

*John Seely Hart's "Lectures on the
Public Schools of Philadelphia, 1849"*

The Special Collections Research Center at Temple University Libraries recently acquired a manuscript volume of thirteen lectures delivered by John Seely Hart (1810–77) in 1849. Transcribed and illustrated by his student Samuel Sparks Fisher (1832–74), these lectures trace Hart's perspectives on the history of the public schools of Philadelphia from 1809 to 1842 and reflect his belief that education was a right for all citizens.¹

John Hart graduated from Princeton University in 1830. He served as an instructor at the university and the proprietor of the Edgehill School in Princeton, New Jersey, before becoming principal of Philadelphia's Central High School in 1842.² His lectures cover the history of public education in the city from 1809, when the Pennsylvania legislature provided for the free education of poor children, to his arrival at Central. They include a chronological survey of school construction, a discussion of the establishment of "colored schools," information about model schools and the benefits of the Lancasterian system, and a review of the state of schools in outlying areas of the city.

Fisher graduated from Central High School in 1851, studied law, and then practiced as a patent attorney. He rose to the rank of colonel in the 138th regiment of the Ohio National Guard during the Civil War, served as commissioner of patents under President Ulysses S. Grant, and was briefly president of the Young Men's Christian Association of Cincinnati. He appears, while a student at Central, to have recorded and illustrated a series of lectures he heard from his principal, but there is no indication whether Hart was lecturing to a classroom of students or to a wider audience.³

On March 9, 1849, Hart opened his lecture series by explaining how antebellum Philadelphians were rethinking the meaning of public education:

¹ John S. Hart, *Lectures on the Public Schools of Philadelphia*: manuscript, 1849, SCRC 138, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.

² Rossiter Johnson, ed., *The Biographical Dictionary of America* . . . , vol. 5 (Boston, 1906).

³ *In Memoriam: Samuel S. Fisher* (Cincinnati, 1874).

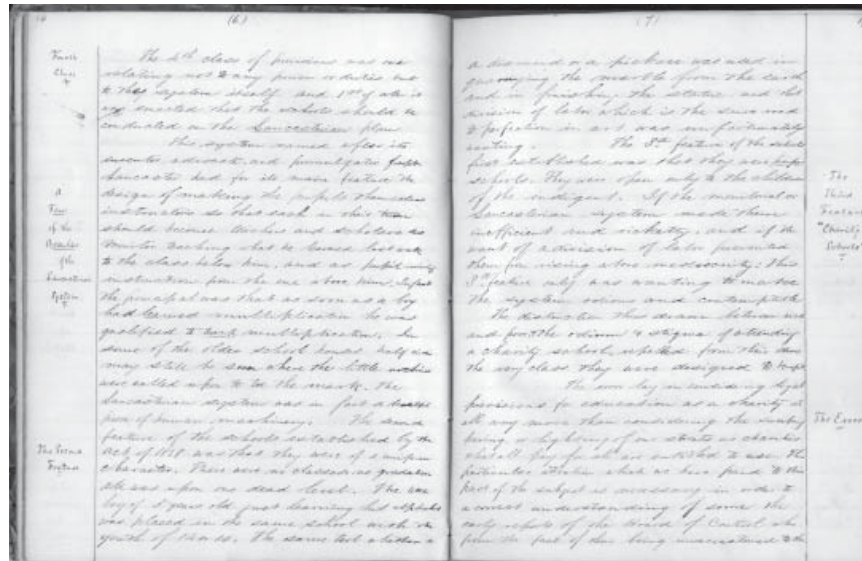


Fig. 1: John S. Hart, *Lectures on the Public Schools of Philadelphia*: manuscript, 1849, pp. 16–17, SCRC 138, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA.

There are still some who regard public schools not as highways opened for the benefit of all, but as alms houses supported by the exercise of public charity. These however are rapidly becoming the exceptions and the opinion which seems to be most universal considers public schools not as a charity but as a right. . . . The true idea of public schools is that they are Common Schools supported at the expense of all and consequently for the good of all.⁴

In his second lecture, delivered March 16, 1849, Hart described the public education act passed by the state legislature in 1818, which provided for the formation of the first school district of Pennsylvania and mandated that its schools be conducted on the Lancasterian plan (fig. 1). English Quaker Joseph Lancaster founded the Society for Promoting the Lancasterian System for the Education of the Poor in 1808, which promoted a system where more advanced students taught other students, thereby educating a larger number of students with the same, smaller number of professional teachers in place. Hart described “a few of the beauties of the Lancasterian system,” which included “making the pupils

⁴Hart, *Lectures on the Public Schools of Philadelphia*, 2–3.

