

High School Yearbooks: Using and Preserving The Record

High school yearbooks are a treasure trove for education historians. They offer glimpses into the educational past found nowhere else. Along with the changes in people and programs that occurred from year to year, they document the ways in which high schools shaped student identities and the meanings students took from their high school experiences.

Some historians have used high school yearbooks, student newspapers, and student magazines to explore a wide variety of topics in the history of education—most commonly student culture, school life, curricula, and the extracurricular activities.¹ Such official documents as administrative reports and school board minutes may be indispensable if the objective is to understand how educational policies and school programs changed over time. If the objective is to understand how students experienced high school and what it meant for their prospects after graduation, however, then student publications, especially yearbooks, should be among the sources consulted.²

¹ See, for example, Paula S. Fass, *Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education* (New York, 1989), 237–39; Philip J. Pauly, “The Development of High School Biology: New York City, 1900–1925,” *Isis* 82 (1991): 662–88; Thomas W. Gutowski, “Student Initiative and the Origins of the High School Extracurriculum: Chicago, 1880–1915,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28 (1988): 49–72; Sara Dwyer-McNulty, “Hems to Hairdos: Cultural Discourse and Philadelphia Catholic High Schools in the 1920s, A Case Study,” *Journal of American Studies* 37 (2003): 179–200; Patrick J. Ryan, “A Case Study in the Cultural Origins of a Superpower: Liberal Individualism, American Nationalism, and the Rise of High School Life, A Study of Cleveland’s Central and East Technical High Schools, 1890–1918,” *History of Education Quarterly* 45 (2005): 66–95; Erica R. Hamilton, “Looking from the Outside In: Preparation for Democratic Citizenship in a 1925 Michigan High-School Yearbook,” *Michigan Historical Review* 38 (2012): 91–105; and John L. Rury and Shirley Hill, “An End of Innocence: African-American High School Protest in the 1960s and 1970s,” *History of Education* 42 (2013): 486–508. Rury and Hill used yearbooks to confirm the emergence of black studies classes in high schools.

² Reed Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (New York, 1987), esp. chap. 6; John Modell and J. Trent Alexander, “High School in Transition: Community, School, and Peer Group in Abilene, Kansas, 1939,” *History of Education Quarterly* 37 (1997): 1–24; William Graebner, *Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in the Postwar Era* (Philadelphia, 1989), 107–18; Erika M. Kitzmiller, “The Roots of Educational Inequality: Germantown High School, 1970–2011” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2012). Kitzmiller used yearbooks in combination with other sources of demographic and personal data to assess the impact of race and gender on the lives of Germantown High School graduates in the first half of the twentieth century. See appendices, 409–44.

In the city of Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs, many high schools maintain a collection of their own yearbooks, but methods vary from school to school. One might store such a collection in the library, another in a dean's office. Some have a designated closet, and some, unfortunately, keep their yearbooks in an otherwise junk-filled room. Sometimes historical societies accession high school yearbooks. The Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, for example, collects and preserves yearbooks from across the state.³ The Newberry Library in Chicago has a large collection, primarily from Illinois, that can be found through its online catalogue. Both the Newberry and the nearby Harold Washington Library Center have many yearbooks from several Chicago high schools, most from the half-century between 1920 and 1970.⁴ The Chicago Board of Education maintains an archive that accepts donated yearbooks. While the archive survived the district's recent move, it no longer has a professional archivist. The School District of Philadelphia should consider adding high school yearbooks to the documents covered by its existing records management policy. Whether or not it houses them is a separate issue.

Since the Civil War, young adults attending educational institutions have documented their school experiences. By doing so, they engage in the construction of memory. At first, students compiled scrapbooks and autograph books.⁵ Later, they devoted the final issue of the school's literary magazine to the graduating class, making space among the student essays, poems, and plays for remembering the seniors. This issue often included a class history written by a graduating student as well as essays and predictions, both serious and humorous, about what might lie ahead for the graduates. With the increased availability of letterpresses and half-tone printing after 1900, literary magazines evolved into yearbooks and became the primary place for memorializing many aspects of high school life, especially the achievements of those about to graduate.⁶

Soon after they first appeared, yearbooks and magazines were shared among schools so that they could be compared. In 1914, students in Woodbury, New Jersey, reviewed yearbooks from fourteen other high

³Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, accessed Aug. 23, 2017, <http://www.michjewishhistory.org>.

