THE ORIGINS OF AN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEM: BIRMINGHAM, 1873-1900

RUTH BRADBURY LAMONTE*

Americans have not always chosen the school as the educational agency for their children. In fact, those early settlers coming to our shores in the seventeenth century saw the family as the cultural institution responsible for education:

> The most important agency in the transfer of culture was not formal institutions of instruction or public instruments of communication, but the family. . . .
>
> What the family left undone by way of informal education the local community most often completed. It did so in entirely natural ways, for so elaborate was the architecture of family organization and so deeply founded was it in the soil of stable, slowly changing village and town communities in which intermarriage among the same groups had taken place generation after generation that it was at times difficult for the child to know where the family left off and greater society began. . . .
>
> More explicit in its educational function than either family or community was the church . . . . It furthered the introduction of the child to society by instructing him in the system of thought and imagery which underlay the culture's values and aims. . . .
>
> Family, community, and church together accounted for the greater part of mechanism by which English culture transferred itself across the generations.[1]

But by 1871 when Birmingham was founded, Americans were looking beyond the family, the community, and the church for help in educating their children. The establishment of formal education was justified on the grounds that a specialized institution was needed to prepare children and youth for life as productive adults. And southerners, like most other Americans, saw the school as the panacea for all educational ills. Thus it was that schooling became accepted as the model for American education.

Before looking at public schooling in early Birmingham, let us define the terms "education" and "schooling." For this discussion "education" will mean that process by which a society transmits to its new members the values, beliefs, knowledge, and symbolic expressions that make communication with that society possible.[2]

By "schooling" is meant that process by which a teacher teaches a student something—subject matter, norms, certain performative skills—under the auspices of that institution which we call school. Now it is obvious that a society can have education without schools or schooling, but the more technical the society, the more likely it is that the society will choose schooling as its model for education.[3]

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[1]Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Formation of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 15-19.

[2]Robert E. Roemer, "The Social Conditions for Schooling," in Allen D. Calvin, ed., *Perspectives on Education* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 3-14.

[3]For further discussion see Marvin Lazerson, *Origin of the Urban School: Public Education in Massachusetts, 1870-1915* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); David Tyack, *The One Best System* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974); Carl F. Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973).

Birmingham was representative of the burgeoning industrial New South. Conceived in confusion and born in confidence, her demands were very different from those of the agrarian, pastoral society from which she sprang. Her citizens would need specialized skills to function in an urban setting. Despite the fact that public schooling in Alabama had never really begun before the War between the States and that the carpetbag government had not won the support or the sympathy of the majority of the white population on the schooling issue, tiny Birmingham wasted no time in petitioning the state legislature for an educational unit of her own. Indeed, those men who met in 1873 to sign a deed granting to the city land on which a school was to be built were of the New South, a South dedicated to progress, a better life through industry, commerce, transportation, and education.

Allegiance to times past was evident, however, because the deed specified that the school be built

> for the white children now residing in, and who may reside hereafter in said city for no other purpose and use whatever. The school is to be taught by white teachers.[4]

There was no provision made for the education of black children.

The summer of 1873 was a terrible time for Birmingham. Early in June, the first case of Asiatic cholera was diagnosed. By late August, the disease had claimed the lives of more than one hundred citizens. On the heels of this epidemic came a major economic panic, in mid-September, the effects of which further depressed an already flagging economy.

In August, an effort was made to subscribe funds for a municipal school, but the attempt proved less successful than had been anticipated. In October, a citizens' mass meeting was convened to gather financial support for the proposed school's construction, but this effort proved no more fruitful than the August subscription campaign. At this juncture, the prospects for public schooling in Birmingham—despite legislative endorsement—were dim indeed, but those prospects were materially altered by the intervention of John Taliaferro Terry, an attorney from Pickens County, Alabama, who had within the year moved his practice to Birmingham. Assuming a leadership role in the fund raising effort, he succeeded in securing all but $3,000 of the funds needed for the construction of a school building. In the absence of other willing donors, Terry personally supplied the requisite $3,000, taking as collateral the first issue of city bonds.

By March of 1874, Birmingham's first school building was ready for occupancy. Named for Colonel James R. Powell, the first president of the Elyton Land Company and the first elected mayor of the City of Birmingham, the school built at Sixth Avenue, North, and Twenty-fourth Street had four rooms which housed the one hundred eighty pupils who attended on opening day.[5] The school was controlled by a three-member commission appointed by the Board of Aldermen and financed by the state school fund, the Peabody Fund, and student fees. The fees, later to become a source of controversy, were to increase in amount as the child progressed through the grades. Nevertheless, this kind of educational institution was called a "free school" because, in the nineteenth century, "free school" simply meant free from any one religious domination, not free in the sense we think of today.

That early school's curriculum followed the traditional academic disciplines;[6] it was not until the 1890's that the urban environment with its industrial order and the farsighted schoolmen, Samuel Ullman and John Herbert Phillips, made an impact on the educational character of the schools, making them places not only to develop the intellect but also the person as a whole.

No story of Birmingham's early schools can be complete without mentioning her black students. The end of the Civil War had brought an influx of blacks to the city, and they, too, were interested in schools for their children. As early as 1876, the Board of Aldermen was petitioned by the black community for a "free colored school." The only contribution made by that board was an agreement to hire and pay a teacher. The building itself was to be provided by the black com-

