

# **West Chester B. Reed Henderson High School**



## **A Brief History**

Henderson High School is among 16 schools serving close to 12,000 students from eight municipalities that make up the West Chester Area School District today. Included in those 16 schools are three high schools, of which Henderson is the oldest.

Henderson's roots go back to the first high school in the Borough of West Chester, which opened in a building at North Church and Biddle Streets in 1863. Two rooms in the building were devoted to the "high department," with the remainder housing lower grades. The first high school class comprising five girls graduated from this building in 1866. After a gap of two years, the second class graduated in 1869. Graduations have been held continuously ever since.

Students in what was then known as West Chester High School continued to study in the 1863 building until 1906, when a new high school building opened on adjacent property on North Church Street. By that time, many of the traditions that are part of Henderson today were well established. Foremost among them was the annual D. Webster Meredith Boys Speaking Contest, initiated in 1890 by a high school graduate.

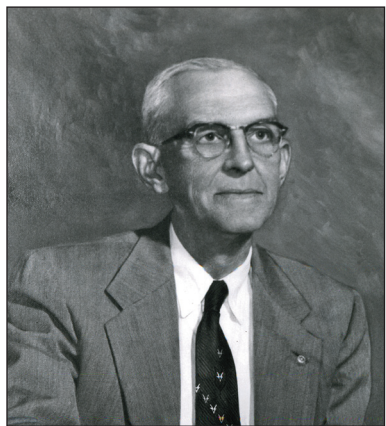


*1906 West Chester High School*

With the opening of the new building in 1906 – this one devoted exclusively to the high school program – traditions grew rapidly. Almost immediately, the school colors were celebrated in a new publication, the Garnet and White. The Garnet and White exists today as the school yearbook, but it was

originally published several times a year as a combination yearbook/newspaper/literary magazine. In the early years, this publication recorded the formation of clubs and activities as the high school program continued to grow. A Science Club, History Club, Dramatic Club, Classical Club, French Club, Gymnastics Club, and the Band and Orchestra all found their way onto the pages of the Garnet and White by the 1930s. A General Association in 1918 represented the first attempt for students and faculty to work together cooperatively; in 1923, the Student Council (Student Senate today) was formed.

The sports program continued to grow as well, with the attendant need for more space. In 1928, the school district met this need by acquiring land fronting on Penn Street for use as an athletic field. A stadium constructed on the site was named after J. Oscar Dicks, who served on the School Board's Athletic Committee and was a driving force behind the acquisition of the property.



*B. Reed Henderson*

By that time, B. Reed Henderson was an established presence in the high school. Born in Wallace Township in northern Chester County, Mr. Henderson received his diploma from Wallace Township High School in 1904 and a teaching certificate from West Chester State Normal School in 1906. From 1906 to 1909 he served successively as teacher and principal at several area high schools outside of West Chester. In 1909 he enrolled at Pennsylvania State College, which awarded him an A.B. degree in education in 1913. He came to West Chester High School as a

mathematics teacher that fall. Other than a short stint with the United States Army from January 1918 to February 1919, he remained at the high school for the remainder of his professional life. From 1924 until his retirement in 1952, he was the principal.

Mr. Henderson was principal during a seminal event in borough history – a nighttime fire that destroyed the high school building on December 22, 1947. Townspeople by the hundreds lined the sidewalks to witness what by all accounts was a blazing inferno. At one point in the long night, the roof collapsed in the center of the building and flames shot 100 feet into the air. Ornamental cornices fell from the third floor onto the street below, creating a shower of flames. Students and adults alike held onto one another and cried.

Emotions ran deep for those who witnessed the fire because the building was such a source of community pride. Indeed, the high school by the time of the fire had a reputation for excellence that spilled beyond the boundaries of West Chester Borough.



*High school fire in 1947*

Residents from the surrounding townships paid tuition to send their children into West Chester for the fine education the high school provided. Even before the fire, the building had exceeded its enrollment capacity, and plans were underway for a new high school on property adjacent to the athletic field. Now the plans for the new school were accelerated.

