



EDUCATION

With the passing of the Common School Law in 1849, Oregon became the first territory in the United States to implement a system of allocating land in every county and levying taxes for the establishment of schools and educational facilities. In time, this allowed for the structuring of full school districts throughout the state. School District 4J, which encompasses the City of Eugene, was the fourth district to be established in Lane County. Its first superintendent was Reverend Robert Robe, from 1854-1855. Thus, the City of Eugene claimed an early and progressive history of education and was even known as the educational center of the Northwest Territory.¹

In the early days, as education moved out of the home and into the schoolhouse, the focus was placed primarily on private schools. These were preferred over public schools, as many of the families in the area were from affluent eastern roots and were accustomed to the traditions of education solely for the wealthy. If public schools were available at all, they were primarily for the poor.² The first school in Eugene (circa 1853), known as “The Point of the Hills” school, was a private school, though it was unlike any private institutions settlers would have encountered back East. Small and relatively meager, the students’ tuition paid the salary of a single teacher, and little was left over for books and materials.

The Point of the Hills school soon met competition as many other private schools sprang up in the area. These schools promoted instruction in various specialties such as art, music, riding, sewing, and certain “graded grammar schools” that qualified students to attend university after the eighth grade. By putting students on the fast track to university education, they tended to hinder the need for public high schools in Eugene.³

However, the institutions and concepts that touted private schools over public would come to be challenged. As the growth of railroads in the 1870s resulted in the increase of population and commerce in the West, the need for local education grew. By default, public schooling gained respectability and was more widely accepted. The first public school in Eugene was established in 1856, but did not become the predominant school in the city until 1870. Located in the center of town, it was known as the Eugene School or “School on the Commons” and was considered to be the most important educational center in town.⁴

Most early schools were located in and around the center of town in order to be accessible for the greatest number of students. However, as the city continued to expand and outlying communities developed, schools were needed to serve them as well. In this way, the River Road area came to have a variety of schools itself.

Pre-1940 Schools

Around 1900, a Danish school was established in the Danebo community, near River Road. The Kompp School (named for the farmer on whose land it was built) was constructed, maintained and directed by the community's farmers for the education of their children. Though boys were often kept out of school to help with farm work, those of the Danish community felt a need to educate their children. Sophie Nielsen, a dairy farmer's wife, was the teacher in the one-room schoolhouse, which served up to forty children in eight grades. Among rural schools in the area, the Kompp School was considered one of the best. It was eventually replaced by the original Danebo School, which burned in 1928 and was subsequently rebuilt.⁵

The earliest known school near the River Road area may have been established as early as 1869, near where Bethel School would later be built on what is now called Bethel Drive. It was a one-room log structure that was used until 1901. At this time it was torn down and replaced with a new school building, though it is believed that some of the logs may have been salvaged and reused. The new building was a two-room facility and was named "Bethel" by George W. Cornell, whose daughter attended the school. The Bethel school district got its name from this early school.

These two Bethel schools were located on land that was located where the Southern Pacific switching yards came to be sited. F.L. Chambers purchased the land to locate the rail yards and sold the school district a nearby site for a new school. Bethel District No. 52 built Bethel School, now a community resource known as the Old Bethel Schoolhouse, in 1926. It was expanded in 1928 and 1929 to accommodate more students and academic programs. The school was well known for its PTA involvement and familial support, as well as many extracurricular activities.⁶

Bethel School closed at the end of the 1965-66 school year, and its students were transferred to the newer Fairfield and Malabon schools west of Highway 99.⁷ At the time of its closing, 150 students were enrolled, though in the years leading up to the closing only 30 percent of the students had returned each year, due to the increasingly transient quality of the surrounding residential neighborhood. Space limitations and obsolete facilities expedited the closure and in the last years of operation only six elementary grades could be accommodated. (The school had originally served grades one through eight.) Bethel area residents strongly opposed the closure and their new dependence on schools and other facilities outside of their community. As the Bethel community began to lose its identity and long-time residents moved away, a strong movement developed in the early 1980s to preserve the Old Bethel Schoolhouse as a symbol of the social and educational center of the community.

The Santa Clara Elementary School is the most historic in the River Road area. It began as a one-room log cabin schoolhouse located a half mile west of the current Santa Clara School site. It was moved and then enlarged to a two-room facility in 1904. In 1913, the school underwent major changes when the building was demolished and replaced with a two-story, four-room facility. A high school was also established at this time, and a separate building was constructed in 1915 to house the first three grades.