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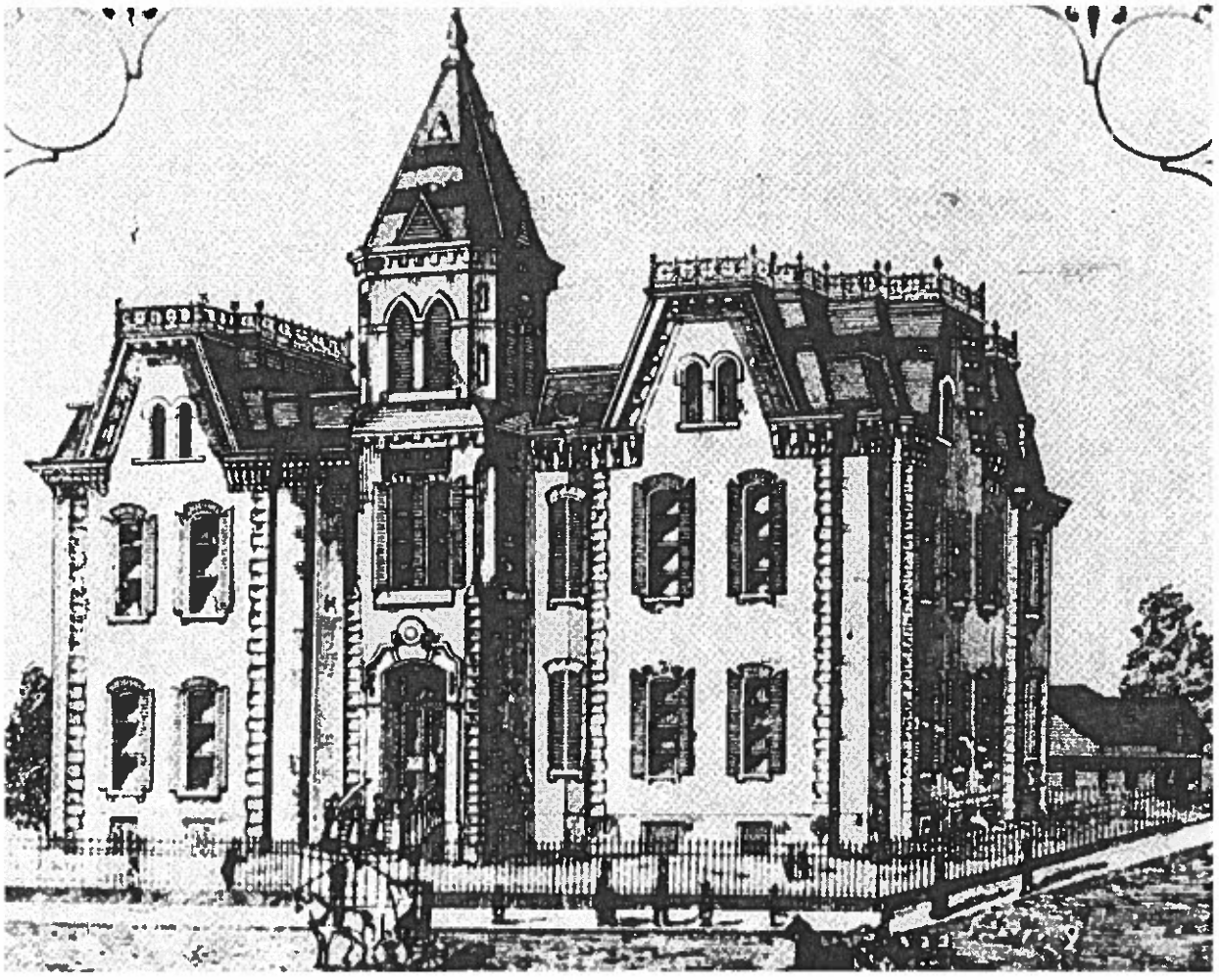
[4]Deed book of the Elyton Land Company, Vol. II, p. 1, deed 261.
[5]Martha Mitchell Bigelow, "Birmingham: Biography of a City of the New South," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1946, p. 220. Minutes of the Board of Aldermen, City of Birmingham, Alabama, Jan. 5, 1875.
[6]Bigelow, p. 222.

munity. It was not until 1882 that a special committee was appointed by the mayor to select a lot for the erection of a school for Negro children.[7]

In September of 1883, the school system came under the direction of John Herbert Phillips, a young Ohioan. When school opened that year, blacks could attend classes at Seventh Avenue and Fifteenth Street, North, and by November two more schools, in addition to Powell, were opened for whites, one on the Southside, another in the West End.[8]



SOUTHSIDE PUBLIC SCHOOL
Fifth Avenue, South, and Twentieth Street
First unit constructed in 1885. Renamed Paul Hayne School. An engraving from the collections of the Birmingham Public Library.

Phillips issued the first public school course of study in the State of Alabama, publishing it in his first annual report to the Board of Aldermen in 1884.[9]

But the real beginnings of Birmingham's School System as it is now organized came in 1885 when the Board of Aldermen and the Mayor gave control of the schools to Birmingham's first Board of Education. The men who served on that initial board were the Mayor, A. O. Lane, President; J. L. Watkins, Vice-president; David D. Smith; Samuel Ullman; Alonzo S. Elliot; W. J. Rushton; and C. P. Williamson.[10] These men devoted long hours to the business of public education in their fledgling city. They were concerned that only the best qualified teachers be selected to teach in their schools and went about the business of setting up a board of examiners to test applicants for teaching positions within Birmingham. The

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 224.
[8] *Dedication: John Herbert Phillips High School*, Board of Education (Birmingham, Alabama, 1923), p. 3.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[10] "Minutes of the Board of Education," Birmingham Board of Education, Nov. 18, 1884.

Board decided that candidates should be examined in the following subjects: theory and practice of teaching, orthography, reading, grammar, penmanship, arithmetic, geography, American history, physiology, literature, algebra, civil government, rhetoric, geometry, natural philosophy, ancient and modern history, chemistry, geology, astronomy, and Latin. For prospective high school teachers, exams were held in all the above plus any other subjects taught in high schools. For principal of other than high school, candidates were examined in the first 15 of the above; for assistant's certificate, the first 10. Special certificates were awarded only for special branches of learning, *i.e.* German, music, *etc.* Applicants scoring 90% and above were awarded three-year certificates; those with 80% to 89%, two-year certificates; and those with 70% to 79%, one-year certificates. The Board further stipulated that any teacher with a three-year certificate who taught three consecutive years in the city's public schools might, at the discretion of the Board, have such a certificate renewed without examination although the examination fee was still required.[11]

Another method the Board used for finding good teachers was advertising. Notices were sent to newspapers throughout the South. Again and again one finds bills from such papers as the Montgomery *Advertiser*, the Atlanta *Constitution*, the Nashville *American*, as well as the local newspapers, for carrying the announcements of impending teacher examinations to be held in the City of Birmingham.

