lone Star Lodge No. 1.

As Houston grew, the number of small private schools increased. Many were short-lived, but new ones soon replaced them. In the decade before the Civil War, the schools advertised in local newspapers included the Male and Female City School, the Classical School, the Houston Female Seminary, and the first Houston Academy, located at Main and Preston. Professor H. F. Gillett, who headed the Academy, boasted that he would prepare pupils "for any college in the United States."

Two especially distinguished schools appeared in the late 1850s. In 1857, the second Houston Academy was built on the site bounded by Rusk, Caroline, Capitol, and Austin Streets. The new Academy was Houston's first chartered educational facility. Measuring 64 by 84 feet, the two-story brick structure was the finest school facility in the city and a source of pride for Houstonians. The Academy was proof that the Bayou City had come of age. In 1859, Miss Mary B. Brown founded her exclusive Select School for Young Ladies. The combination day and boarding school, located in an elegant two-story frame house at McKinney and Crawford, attracted the daughters of prominent families both in Houston and from neighboring towns.

The movement for free public education gained momentum in urban areas all across the United States in the 1870s, and Houston was no exception. In 1876 the Texas legislature empowered municipalities to claim a pro rata share of specially assigned school funds. As a result of this action, in 1877 the Houston City Council began to provide free schooling for all children from eight to fourteen years of age. The Council established a board of trustees and a superintendent to operate the public schools. The school system consisted of a high school, two grammar schools, and five primary schools for white children, as well as a "colored" school in each of the city's five wards. A new era was beginning for Houston and its schools, as noted in the 1880-81

Houston City Directory:

While building improvement, trade and commerce, are indicative of a city's wealth, so in a like manner are educational establishments, signs of moral and social advancement, and of these advantageous facilities Houston can justly boast.

The school census, just taken, shows a school population . . . of 2746, of which number over 1700 are being educated at the public schools . . .

To Houston belongs the honor of having first successfully established the system of graded schools in Texas, which . . . far surpasses any other public educational establishments in the state.

The movement toward free schools coincided with a period of explosive growth in Houston. As the city's population grew from 16,500 in 1880, to 44,000 in 1900, to 78,800 in 1910, the public school system steadily expanded. By the 1890s, Houston's thirteen permanent public schools had an enrollment of approximately 5,500 pupils. In 1905, Houston had twenty-three public schools, with 7,562 students enrolled. By 1914, 17,000 children attended classes in forty schools and received instruction from nearly 500 teachers.

The accelerated influx of new residents and wealth into Houston after 1900 created both the need for expanded educational facilities and the means to fund their construction. Revenues originating from Houston's surging petroleum industry and from commerce via the ship channel boosted the city's economy and made possible the frenzy of school construction which characterized Houston's entry into the twentieth century. This period of rapid expansion of Houston's educational facilities produced some of the city's most memorable school buildings. Although the buildings have long since been torn down and replaced, their names linger in the memories of long-time residents and in historical records.

The names reflected heroes, popular local citizens, literary personages, streets, and geographic locations. Stephen F. Austin, C. Anson Jones, James Fannin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Beauchamp Springs, First Ward, and Fifth Ward Schools are a few of the names commemorated on the city's roster of schools. Like the schools themselves, many of the names have disappeared and become a part of Houston's past. Other names, more relevant to contemporaries, replaced the older ones, leaving a trail to challenge the investigative talents of chroniclers. The Elysian Street School in the old Fifth Ward, for example, began in 1888 as a four-room frame building accommodating ninety-six pupils. In 1905, this modest structure was replaced with an eight-room brick building and renamed C. Anson Jones School in honor of the statesman of the Texas Republic. Later the Jones School became the location for night classes. Although the building ceased to exist, the name Anson Jones continues to be used by the Houston Independent School

District. Another school with a long tradition is the Dow School, named for Justin E. Dow who served as the principal of the Houston High School from 1882 to 1885 and as superintendent of the Houston public schools from 1885 to 1887. Founded in 1885 as the Fourth Ward School in a two-room building, the school had one hundred and seventy-one pupils enrolled by 1886. In 1887 the school moved to a newly constructed building at 1600 Washington Street, and was renamed the Washington Street School. In 1888 the name was changed again, to the Justin E. Dow School. Like Jones, the name Dow survives today on the HISD system roster.

