

FOREST AVENUE SCHOOL DESTROYED BY FIRE

by Newton M. Howard

The alarm continued to sound as hundreds converged on the scene of the fire at Forest Avenue School. That Saturday afternoon in February of 1926 was cold and overcast as crowds were drawn to the fire by columns of billowing black smoke and the rosy glow in the sky. Fifteen year old Helen Bowers, who lived next door, had seen the smoke earlier and turned in the alarm. She and her younger brother then went to the school, broke a window in the office and rescued whatever could be carried away. Helen was a student at the new Ambler High School on Tennis Avenue, opened only two and a half years before.

It was in September of 1891 that the old school, being consumed by fire, first opened. Principal Aaron H. Mandertbach and teachers Miss Hannah Bean and Miss Edith Ermentrout were in charge. This was Ambler's only public school and had a total enrollment on that opening day in 1891 of just 128 students.

Among those watching the burning school were many teachers, one of them Florence Whiteside, who had taught at Forest Avenue for three years. She was heard remarking to fellow teachers Anna Gear, Bessie Dunmoyer and Evelyn Kulp that she had a new camera but didn't remember to bring it along, being almost certain that somebody in the crowd today would have a camera to photograph such a devastating



This photograph of the aftermath of the Forest Avenue School fire on February 20, 1926 is believed to be the only one in existence and was taken the day after the fire by Forest Avenue School teacher Miss Florence Whiteside. Walls of the upper floor have completely fallen in with only the chimneys remaining. A light snow had fallen and traces of steam can be seen rising from the ruins.

Photograph furnished by John Astler, son of teacher Florence Whiteside (Astler)

fire. Also watching the school's destruction were Supervising Principal Jacob M. Fisher, Principal Elam E. Kerschner, and teachers Raymond Duncan, Willis Milspaugh and Abram Hunsicker.

Wissahickon Fire Company was assisted by a dozen companies from surrounding regions, a fire such as this having high priority among fire fighters. They tried valiantly for about three hours to save the structure, but all in vain. The building, of brick and stone, had an unusually large number of small window panes,

more than a thousand of them, with relatively little masonry support, especially on the upper floor. The fire is believed to have started in the basement, where the heating system, fired by bituminous coal, was located.

Two firemen were overcome by smoke and had to be carried from the first floor of the blazing inferno by their comrades. They were treated on the spot by local physicians present. There was a great danger of both the roof and the upper walls falling in, making it necessary to keep onlookers back at a safe distance. Assisting companies played continuous

streams of water on building surrounding the school, as well as Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church across Spring Garden Street. Soon the entire roof had fallen in as well as the upper walls.

During the blaze, a group of volunteer ladies, under the leadership of prominent local business woman Carrie Heiss served hot coffee and lunch. Mrs. Heiss, whose husband Walter had been an active member of the Wissahickon Fire Company until his death in 1912, was one of the largest property owners in Ambler.

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Forest Avenue School Destroyed by Fire

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Even as the fire continued to burn, the school board was on the scene arranging for the displaced Forest Avenue students to be distributed between the two remaining schools, Mattison Avenue and the High School on Tennis Avenue, without any interruption of their schooling. This decision, of course, was regretted by many of the students who were antic-

ipating a long holiday following the fire.

The firemen were called back to the building several times on Monday to extinguish the flames which broke out again in the ruins, in spite of a light snow that had fallen. Following this, watchmen were placed at the fire scene.

The School Board held an emergency meeting the Monday following the fire to discuss

rough plans for a new building with local architect Watson Phillips. He suggested that an attempt should be made to use any brick and stone that could be salvaged from the fire, and at this meeting estimated that a new school could be erected in six months. This however did not come about, because it was Fall of the year after the fire before the new building was ready for occupancy.

The new school, completed with fewer window panes than its predecessor, was to serve the school district for many years, with thousands of students passing through its portals, before abandonment as a school. Its final use was as the headquarters for SAGA, only to be abandoned by that group in recent times.

Landscape Classes

Spring Landscape Classes are held at Morris Arboretum's Widener Visitor Center. For more information, or to register: 247-5777 (ext. 156 or 125)

Hospital Offers Adult CPR Course

Chestnut Hill Hospital, 8835 Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia, is holding its next course in cardiopulmonary resuscitation, CPR, on Monday, February 16, from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Through lecture, demonstrations and practice, the American Heart Association's Heart Saver course teaches participants CPR techniques that can be used until medical help arrives. The course also includes instruction in the Heimlich Maneuver to aid choking victims. Participants receive Heart Association certification upon completion of the course.

The CPR course is open to anyone age 16 and over. The cost is \$30.

Registration is required as class size is limited. For more information or to register call the Department of Community Health Education at 215-248-8395.

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