So insistent on quality instruction was the Board and so dedicated to its students, that the secretary wrote, "this plan [of selecting applicants] rigidly and impartially adhered to will do much toward elevating the standard of scholarship in the schools. It will be of direct benefit to the teachers and pupils, and will enable the Board of Education to always secure thoroughly competent teachers."[12] Board policy also dictated that applicants with less than one year's experience be awarded a certificate valid for only one year. "The reason for this is plain," wrote the clerk. "To a young teacher, the prospect of an examination supplies an excellent incentive to study and self-improvement, whereas the receipt of a certificate subject to renewal without examination, may have a tendency to foster negligence and self-complacency on the part of the teacher, and ultimately work injury to the schools by lowering the standard of scholarship, the constant elevation of which is the earnest desire of all friends of education."[13]

MARY A. CAHALAN
Teacher, Birmingham Schools, 1874-1884
Principal, Powell School, 1885-1906
A photograph included in George M. Cruikshank, *A History of Birmingham and Its Environs*, 2 vols. (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1920.)

Even these precautions were not enough to make the system error free. On April 17, 1888, a special called meeting was held to discuss the German teacher, Professor Lansberg, for his "socialistic and communistic ideas." Superintendent Phillips reported that Lansberg, when "interrogated, denied that he entertained any sympathy with anarchist principles, but admitted that he

[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*, June 25, 1885.
[13] *Ibid.*

was a socialist." Further incriminating evidence indicated that the man was the associate editor of a paper which "promulgates similar (anarchist) views." As if that data were not convincing as to the disreputable character of Lansberg, Phillips continued that the accused boarded at the Dude Restaurant which was connected with a drinking saloon on the corner of Second Avenue, North, and Twentieth Street, where he had been in trouble with other men. Finally, the superintendent concluded his report with another jab at Lansberg's character. "The fact that the Professor habitually resorts to such a place is not calculated to reflect any credit or dignity upon the schools; neither is it calculated to inspire the pupils in the schools with respect for him."

The Board, insistent on teachers with high moral character, suspended Lansberg and instructed the superintendent to look for another German teacher. That Lansberg's was the only case of its nature recorded during the period under investigation indicates the care and attention given to the selection of teachers. In fact, Phillips in every annual report commented positively on the quality of the teaching staff, lamenting only that the quality of black instructors was not so high as he wished. One reason which may account for that fact was that there was a teacher training school organized in the city for white scholars, who, if they finished the two-year course and taught five years in Birmingham schools, were given free tuition. There was no such institution for black teachers.[14]

In this very early period of public schooling, the contributions of two persons need to be addressed. One was a school board member, Samuel Ullman; the other, the Superintendent of Schools, John Herbert Phillips.

Samuel Ullman was born in Germany in 1840 or 1841. Shortly, thereafter, his family moved to Alsace. When young Ullman was eleven, his family moved again—this time to the United States, settling in Port Gibson, Mississippi. Records indicate that the young boy attended Port Gibson public schools, leaving school at age fourteen to work in business.[15] When the War between the States was declared, he joined the Confederate army, in which he served with distinction.[16] After the War, he married Emma Mayer in Natchez, Mississippi, where he had begun reforms in the Hebrew Orthodox congregation, serving as its president for several years. But Natchez was to lose this young activist, for in 1884 the Samuel Ullman family moved to Birmingham.

Birmingham was only a small town when the Ullmans arrived, and Mr. Ullman's presence was immediately recognized and utilized. A history of Temple Emanu-El reads, "the most notable addition to congregational life was the coming of Samuel Ullman in the spring of 1884." And with good reason. Within two years he was elected president of the Congregation, and in 1890 he became the Temple's rabbi, serving until 1894, only to be replaced by the man who would become his son-in-law, Rabbi Morris Newfield. In addition to his spiritual dedication, Ullman was actively concerned about civic affairs. He served on the Board of Aldermen, was one of the organizers of United Charities, was a member of the Board of Trustees of Hillman Hospital, president of District Grand Lodge, No. 7, Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, and a member of the Executive Committee of the Jewish Hospital for Consumptives in Denver, Colorado.[17]

But one of Ullman's major contributions to his adopted city was an unselfish devotion to the Birmingham schools. Appointed to the Board of Education in 1884 soon after his arrival, Ullman was the Board's leading spokesman for better teachers, better school facilities, better methods of instruction, better education for *all* of Birmingham's children. He was chairman of the Committee on Instruction for many years, and it is in his committee and, later, his presidential reports to the Board that one finds the evidence of his relentless perseverance for excellence in the Birmingham schools. He consistently asked that parents and Board members as well as all citizens of the community visit the schools and cooperate with the teachers.

> Parents and patrons are scarcely aware how much they can contribute towards the development of the work of education in our