Consistently expanding its facilities and academic offerings, the school had grown to its full potential by 1931 and consisted of a standard public school with eight grades and a high school. The final school building was designed by local architect, Theodore Gerow. When another school in the northern part of the Santa Clara district became overcrowded and closed in 1931, the Santa Clara School accommodated the transferred students and continued to grow.

Many modifications were made to the facility over time. In 1937, the gym burned and two years later the high school building was condemned, followed by demolition in 1949. High school classes were discontinued at that time. Originally part of the Santa Clara area's own school district until 1945, the words "District No. 12" were carved above the front door. It was merged with Eugene's District 4, however, resulting in continued use and growth. Two new wings and a four-plex of classrooms were constructed in the 1950s and 60s. The historic main building continued to house offices, health room, library, music room, cafeteria and gym. In 1952, the gymnasium was refurbished. It was distinctive for its spacious size, balcony and bleachers, wood floor and stage. In part due to this ideal facility, Santa Clara became known for its performing arts programs. When River Road was widened to accommodate four lanes, curbside parking and the front yard of the school were eliminated. Parking was relocated to the back of the school. Enlargement of the school's playground and playground equipment also improved the facilities that the school offered to students. The school was finally closed in 2002.⁸ Fire partially destroyed the school in June 2005, which has made the building's future uncertain.

River Road School District No. 185 was established around 1914, with a three-room schoolhouse at 1000 River Road. The original school building burned in 1926, and was quickly replaced with a four-room facility (three classrooms and a lunchroom). Construction of the new larger building was very timely, as the district's population had rapidly increased due to construction of the nearby railroad yards. By 1938, River Road School served grades one through eight. Through an agreement with Eugene School District No. 4, River Road pupils went on to the ninth grade at Wilson Junior High School, and then to either Eugene or University high schools.



The second River Road Elementary School (1926) at 1000 River Road. Photo from City files.

River Road, Santa Clara and several other outlying school districts merged into the larger Eugene district in 1945. Colin Kelly Junior High School was established that same fall, taking seventh and eighth graders out of River Road and Santa Clara schools. But after a mere 20 years of service, the River Road School building was deemed inadequate to handle the post-WWII population boom. Increased traffic on River Road caused child-safety concerns, as well.

In 1953, the current River Road Elementary School building opened around the corner from the old, at 120 W. Hilliard Lane. First, second and third graders were housed in the new building, which consisted of four classrooms, offices, a health room, furnace room, multipurpose room and adjoining kitchen. The three upper grades continued to use the old school building until 1956 when, with the addition of a library, gymnasium and nine more classrooms, the new building was complete. The old school building was demolished that year, and the land sold to U.S. Bank for its River Road branch.

River Road School developed a tradition of strong parent involvement and a focus on activities for community betterment. Enrollment at the school peaked in the 1960s with 575 students, and later declined to a regular enrollment of 225. The addition of the Corridor School, an alternative education program that moved to River Road School after the closure of Silver Lea School, augmented the enrollment figures after 1983.⁹ Corridor School moved back into the Silver Lea School building at 250 Silver Lane in 1985.

Eugene's Whiteaker School, on North Grand Street, was not part of the River Road area itself but was close enough to have some influence. District No. 4 built Whiteaker in 1926 to handle the population growth resulting from the new rail yard, and to eventually replace the aging Geary School on West Fourth Avenue. Geary closed four years later.
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Originally a four-room facility, Whiteaker was expanded in the 1940s and 1950s as its neighborhood grew. With an active PTA, the school had much to offer, including a free lunch program that was organized in 1933. It was the first program of its kind in the city and was instituted city-wide in 1940. At that time, Whiteaker School enrolled 170 students.

During World War II, Whiteaker School was involved in the war effort. Students were awarded a certificate by the war department for buying enough war stamps and bonds to purchase a Jeep. In 1945, a new safety patrol program was instituted to help students across the busy surrounding streets. At this time, portable buildings were used to expand the school facility and accommodate the growing number of students. The first permanent additions to the school were made in 1948 and included a multipurpose room and two classrooms. Later, a wing of five rooms was added and the portables decommissioned. The



school grounds were also enlarged during the late 40s through the purchase of surrounding lots.