Perhaps the most prominent example of renaming is the Houston High School, successor to the old Houston Academy and considered the "flagship" of Houston's public schools during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As Houston's only high school for white children, the school represented for most students the apex of scholarly achievement. A series of name changes and renovations had followed the Academy's construction in 1857. Its function as a school was interrupted during the Civil War when it was converted into a hospital. It reopened as a school for a short time following the war, but fell into disuse until the building received extensive repairs in 1878, and opened its doors in 1881 as Houston's first permanent high school.

Several names for the school appeared in subsequent years. The school was known in 1882 as the Clopper Institute to honor Professor E. N. Clopper, who had functioned both as its principal and as the superintendent of schools until the previous year, but the name was changed to Houston Normal and High School in 1886. In the same year the school received accreditation from the fledgling University of Texas. In 1895, the city completed work on a new school building at the old Academy site. This building, an ornate twenty-classroom structure, became a Houston landmark until a fire destroyed it in 1919. By then it had undergone two additional name changes. In 1902 the school became known as Houston High School and in 1914 as Central High School. When a new eighty-classroom building replaced the former structure in 1921, the school retained the name Central High. Finally, in 1926, the school was renamed Sam Houston High School.

Schools of all types in the Bayou City have made their own particular contributions to the city's history. From primary to postgraduate levels, schools offer a unique window into our past, a view of the community's social values and customs. The following photographs provide a glimpse of Houston schools that now survive only in memory.