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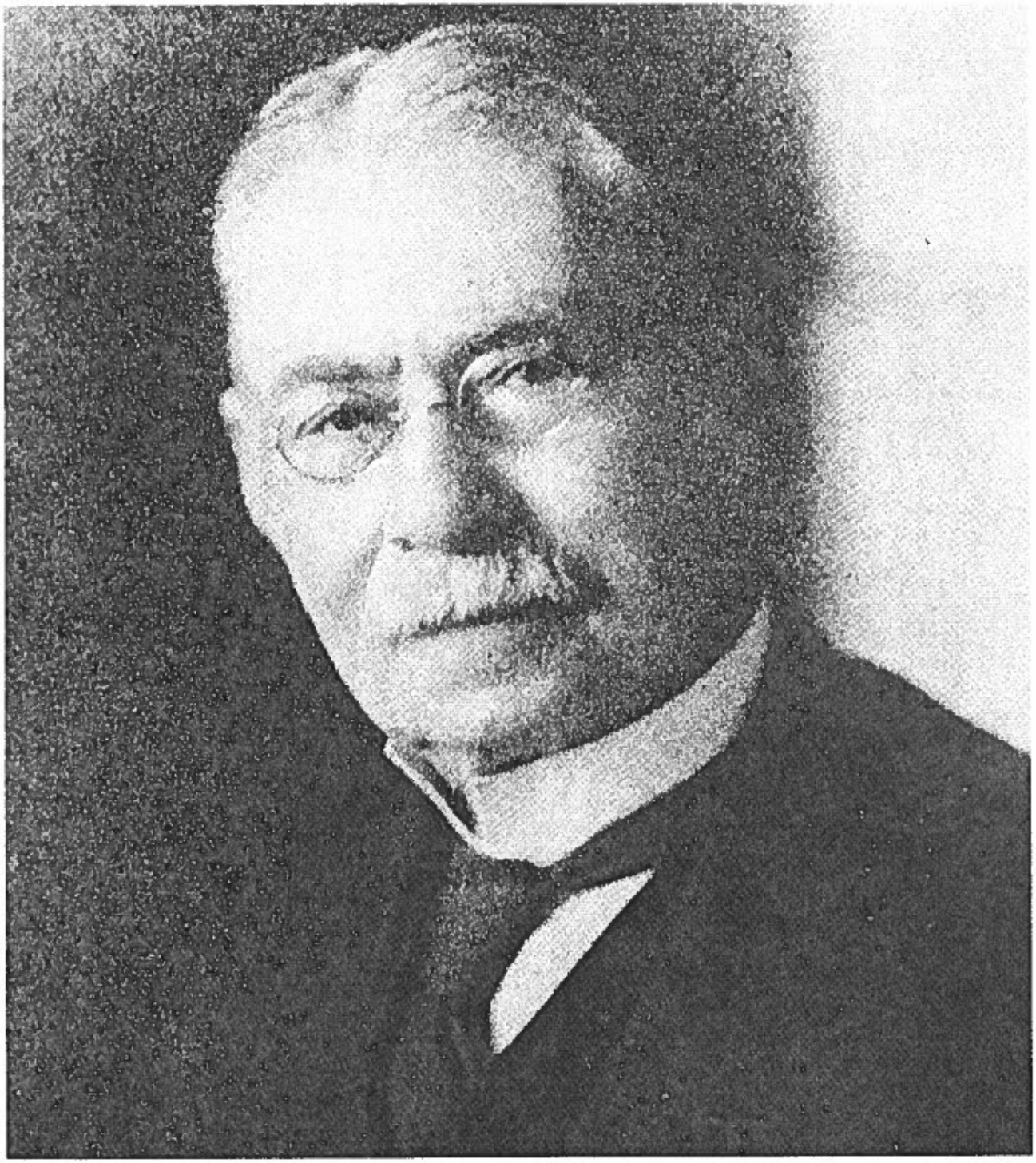
[14]*Annual Report of the Birmingham Public Schools for 1899* (Birmingham: Roberts and Son, 1899), p. 38.
[15]*Birmingham News*, March 21, 1924. See also "Record of Confederate Soldiers, Claiborne County, Mississippi, Index," p. 24.
[16]Private memorandum from Mayer A. Newfield to B. G. Minisman, Jr., March 28, 1956.
[17]Vertical File, Department of Southern History and Literature, Birmingham Public Library.

city. An occasional visit to our schools would go far towards bringing them into a closer sympathy with the work, and would afford material aid to the teachers in the work of instruction and discipline. . . .

Parents and teachers must be in full harmony in order that the best results may be obtained.[18]



SAMUEL ULLMAN
Member, Birmingham Board of Education, 1884-1905
President, Birmingham Board of Education, 1892-1901

A photograph included in Samuel Ullman, *From a Summit of Years—Four Score* (Birmingham: By the author's family, n. d.)

[18]Report of Committee on Instruction, *Annual Report of the Birmingham Public Schools for 1887* (Birmingham: Herald Book and Job Rooms, 1887), pp. 10, 11.

Never one to make hasty or rash decisions, Ullman studied the curricula of other industrial cities' schools and made recommendations to the Board for updating Birmingham's curriculum. Because of the industrial revolution, city school systems throughout the country were turning to courses in vocational and manual training. Drawing was the first of these courses to be incorporated in Birmingham schools, and the justification for its inclusion was as follows:

> The practical man, whether mechanic, manufacturer, engineer or builder, must to some extent be familiar with the elements of drawing. How beneficial will it be to the pupils of our schools, many of whom must soon be the artisans of our foundries, machine shops, and factories, to be in possession of the principles of drawing? Is it not our duty then to anticipate this coming future, and do what we can to enable our youths to meet its certain demands? It is our solemn duty to do what we can in providing the children placed under our charge with equipments necessary for successful combat in the battles of life. The time to do is now. We cannot begin too soon. The community is ripe for it and our people will thank us for such an enlargement of their children's opportunity to become practical, as well as intellectual, men and women.[19]

In 1891 the Board, "as an additional evidence of our desire to equip our pupils for the practical purposes of life . . . added a commercial course to our High School. . . ."[20]

Even the German language was justified as practical since . . . "it being no longer a question that the English and German languages are the commercial languages of the world."[21]

In his presidential report, for 1899, Ullman intensified his pleas for a new high school facility. Although Birmingham had instituted a high school curriculum, and had, in fact, operated a high school, the high school had no home. Students had been shuttled hither and thither since 1883, and Ullman saw as the most pressing need, a permanent high school building:

> Other cities educate; we must educate. Other communities realizing the greater demands of today than of yesterday, prepare to meet these demands; we cannot do less, if we would have our loved ones placed upon a parity with others.
>
> . . . if anything is needed more than another, it is the necessity for enlarged High School facilities. To most of our children the High School is the last extent of their education. . . . The need of the High School with its training and discipline is a necessity to our boys and girls.
>
> . . . . In the very near future our boys and girls will be the operatives of our mills, factories, and foundries, or other industrial enterprises. The offices of these establishments will need educated typewriters, bookkeepers, and stenographers—the better educated, everything being considered, will be chosen. Hence our people must be given the opportunity to have their children thoroughly trained to assume the conditions of the present competitive system; if not, they will be crowded out by the more efficient.[22]

Ullman lived in the world of reality. He saw the needs of the schools and worked toward meeting those needs. He insisted on the Birmingham child's being prepared as a fair competitor in the economic world of winners and losers. He believed in the slogan, "Education Pays."