Beginning in the 1970s, Whiteaker’s enrollment began to decrease steadily and substantially. The district closed the school in 2003 and sent its pupils to River Road Elementary School, which is now also known as “El Camino del Rio” – Spanish for River Road. The dual school name was adopted as a gesture of welcome and inclusion for the many Hispanic youngsters from the Whiteaker neighborhood.

The old Whiteaker school building became the site of a pilot community-school program, operated jointly by the Eugene School District and the city of Eugene. Whiteaker Community School now serves and enriches the neighborhood with a variety of activities and services.¹⁰

Post-1940 Schools

It was not until after World War II that schools began to flourish in the River Road area, reflecting the expansion of the city to the west and northwest of the downtown core in the 1940s. Having long been an agricultural area, land use began to shift to accommodate residential needs. In response, schools were established to serve the families that moved into the new houses being built.

The River Road, Santa Clara and Willagillespie school districts in 1945 agreed to join Eugene School District No. 4 upon the condition that a new junior high school be built north of the city. In the fall of 1945, Colin Kelly Junior High School was established. The first Kelly students shared Wilson Junior High School on a “double-shift” basis for a year and a half, before moving into their own “ultramodern” facility at 850 Howard Avenue in January 1947.

The school was named for Army Capt. Colin P. Kelly, Jr., a B-17 bomber pilot who was killed in action over the Pacific in the opening days of World War II. The names of Generals Douglas MacArthur and Dwight Eisenhower had been proposed for the school, but students wanted an “ordinary Joe” as a namesake. Captain Kelly had no ties to the Eugene area or to Oregon, but his heroism had boosted the nation’s morale in the grim early days of the war.



The Colin Kelly Junior High building at 850 Howard Avenue soon after opening in 1947. Postcard from Pinyerd Collection.

Colin Kelly Junior High originally drew its student body from the River Road, Santa Clara, Whiteaker and Coburg Road areas, as far north as the McKenzie River and even into the northwest fringe of Springfield. Ninth-graders from the Bethel School District also attended Colin Kelly, until Willamette High School opened in 1949. The establishment of Cal Young (1953), Madison (1963) and Monroe (1965) junior high schools gradually shrunk Kelly's attendance area to its current size.

The school building had a unique architectural design, with classrooms projecting out from a central hall, which set it apart from other schools. Its construction reflected war-era shortages in materials, but made efficient use of elements like window placement to ensure that operation expenses would be conservative. School administration was notable for the democratic principles it exercised, allowing students as well as staff to express their interests in unified discussions and votes. It also provided many extra-curricular opportunities, such as athletics, 4-H, and other clubs. Kelly was the first school to have an "activities bus" to facilitate after-school activities, since the majority of its students were bused in from surrounding areas.

Colin Kelly's enrollment reached its all-time high of 900 students in 1964. During the steady rise in enrollment preceding the 1964 peak, the school facility was gradually expanded. In 1954, a music room, industrial arts room, homemaking room, and additional classroom were added onto the gym. Art, health and science/math rooms were added shortly after, and eight additional classrooms followed over the coming years. Programs expanded as well, with developmental reading and the "new math" program being added to the curriculum. In 1959, the school was awarded seven honors by the National Science Foundation and received college study grants for homemaking, science, counseling and guidance. Revolutionary and award winning programs continued to be a tradition at Kelly. In 1983, district secondary schools were reorganized, with high schools adding freshman classes to become four-year facilities. Kelly and its seven fellow junior-high schools were renamed "middle schools," with sixth-graders coming from elementary schools to join seventh and eighth graders.¹¹

Howard Elementary School was another response to the growing need for schools in the River Road area. It was built in 1949 and named after Dewitt Howard, a prominent local citizen and the descendant of a pioneer family that owned 320 acres of land along River Road. Mr. Howard's grandfather, Samuel Howard Jr., came from Iowa in 1853 and established a Donation Land Claim near Junction City. Active in trading, mining and herding cattle, he later established orchard crops on a farm in the River Road area, raising Italian prunes and Royal Ann cherries. His grandson was born and raised on the farm and was known to be a man of upstanding character,



*Howard Elementary School (1949) at 700 Howard Avenue.
Photo by Caitlin Harvey in 2005.*

thus earning him the honor of having Howard Elementary School named after himself and his family.