⁴The Chicago high schools include Austin, Englewood, Christian Fenger, and Lake View. Details on materials at the Harold Washington Library Center are available at http://www.chipublib.org/archival_subject/education/.

⁵Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore, PA, has some excellent examples, and the Philadelphia High School for Girls maintains a collection in its archives.

⁶Hamilton, "Looking from the Outside In," 92n4.

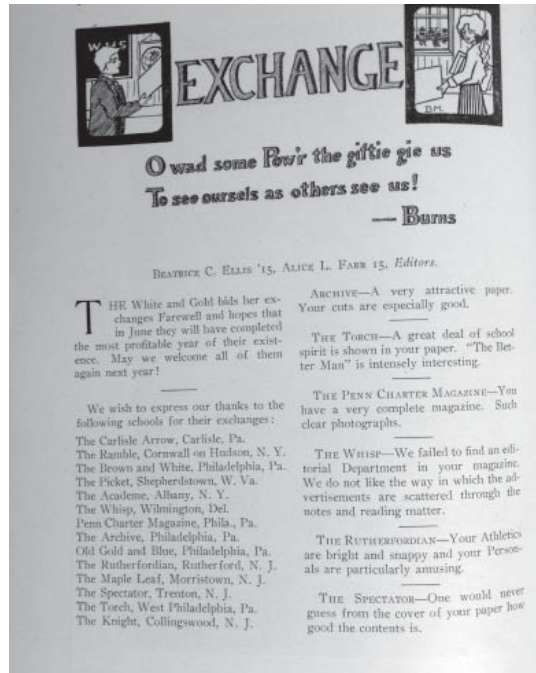


Fig. 1: Yearbook exchange review, Woodbury High School *White and Gold*, 1914, Woodbury Junior and Senior High School library, Woodbury, NJ.

schools and commented on six (fig. 1). These exchanges demonstrate a national interest among teenagers in their peers and a nascent youth culture. The editors of these student publications believed, as Reed Ueda has pointed out, that “they were not only expressing their identity, but also discovering the common bonds joining turn-of-the-century high school students in every part of the country.”⁷

Of special value are student commentaries. In Camden, New Jersey, students in 1908 asked, “Shall We Study Latin and Greek—What, then, is the value of Latin and Greek to the boys and girls of the Camden High School?”⁸ Decades later, changes in athletic programming prompted female students at Frankford High School in Philadelphia to correct a common misperception: “Some people have the false impression that girls do not take much part in the sports world; however according to the show-

⁷ Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood*, 125.

⁸ Camden Manual Training and High School, “The High School Record,” Nov. 1908, Camden County Historical Society.

ing in Frankford High, there are as many girls as there are boys interested in participating in sports.”⁹

Part independent student product and part administration-authorized institutional representation, yearbooks (and year-end issues of school newspapers and literary magazines) offer evidence of the tension between the sanctioned and the subversive. In addition to lauding classmates, recognizing accomplishments, cataloging distinctions from previous classes, and marking institutional changes, yearbooks often contained the contrarian opinions of students. In 1929, a student at the Philadelphia High School for Girls claimed her goal was to be an Olympic hurdler, knowing full well that her declaration challenged bourgeois standards that abjured public athletic performances by girls and women.¹⁰ In 1938, Olney High School girls excused their lack of a field hockey championship by explaining that they practiced on “asphalt” but competed on grass when playing at other schools; by taking this step, they insured that their complaint would be preserved for years.¹¹ In 1972, Frankford High School girls remembered they started “the season by cutting grass and raking their own field” and cheekily attributed any success they achieved to “coaching and gardening.”¹² These were meaning-making experiences unlikely to be recorded anywhere else, except perhaps in diaries or letters. As public pronouncements, they carried a different meaning.