But Ullman had other concerns for the city's school system. He abhorred the discrepancy between the salaries paid white teachers and those paid black teachers and worked to bring about a more equitable salary schedule. He, more than any other board member in those embryonic days, visited the black schools, always making recommendations for better facilities and less cramped conditions. Recognizing that education and preparation for industrial life were essential for blacks as well as whites, Ullman advocated manual training for the Negro schools. Obviously attracted to Booker T. Washington's educational philosophy for blacks, he declared to the Board:

> . . . manual training ought to be made a feature of these (black) schools as well as in our white schools. We should do this because it pays, both morally and pecuniarily. Schools can be maintained cheaper than penal institutions. An educated heart and hand is better adapted to overcome vice than simple so-called book learning. The church has done much for the Negro; the state must come to his assistance, for "the black man's problem is the white man's problem."[23]

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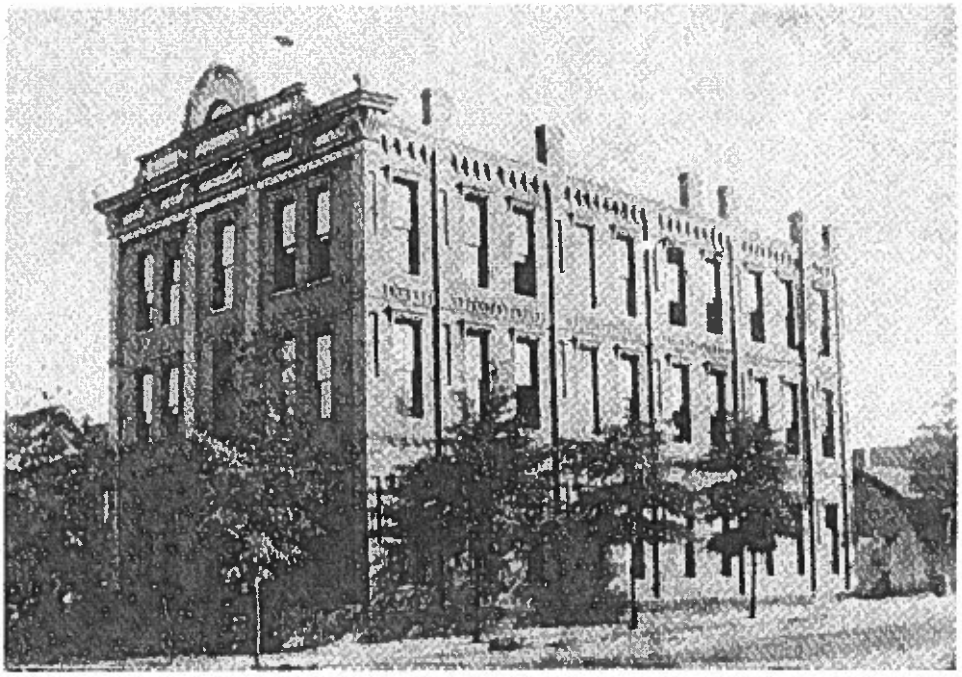
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[20] *Ibid.*, 1891, p. 17.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*, 1899, pp. 8-10.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 12.



ENSLEN BUILDING
Occupied by faculty and students of the Birmingham High School, 1891-1906
Seventh Avenue, North, and Twenty-first Street
A photograph from the collections of the Birmingham Public Library.

Ullman's record on the Board of Education was a clear case of leadership. Without being unreasonable or demanding, he created an atmosphere of rationality in which that early Birmingham school system functioned. Whether the issue was religious or moral, economic or political, Samuel Ullman approached it in a calm, deliberate manner. A sense of place and a sense of duty, combined with intellectual insight, were traits of this man who gave to the city's schools a life of exemplary service. It is altogether fitting that Samuel Ullman's name was given to one of the very early Southside schools; what is more appropriate is that Ullman High School became a high school of black children.

One other contribution of this man is perhaps not directly related to his daily activities as a school board member, yet bears mentioning. Samuel Ullman, Birmingham citizen, rabbi, social reformer, and philanthropist, was a poet as well. Not long ago, in a syndicated column of the Birmingham *Post-Herald*, there appeared a poem called "Youth." The columnist listed the author as anonymous. A few weeks later, authorship was definitively established. Samuel Ullman's grandson, living on the West Coast, saw the column and wrote to inform Ann Landers that his grandfather, years ago in Birmingham, Alabama, had written the lines. And somehow the appreciation for that long ago public school man grows deeper each time these lines are read.

YOUTH

Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind; it is not a matter of rosy cheeks, red lips and supple knees; it is a matter of the will, a quality of the imagination, a vigor of the emotions; it is the freshness of the deep springs of life.

Youth means a temperamental predominance of courage over timidity of the appetite, of adventure over the love of ease. This often exists in a man of sixty more than a boy of twenty. Nobody grows old merely by a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals.

Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul. Worry, fear, self-distrust bows the heart and turns the spirit back to dust.

Whether sixty or sixteen, there is in every human being's heart the lure of wonder, the unfailing child-like appetite of what's next, and the joy of the game of living. In the center of your heart and my heart there is a wireless station; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer, courage and power from men and from the infinite, so long are you young.