Howard began as an economical and efficient starter unit consisting of a nucleus of essential rooms that could be expanded as the school grew. Beginning as a four-room facility, it also had an office, staff lounge, multipurpose room and furnace room. A library was located on the second floor, and was novel as many elementary schools did not include a central library facility.

The first year's enrollment at Howard was 108 and more than doubled in the next three years, responding to the growth of the surrounding community. Enrollment peaked in the early 1970s with 530 students, making it the second largest elementary school in the district. Because of this steady growth, the school facility adapted accordingly. A west wing was added to the original starter unit in 1950-51 and an east wing followed in 1953-60. A gym and a new library facility were included in the latter. In 1968, a semi-detached module of four classrooms was added to the west end of the building.

In the 1970s, Howard Elementary School developed a reputation for a solid emphasis on basic education. A prototype of the back-to-back reading program was pioneered at the school and allowed for concentrated reading time by dividing the student-body and providing alternating instructional periods. Athletics, too, have been an emphasis at Howard.

A nationwide trend saw the decline of school enrollment in the 1970s and Howard Elementary was no exception. When the middle school concept was instituted and sixth grade was moved from the elementary level to the junior high level, many schools suffered even lower enrollment and eventually closed. Some neighboring schools suffered this fate, though Howard survived and in the mid-1980s its enrollment leveled out at approximately 460 students.¹²

The 1950s brought a phenomenal growth surge to the northern suburbs of the Eugene school district, and the need for a second high school. District voters in 1955 approved a bond issue toward construction of North Eugene High School (NEHS or "North") on 25 acres of a former filbert orchard, just west of River Road on Silver Lane. Ground was broken and construction commenced in the spring of 1956. NEHS opened in the fall of 1957, with a 300-member sophomore class sharing Colin Kelly Junior High School until October. North was fully completed and dedicated by the end of 1958, and was home to sophomore and junior classes. The 1959-60 school year brought a fully-occupied NEHS its first graduating class, and an enrollment figure topping 1,000 students.

New additions continued to be made to the still-growing high school, including a new south wing in 1961-62. But by the time the North boys' basketball team had won the 1962-63 state championship, overcrowding had come to the "home of the Highlanders," with a peak enrollment of 1,600 students. Sheldon High School opened on Willakenzie Road in the Fall of 1963, serving the Coburg Road area and relieving the strain on North.

In the 1960s, North Eugene High School developed a program for handicapped students, particularly the blind. It has since distinguished itself in academics, arts and sports. In the late 1960s, a pioneering curriculum change allowed students to attend combination and mini-courses that resulted in the completion of graduation requirements through three different plans. This system was discontinued by the mid-1980s, however.



North Eugene High School (1957) at 215 Silver Lane. Photo by Caitlin Harvey in 2005.

The school underwent major changes during the 1970s. New construction, including industrial education facilities, an auditorium, language and science laboratories, a greenhouse, pond, music and art studios, locker rooms and many other additions were made. This in turn allowed curriculum and academic programs to expand. In 1983, the Eugene school district added freshman classes to the high schools, making North a four-year facility.¹³

A close neighbor to North Eugene High School, Silver Lea Elementary School was established in 1961 to relieve overcrowding at Santa Clara and Howard elementary schools. In 1974, Corridor School was created and acted as an alternative school within the Silver Lea entity. It provided substantially different approaches to teaching and learning that gained much support. It was limited to 150 students within the larger Silver Lea student body.

Despite strong community support, Silver Lea enrollment dwindled to such an extent that it was slated for closure in the early 1980s. The district opted to close Silver Lea rather than Santa Clara, due to growth patterns in the neighborhoods nearest each school. Most of the students from Silver Lea were transferred to Howard and the Corridor alternative school was moved to River Road Elementary School. The Silver Lea facility has since been leased to various education related programs, including the Lane County Education Service District, Head Start, and Montessori.¹⁴ Corridor School moved back into the Silver Lea school building in 1985. Yujin Gakuen, a Japanese immersion school, is also now housed at the Silver Lea building.

Though schools have come and gone, the River Road area has maintained a strong tradition of education, drawing from schools in the area and surrounding communities. Many of these schools have had influence not only on their students, but the surrounding community through activities and programs offered by the schools. The more rural location and a certain separation from the City of Eugene proper may have been responsible for creating close school-community ties. These bonds have inspired the River Road community to put great stock in local education.

Education Endnotes

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