

Portland High School, c. 1899

By Edwin D. Jorgensen

Photographer Edwin D. Jorgensen captured this image of Portland High School circa 1899. Constructed between 1883 and 1885, the building stood on the corner of SW Fourteenth and Morrison streets for forty-four years and served as a high school until 1912. It housed fifteen classrooms, two recitation rooms, a library, museum, laboratory, art room, model room, administrative offices, and a large assembly hall. The building's impressive size and Semi-Norman architectural style suggested that high school was to be a permanent aspect of public school education in Portland.

Public high school had modest and tentative beginnings in Portland. School board officials opened the city's first public high school on April 26th 1869 in two rooms of an existing primary school. Professor J.W. Johnson, who later became the first president of University of Oregon, led the original group of forty-five scholars as their principal. Prior to this time the only way to receive education beyond grammar school was to attend one of the city's private secondary schools. Some opponents of public high school wanted to keep it that way—they thought it was unnecessary and unfair for taxpayers to support education past the primary level.

Despite resistance, the institution grew and curriculum standardized over the next fifteen years. In 1873 a board of examiners conducted the first written exam for promotion from primary school to the high school. In 1875 five pupils, of the 121 total enrolled, passed a completion examination and created Portland's first high school graduating class.

As the school expanded it relocated three times prior to the construction of the Portland High School building. School board directors voted to erect a building primarily for high school use in 1883. To fund the construction, they levied an extra tax. Construction halted for nearly a year in 1884 because costs greatly exceeded original estimates, conflicts over quality arose between school board directors and contractors, and taxpayers grew impatient. After the directors secured additional funding and the contractors made progress, Portland High School's first classes met September 1885. Over the next decade increased enrollments gradually filled the grand building, and public high school became an undisputed fixture in the city.

Further Reading: United States. Works Project Administration, Oregon. *History of Education in Portland*. Edited by Alfred Powers and Howard McKinley Corning. Portland, Ore., 1937.

Robbins, William. *Oregon: This Storied Land*. Portland, Ore., 2005.

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