When the aerials are down, and your spirit is covered with snows of cynicism and the

> ice of pessimism, then you are grown old, even at twenty, but as long as your aerials are up, to catch the waves of optimism, there is hope you may die young at eighty.[24]

Arriving in Birmingham one year before Samuel Ullman, John Herbert Phillips, at the age of thirty, was to become the father of the Birmingham School System. Young Phillips, born in Covington, Kentucky in 1853, grew up in the red brush of Gallipolis, Ohio.[25] Borrowing the money to further his education, he attended Marietta College, graduating in 1880. Immediately after graduation, he was selected from a field of twenty-five applicants to become principal of Gallipolis High School. Within three years, he was to leave Ohio for a "Southern industrial city" whose school system he would build on the model of the Columbus, Ohio schools.[26] At the time Phillips came to Birmingham, the system was under the control of the Board of Aldermen; but within two years, the Board of Education was made a separate entity and the schools were reorganized.

To attempt a listing of Phillips' contributions to education and schooling in Birmingham would be an almost infinite task. But what follows are some of the reasons and examples of why Birmingham schools became not only locally and regionally known, but nationally so. Without the leadership of a dedicated man with a plan, the evolution of a system of public schooling would have been difficult, if not impossible.

In his initial annual report to the Board of Education, Phillips presented an intricately detailed record of his plan for schooling and the first statistical data based on Birmingham's schools.[27] From 1884, then, it is possible to document the enrollment by sex, by race, by national origin, by age, by grade, and by place of residence. Data on attendance, tardiness, and corporal punishment are also available. Phillips did not forget to record the demographic information on teachers, the amounts of money received from every source, the listing of supplies purchased and the state of physical facilities. Meticulous record-keeping was to be an integral part of Phillips' superintendency. But he did not lose himself in physical planning and statistical data. Even in that first report, he shared his concerns for discipline and moral and literary training. A believer in corporal punishment only as the last resort, Phillips declared:

> The teachers are enjoined to govern their schools with firmness, but to avoid, if possible, all harsh means and punishments. Corporal punishment has been used only in rare and extreme cases, and only as a last resort, in reducing to submission a class of pupils with whom no milder argument would prevail. The teachers are impressed with the idea that *teaching* is their chief work in school. . . .[28]

One concern he had was that many children were not exposed to literary culture. He noted that the child finds "sensational story papers gratuitously scattered in his way. He is first attracted by the blood-curdling illustrations perhaps, but soon acquires a taste for the story, and unconsciously imbibes the principles that are to give direction to his youthful energies—he has already learned the alphabet of crime."[29]

Commenting that parents, teachers, and churches talk about the problem, but rarely do anything about it, Phillips related the plan he had newly instituted in the schools. The children celebrated the birthdays of prominent American authors while systematically studying their work. The daily roll call response was the recitation of "some literary gem." And the result, Phillips claimed, was that a better literature had taken the place of dime novels and sensational stories. But his program went further:

> To enlist the sympathies and direct the moral energies of the children, a Band of Mercy has been organized in each grade of the white schools. The Band of Mercy is a new order of chivalry, whose leading principles are "protection to the weak" and "kindness to all harmless living creatures." The great object of the organization is to inculcate the sentiments of kindness and mercy in the

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[24]Samuel Ullman, *From the Summit of Years, Four Score* (Los Angeles: Fred S. Lang Company, 1924), p. 13.

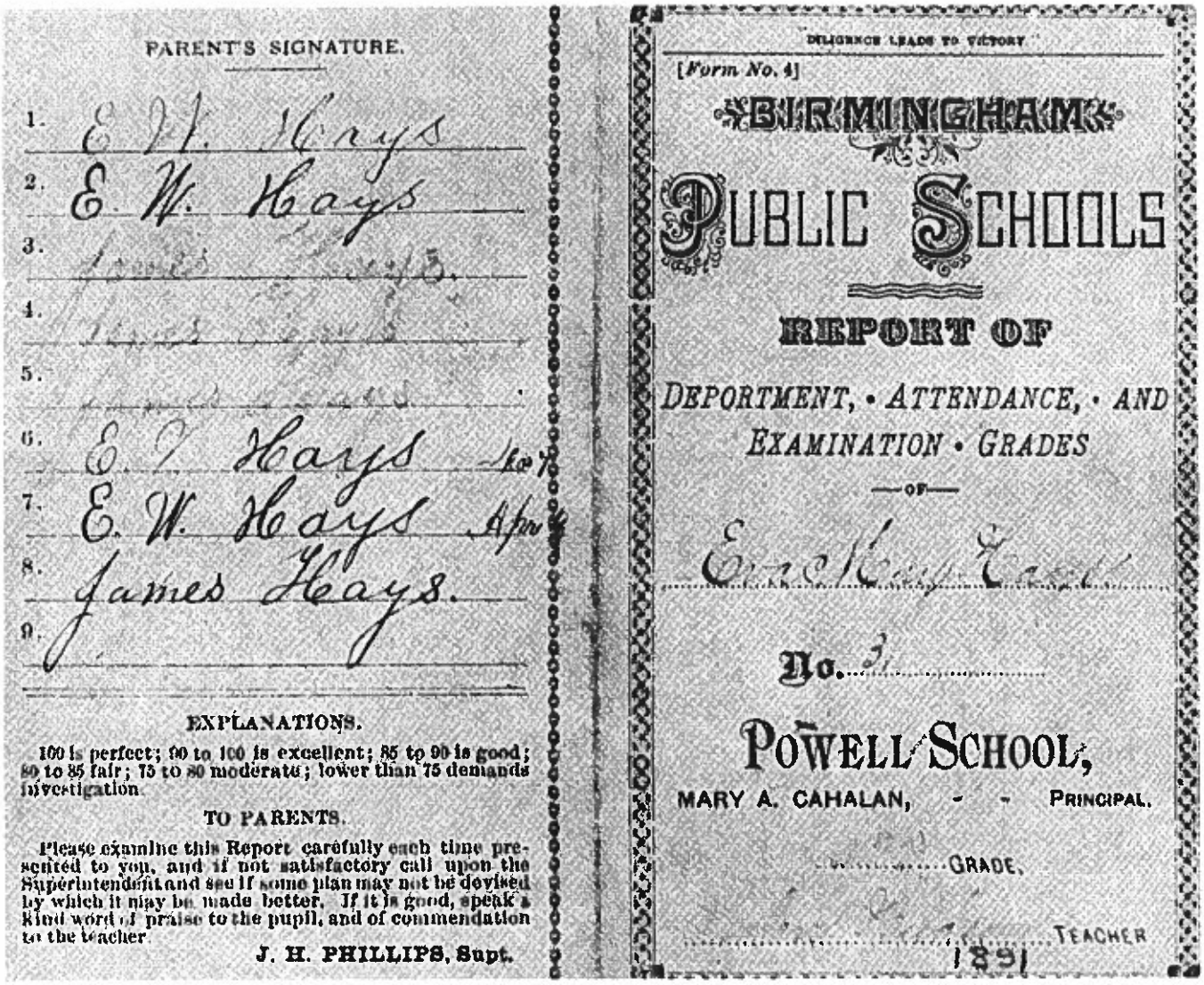
[25]Gallipolis, a town of about 2,000 people in 1880's, a Southern Ohio River town located on what was known as the French Grant. Settled by French emigrants, it was the city where Hiram Blennerhasset and Aaron Burr met to conspire against the government of the United States.