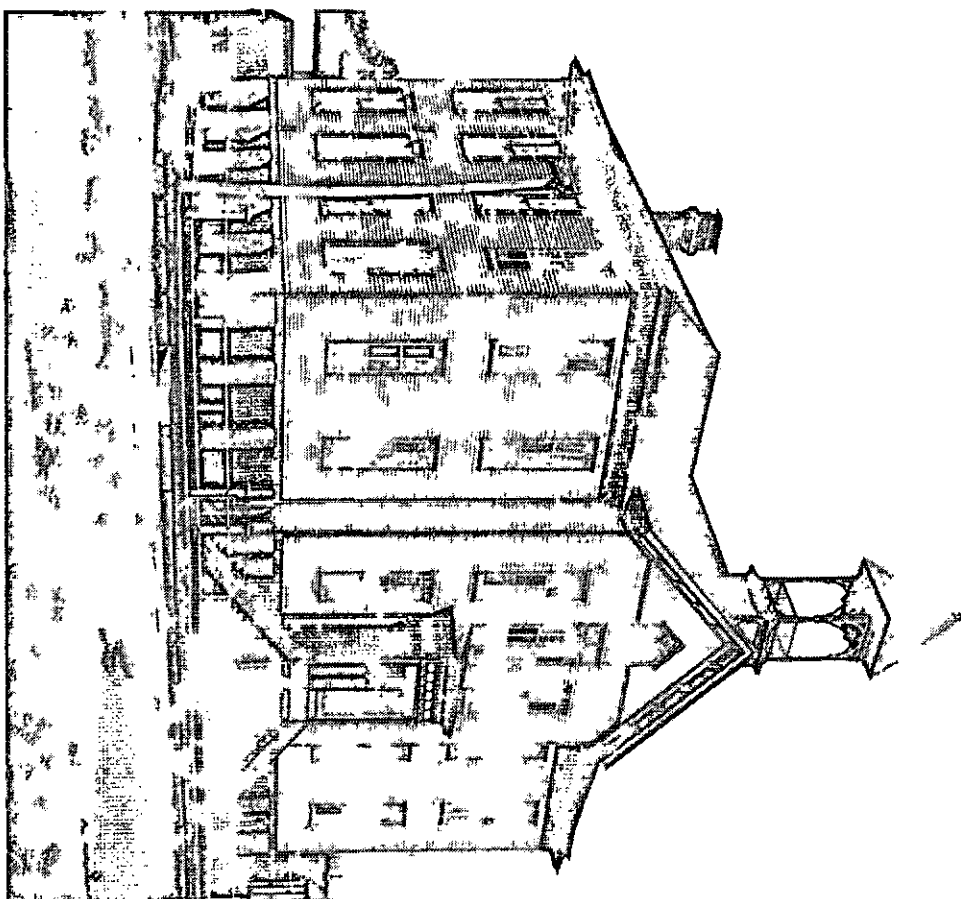
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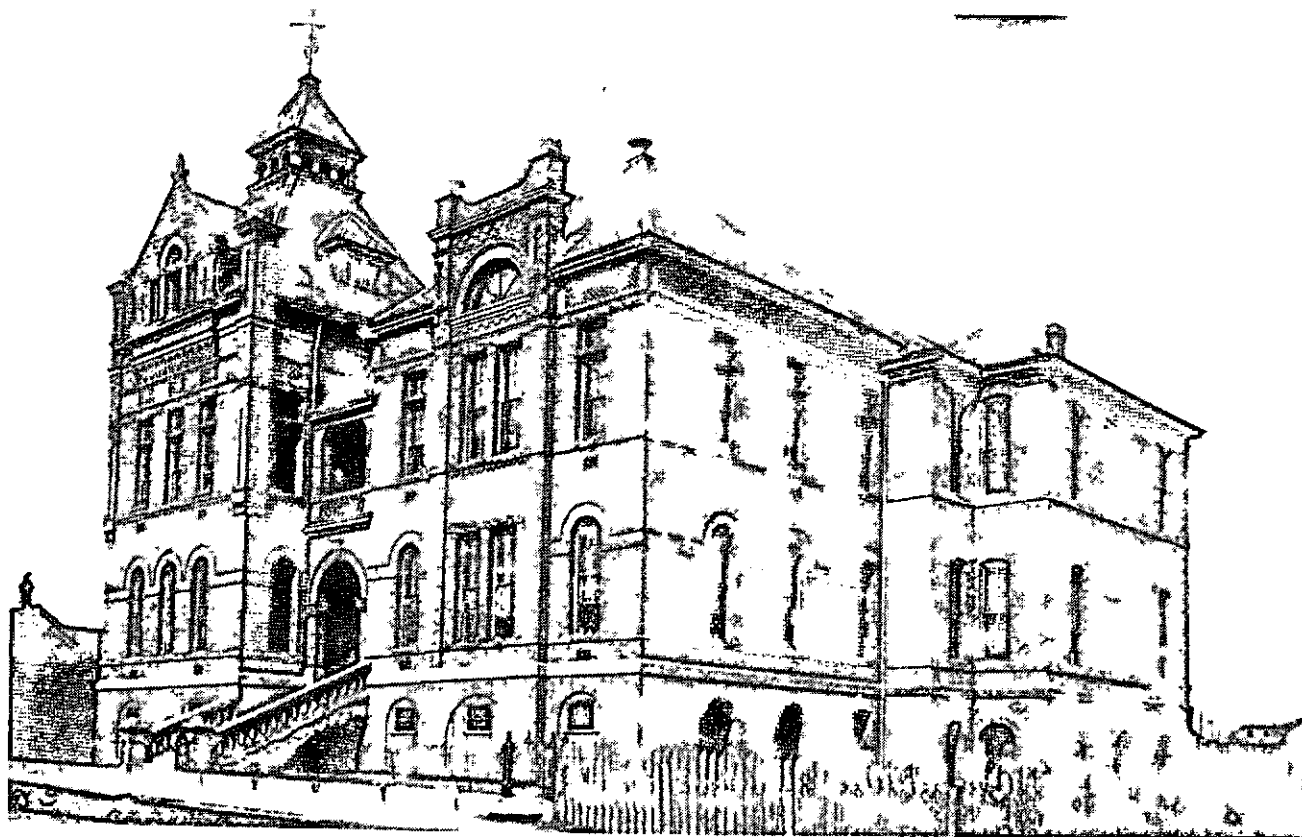
Graduating class of Houston High School, winter term of 1909-10. Total enrollment at the High School was 779 students.