In combination with the student commentary, yearbook pictures capture mundane but important changes in the material culture of schooling and the way it was experienced. Pictures of new buildings were often prominently placed on the front cover or the back page of a yearbook. Inside the book’s pages, the students might describe how they experienced the space. For example, the principal of Germantown High, Harry Keller, told his students in 1917 that theirs was one of “the most beautiful buildings of the state,” but its aesthetics did not mollify the girls, who experienced second-class treatment there. “Again this term, we played second fiddle to the boys,” they wrote in 1926, adding, “The fact that the boys should be allotted seats on the main floor of Study Hall, while we girls had to sit on the horrid balcony, was a bitter pill to swallow, but we swallowed it and had

⁹ Frankford High School yearbook, June 1938, 60. From 2008 until the school closed, Frankford H.S. yearbooks were kept in the office of the assistant principal, part of the main office.

¹⁰ *Iris*, Apr. 10, 1929, archives room, Girls’ High School of Philadelphia.

¹¹ Olney High School yearbook, Jan. 1938. Olney H.S. yearbooks were stored in a closet attached to the assistant principal’s office on the second floor of the Olney West building.

¹² Frankford High School yearbook, 1972.

to look pleasant while doing it. However, these things only added the spice to life and make the nice things seem nicer.”¹³ It would be difficult to find similar accounts of the gendered space of high schools in other documents.

Yearbook photographs capture other aspects of school culture. They reveal what students and faculty wore to class every day and the costumes they donned on special occasions. The uniforms for cheerleaders, majorettes, band members, and athletes appeared yearly and can be analyzed over time for their symbolic and cultural references. Students’ recorded opinions add to our understanding. In 1917 the girls at Germantown High “had the time of [their] lives doing gym stunts” in their specialized costumes. “In those days we loved to wear our gym bloomers, and a Freshie could be spotted a mile off by the fact that she wore a light skirt to disclose the fact that she had them on,” one student reminisced.¹⁴ In 1921 Frankford girls crowed about the new “scarlet uniforms [that] were purchased for us,” which “aroused the envy of every team we met.”¹⁵

After editors began to identify by name the students whose pictures they published, yearbooks documented the racial and ethnic composition of their schools’ student bodies in a new way. Adding student profiles that identified the elementary schools the students attended made manifest the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic contours of their school district. In the Philadelphia metropolitan region, yearbook pictures illustrate the transition urban high schools made from majority white to majority black as well as the ways in which suburban high schools such as Phoenixville, Yeadon, and Media served historically black communities outside the city. While yearbooks document such well-known stories as white flight, they also shed light on the story of suburban school consolidation and the closure of black suburban high schools such as Yeadon, Darby, and Media.¹⁶

Reorganization in Philadelphia and other Pennsylvania cities, most notably the closing of long-established high schools, raises questions about the preservation of their histories. Yearbook collections may disappear if the school buildings in which they are kept are abandoned, demolished, or

¹³ Principal Harry Keller’s note to the first class of girl graduates, “The Record of the Class of June 1917,” Germantown High School yearbook, 4; “The Class Record,” Germantown High School yearbook, Feb. 1926. From 2008 until the school closed, Germantown H.S. yearbooks were kept on shelves in the office of the librarian. Their current location is unknown.

¹⁴ Germantown High School Yearbook, June 1917.

¹⁵ Frankford High School Yearbook, Feb. 1923.

¹⁶ For an analysis of suburban school consolidation in the Philadelphia area, see William W. Cutler III and Catherine D’Ignazio, “Public Education: Suburbs,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/public-education-suburbs/>.

repurposed. That may be the case for Germantown High School, which was shuttered in 2013 after operating for nearly a century. The same might be said for merged or closed high schools in the suburbs.¹⁷ Alumni associations are often the basis for preservation efforts. But schools that close no longer produce alumni, so eventually this wellspring of support for preservation will vanish. In its place, school district policies should comprehensively address the preservation of student publications so that academic researchers and others may continue to explore the complex ways adolescents have experienced secondary education in America. Unfortunately, the precarious state of their finances may discourage, if not prevent, many school districts—especially those in big cities—from undertaking such preservation efforts.

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¹⁷ A local account of the closing of a historically black school is included in the documentary film *"A Highway Runs Through It . . .": A Community History of Darby Township*, written and directed by Valerie Harris (Philadelphia, 2011), DVD.