[26]*Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 28, 1928.

[27]*Superintendent's Report and Manual of the Board of Education of the City of Birmingham* (Birmingham: Roberts and Son, 1884), pp. 10-12.

[28]*Ibid.*, p. 14.

[29]*Ibid.*



PARENT'S SIGNATURE.

1. E. W. Hays
2. E. W. Hays
3.
4.
5.
6. E. W. Hays Mo
7. E. W. Hays Afm
8. James Hays.
9.

EXPLANATIONS.

100 is perfect; 90 to 100 is excellent; 85 to 90 is good; 80 to 85 fair; 75 to 80 moderate; lower than 75 demands investigation.

TO PARENTS.

Please examine this Report carefully each time presented to you, and if not satisfactory call upon the Superintendent and see if some plan may not be devised by which it may be made better. If it is good, speak a kind word of praise to the pupil, and of commendation to the teacher.

J. H. PHILLIPS, Supt.

DILIGENCE LEADS TO VICTORY

[Form No. 4]

BIRMINGHAM

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

REPORT OF

DEPORTMENT, • ATTENDANCE, • AND EXAMINATION • GRADES

—OF—

Ernest Hays

No. 3

POWELL SCHOOL,

MARY A. CAHALAN, - - PRINCIPAL.

.....GRADE.

.....TEACHER

1891

REPORT CARD
Powell School
For the academic year 1891
Reproduced from the original document in the Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library.

hearts of the young, and thus lay the foundation of character.[80]

One might speculate that the Band of Mercy was the rudiments of the Humane Society later to begin in Jefferson County.

Never throughout his tenure as Superintendent of Schools did Phillips ignore the intellect for the heart or the hand; it is clear that his goal for Birmingham students was not only a school credential, but a real education, a heightened awareness of the world around.

As Phillips has been characterized as "a man with a plan," one needs to look at the years 1883-1900 and see how this man stopped, looked, and listened before he acted. Many times when suggestions for new departures in schooling were made — whether they dealt with curriculum or physical facilities — Phillips' response was a plea to watch other cities. This is not to say that Phillips retarded change or growth in Birmingham schools, but that he tread a cautious pathway in decision-making.

One example of his deliberation regarded the tuition costs for students. Always an advocate

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

of free public schools—free in the sense that students paid no tuition—Phillips realized the impossibility of immediate triumph. But he did not give up easily. By 1900 only high school students and non-resident students were paying tuition.[31]

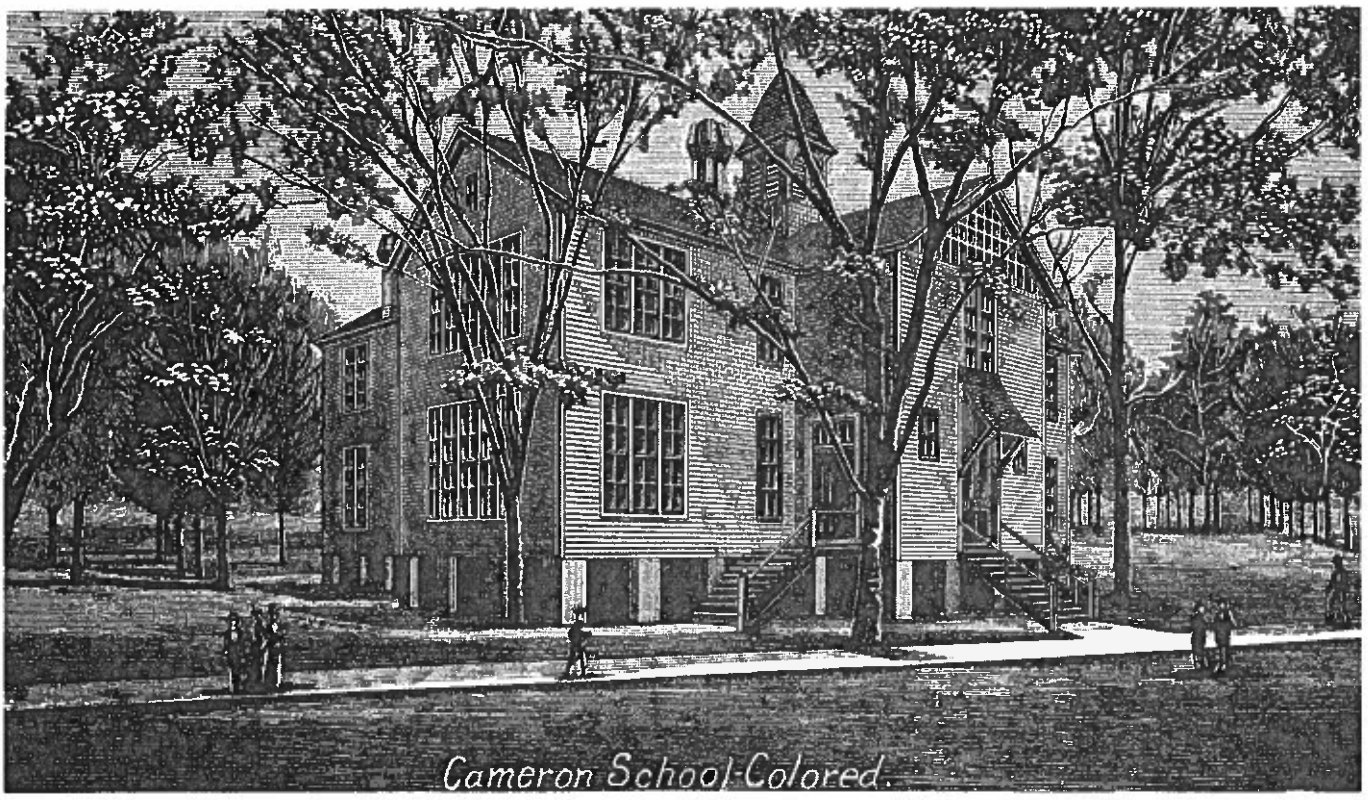
Another expression of his professional awareness and personal concern was that Birmingham students were to receive the kind of education that would best enable them to compete in an industrial society, and at the same time to value their own self worth.

