

School Buildings as Time Travelers

Admit it: you've been thinking about school.

Your school is important to you for all the obvious reasons, but it's important to your neighborhood too. It's where families meet each other, where friendships happen, where people get together for celebrations, concerts, meetings.

A school is kind of like a home base for the neighborhood. There's a place for it, and everyone knows where it is. You can count on it five days a week (unless it's snowing or there's a pandemic on). It's been there in the past, and you know it's going to be there in the future.

But it wasn't always that way. Over the years, every generation of neighbors has had to advocate for their school; whether to get it built in the first place, to make it bigger or take care of it, or to make sure there were enough teachers. As the times have changed and our neighborhoods have changed too, schools have been a constant. If we want to know more about the history of our neighborhoods, it's worth a look at the early days of our school buildings and their surroundings.

Food for Thought

Long ago when Portland's eastside neighborhoods were first built and families began building houses and moving in, schools were unfortunately not at the top of the list. Funds were scarce to build and to operate enough buildings to keep up with so many new students in so many new neighborhoods. Schools often started out as temporary buildings at the back of open fields. Alameda School was built in a cow pasture. Seriously.

The earliest Alameda School, for instance, was actually five separate small buildings that parents said were as flimsy as cardboard and that were heated by wood stoves. In 1920—before the school we know today had been built—the principal there was also teaching sixth, seventh and eighth grade.

The old Vernon School was a four-story barn of a building that many considered a fire trap (it did eventually burn down). Sabin and Beaumont were once single-story wood buildings located in slightly different places than they are now.

What if we were able to turn back the clock almost one hundred years to 1924 and have a look at a few of our schools and their neighborhoods? *Guess what: we can!*

Activity Suggestions & Curiosities

1. Using the maps that are linked below for each of the following schools, see how many differences you can find between today and almost 100 years ago. Make a list of what you find (be sure to look at how many vacant lots there were back then...are they all built up today?). Click in and get started!

Alameda School

<https://alamedahistory.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/alameda-school-1924-1.pdf>

Sabin School

<https://alamedahistory.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/sabin-school.pdf>

Old Vernon School (but wait, it's completely gone now...)

<https://alamedahistory.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/old-vernon-school-1924-1.pdf>

Today's Vernon School (but wait, it wasn't built yet in 1924)

<https://alamedahistory.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/todays-vernon-site-1.pdf>

Beaumont School

<https://alamedahistory.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/beaumont-school.pdf>

2. Draw a map of your school and label the rooms with each teacher's name (if you can). Don't forget the principal's office; the gym; the cafeteria; the auditorium; the playground. Where's your room? Your favorite place?
3. For parents or anyone not still in school, you can play too! Make a diagram of any school you've attended and see if you can do the same. Label what you remember, including any special places in the universe of your school (we remember the tall cottonwood trees at the far end of the field that we had to run around for warm ups in gym class). What memories can you share with your student?
4. In 2009, Portland Public Schools completed a district-wide review of 68 school buildings to assess their historic integrity and eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. The written reports on each building make for interesting reading and help us understand early chapters of our schools and our neighborhoods.
5. Check out the full list of inventoried school buildings and find your school:
<https://www.pps.net/Page/2248>
6. Once you've located your school's assessment, make a list:
 - A. When was your school built?
 - B. What was the name of the architect who designed your school? The builder?
 - C. Any special problems or challenges during design and construction?
 - D. What years were changes or additions made to your school, and what were the changes? Now that you know about the change, can you see it?
 - E. Any special stories or insights you want to tell your teacher about when you get back to school?

Home History School is a collection of activities for kids of all ages to experience and connect with neighborhood history in Northeast Portland, Oregon. This is one of a dozen "lesson plans" on a variety of local topics. The collection—which we're adding to each Monday this spring—can be found at www.alamedahistory.org. For more information or other ideas, contact Doug Decker, doug@alamedahistory.org / 503-901-5510.