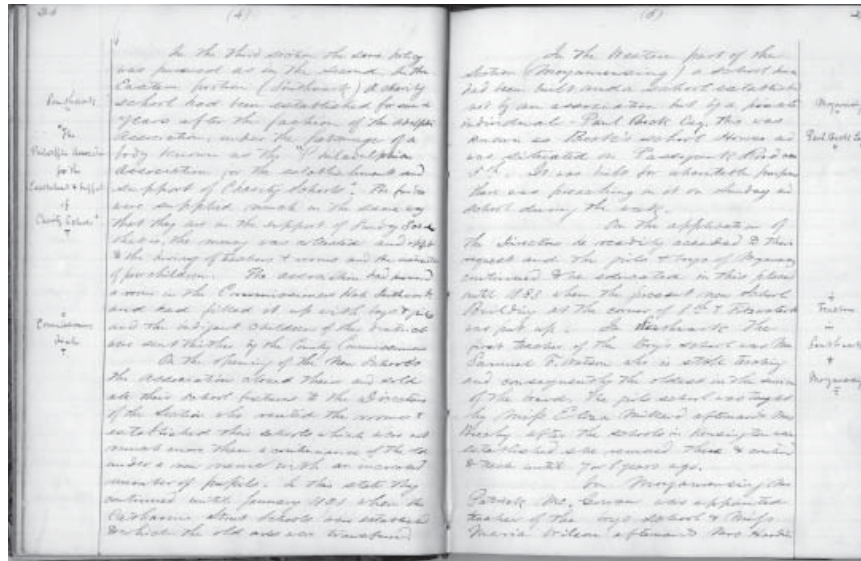


Fig. 2: Hart, Lectures on the Public Schools of Philadelphia, 26–27.

themselves instructors so that each in their turn should become teachers and scholars,” and noted that the Philadelphia schools adopted the system to provide the best possible education for “poor children” (fig. 2). He continued with a nuanced consideration of the some of the errors made by the legislature and the deficiencies of the Lancasterian system that became apparent over the course of thirty years, noting Philadelphia’s work to amend initial mistakes. The city abandoned the Lancasterian system in the 1830s when it opened its public schools to all children.⁵

In 1820, Philadelphia school directors applied to the Board of Controllers for \$1,200 to start a “colored school.” The application, denied at first, was approved two years later. Hart’s fourth lecture, delivered March 30, 1849, discussed the resulting Lombard Street schools (one for black boys and one for black girls), including a report on attendance and the changing cast of teachers in the early years.

In addition to Fisher’s manuscript text, the book includes his pen-and-ink and watercolor illustrations. They depict many school buildings, including the Anthony Benezet School, Central High School, Fulton Grammar School, Hamilton Grammar School, Harrison Grammar School, Jefferson Grammar School, Madison School, Marlborough Street

⁵Hart, Lectures on the Public Schools of Philadelphia, 16–22 *passim*.

School, Mount Vernon School, Normal School, Thomas Mifflin School, and Wayne School. Illustrated initial letters open each lecture.

Hart dated the founding of Central High School to 1837. His manuscript details a variety of threats the school faced in its early years. In 1842, these included a motion to discontinue the school (eventually voted down by the controllers) and the resignation of Professor Alexander Bache as principal of Central and superintendent of schools. The school grew in stability under Hart's leadership. In a coda to the manuscript, he reflected on the school's future:

The attacks against the High School have been from time renewed but with a proportional decrease of vigor, the last vote on the subject having stood 14 for & 2 against. The institution may therefore be regarded as a "fixed fact."⁶

Hart is also known for the annual reports he wrote as principal of Central High School, which include valuable statistical information and his ideas on organization and supervision. It would be worth investigating how much those reports and these essays mirror each other in content. Hart left Central in 1858 to edit various publications, including those of the American Sunday School Union. He served as principal of the New Jersey State Normal School from 1863 to 1872 and was professor of English and rhetoric at Princeton University until his death in 1877.

It does not appear that historians of the public schools in Philadelphia, most notably David F. Labaree, had access to this volume of essays, which was likely in private hands until purchased by Temple Libraries.⁷ Revisiting the schools' early history in light of Hart's lectures has already uncovered some variations in dates and timeline as compared to more recent studies. Further comparisons may alter or refine our understanding of the history of education in the region. Historians of education may also arrive at a better understanding of Hart's work and impact.

*Special Collections Research Center,
Temple University Libraries*

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⁶Hart, *Lectures on the Public Schools of Philadelphia*, 164.

⁷See David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838–1939* (New Haven, CT, 1988).