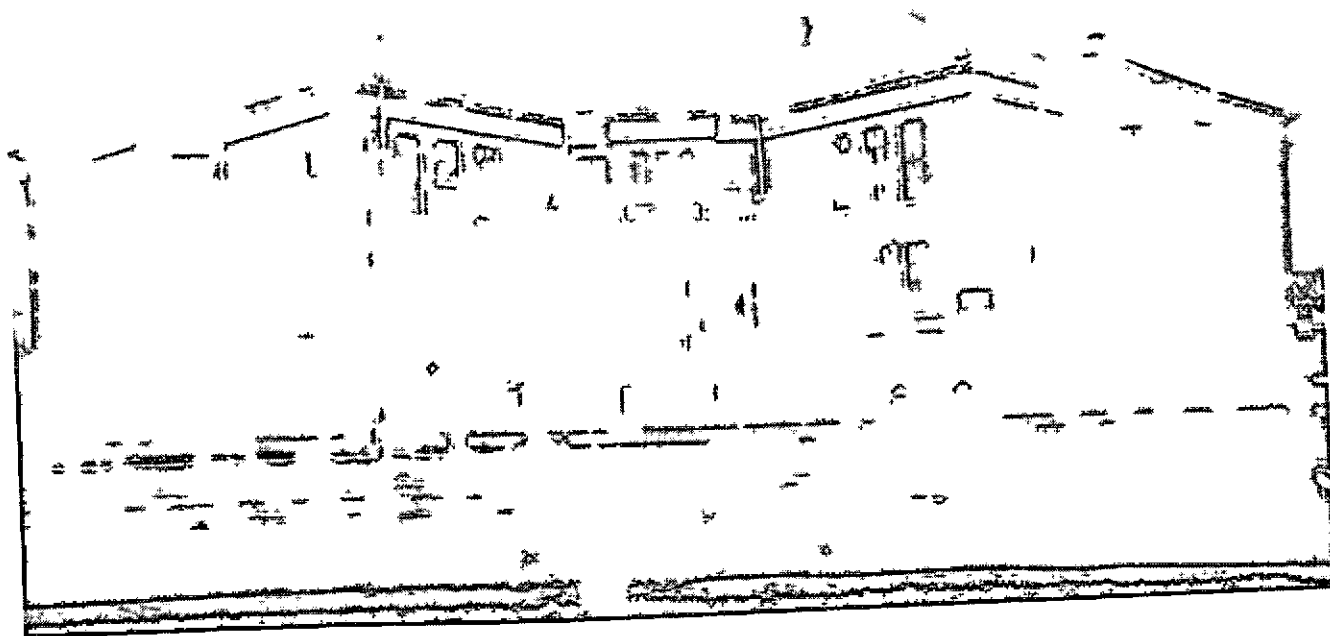
Teachers in Houston's public school system, ca. 1904, posing in the High School auditorium.



Taylor School. This two-story frame structure, built in 1887, is typical of Houston public schools at the time.



Jones School. By the 1890s, Houston Schools were housed in more elaborate brick buildings. The Jones school moved into this new building in 1892.



Fannin School. The size of this 1899 building reflects the constant increase in school enrollment.



Douglass School, ca. 1890s. This school served black children in Houston's Third Ward. By 1894, the public school system included a "Colored High School" in addition to the original five black schools.



Night school pupils in the Houston High School building, ca. 1912. Adults and children united in a common desire for education after their workday ended.

*Red Scare!
Legacy in
Press, 1985.*

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