By the turn of the century, Birmingham's schools were headed for economic recovery from the depressing years of the early 1890's. School sessions were nine months long instead of eight, attendance was up from the previous years, and a new building program was projected. But the changes in educational programming are the important areas to examine if one is to see how J. H. Phillips and Birmingham responded to the demands of an increasingly urbanized population.

It was no small feat that Birmingham schools had won the three highest educational awards at the Cotton States' Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. The awards were for having the best school system, the best method of instruction, and the best

STUDENTS, GRADE 2-B
Paul Hayne School
1888 (?)
Mrs. Clara Dennis, Teacher, is pictured on the left, standing. A photograph from the collections of the Birmingham Public Library.

[31] *Annual Report of the Birmingham Public Schools for 1900*, p. 11.



CAMERON SCHOOL, 1890
Formerly the Henley School, moved from Sixth Avenue, North, and Seventeenth Street to Eighth Avenue, South, and Fourteenth Street in 1890 for use by black students.
An engraving from the collections of the Birmingham Public Library.

work by pupils. The custom of giving awards and medals for outstanding performance by students was as old as the organized system itself. But by 1900, the concept of rewards was in disfavor. Phillips had, after careful consideration, adopted much of the new "progressive educational theory" of Colonel Francis Parker and John Dewey:

> The elimination of prizes in our schools, and the substitution of more rational incentives to study have proven beneficial. . . .
>
> The schools may accomplish something for society by the development of proper motives for work. To do this effectively it is not enough for the school to prepare for life; it must be life itself. The motives and the ideals of the child's active life career must first be developed and lived in the school.[32]

Phillips did not stop with rhetoric. So convinced was he that Dewey's progressivism should be taken seriously, he announced to the Board that the work of the school in the past had been too exclusively intellectual, omitting the aesthetic and the emotional, and that in the future more attention would be given to the whole child. He reasoned:

> The training of the intellect alone will never develop an exalted character; neither will the training of the feeling alone. The school and the home must train both intellect and feeling, thought and emotion, if an ideal character is to result.[33]

One project carried out by the schools that year was the creation of correlated art displays. Pictures were distributed according to a "Progressive scheme" for school decoration. The "art caption" for each grade was a key to the reading or specific historical assignments of the class. The pictures ranged from Grade I's Mother Nature and Her Children and Round the World in Myth and Story to Grade VII's Great Statesmen and Great Men of Letters.[34] Phillips reasoned that schoolroom decoration would do much to supplement the training of cultured homes and was of inestimable value to those children whose homes were barren of good pictures.

In line with progressivism's "learning through

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 23.

experience" idea, Phillips had encouraged the establishment of a library as part of the school's business. Housed within the school itself, Birmingham's library was a valuable asset to her educational system. By the centennial year, Washington Library had been established in connection with the black schools, so that all children had access to a lending library.

Although no high school had been built for black students, the Board of Education granted permission to use Cameron School to those parents who wished to send their children for an additional advanced year. The teacher was to be hired at the expense of the parents.[35] Also, the Board appointed an advisory committee of Negroes to visit their schools and advise the Board and Superintendent on matters pertaining to the welfare of these schools. This action appears to be one of the first which gave to black parents a voice in the operation of black schools. Not far into the future lay A. H. Parker High School, which gained national acclaim for its industrial training and magnificent musical programs.

On the threshold of a new century, an industrial age, a time of expansion and progress, Birmingham's John Herbert Phillips stood tall among the public schoolmen in the country. Always active in the National Education Association, he led his teachers and his students toward that which he thought important—becoming the best person one could be. As he said in a speech to the Board:

> The thousands of children in our schools represent all classes of society and all stages of social and moral development. We do not hope to make scholars of all, much less perfectly develop men and women. Our aim is to do the best we can for each individual, to enable him to realize the highest possibility of his heritage, and to do his duty whatever his station in life.[36]

John Herbert Phillips, by 1900, had seen his city's schools evolve to a respected system of education. For twenty-one more years he was to lead, stopping only when death came in 1921.

It is true, perhaps, that men do not make history; it is true, perhaps, that men are merely puppets on life's stage; it is also true, however, that cities, especially city schools, need their Samuel Ullman's and John Herbert Phillips', leaders who lead without alienating, men who serve without dictating, men who exemplify that which our city schools work daily to create.

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[35] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 28.