It takes time to build a school, however, and in the interim, West Chester High School students shared the adjoining junior high building with their younger counterparts – the high school going to classes in the morning and the junior high in the afternoon. For the class of 1948 – the senior class the year of the fire – it was an especially difficult situation. But the students did manage to recoup a semblance of school life. Despite the fact that many records and photographs were lost, for instance, a complete edition of the 1948 *Garnet and White* was printed, with photographs of students, faculty, and the building before and after the fire.

Finally, in February 1951, the half-day sessions ended with the opening of what was known as West Chester Joint High School. The word “joint” was added because the townships that were sending their children into the borough for a high school education helped pay for the building.

In 1954, a new junior high school was appended to the east side of the high school; later, to accommodate growing enrollment, the high school took over the space occupied by the junior high. While the arrangement made sense in terms of adding capacity to the high school, it created a situation in which there were two “main entrances” to the building – one on the original high school side, the other on what had been the junior high side.



*Henderson east side construction 1954*

In 1962, the building was officially named B. Reed Henderson High School in honor of Mr. Henderson, who to this day holds the record for serving the longest of any high school principal in district history. In 1966, in accordance with state law, the surrounding townships officially became a part of the K-12 West Chester Area School District.

Eventually even the expanded Henderson building was unable to accommodate the burgeoning high school population. The solution to the problem was the construction of a new high school, West Chester East, which opened in 1973. At that time, a longstanding Turkey Day rivalry between Henderson and Conestoga High School in nearby Berwyn was replaced with today's rivalry between East and Henderson.

The high school population continued to grow, and an addition to Henderson in the late 1970s included a brand new library and a second cafeteria, designated for juniors and seniors only. Several other areas of Henderson underwent renovations in succeeding years. The auditorium was completely refurbished, asbestos was removed from the ceilings, and student bathrooms were updated. But no major building-wide renovations were undertaken at either Henderson or East High School until 2003.

In that year, the district embarked on the most ambitious project in its history. Intended to accommodate growing enrollment and bring the existing high schools up to 21st century standards, the project included additions and renovations to both East and Henderson and the construction of a new third high school. Named after Bayard Rustin, a 1932 graduate of West Chester High, the new school opened its doors to students for the first time in the

fall of 2006. The work at East and Henderson were also completed that fall, with only some site work at Henderson remaining through the winter and spring.



*Construction of new front entrance 2003*

At Henderson, the addition that was part of the construction project gives the school a clearly defined new main entrance. Administrative offices, which were divided between the east and west entrances of the old Henderson, are together in one space to the left of the entrance foyer. Guidance offices are on the right. Science laboratories, family and consumer science classrooms, and a video production classroom and studio, all equipped to meet 21st century learning needs, are also located in the addition.



*East side construction 2003*

The old east and west sides of Henderson were gutted, with new larger classrooms constructed in the existing space. Everything from art and music to regular academic classrooms were created and/or renovated to meet current educational standards. Computers and related technology abound. A brand new brick exterior whose design is in keeping with the colonial character of historic West Chester caps these interior building renovations.

Also, property surrounding the school has been acquired to expand the outside campus. Artificial turf and a polyurethane track have been installed in the nearby J. Oscar Dicks stadium. Several miles up the road, a new North Campus houses additional athletic fields.

Through all the years, beginning with that first class in 1866 and continuing through the recent addition and renovations, Henderson has stood for academic excellence. Its students today are admitted to the most competitive colleges and universities, with College Board and achievement test scores that exceed state and national averages. A wide variety of academic courses from the basic level to Advanced Placement are offered, as are courses in business and marketing, music and art, and various vocational areas. Students are heavily involved in extracurricular activities and in service projects that frequently take them out into the community.

In summary, we are proud of the rich history that has shaped Henderson High School into a respected and beloved community institution. As we celebrate and build on the traditions of the past, we look forward to a bright future for ourselves, our school, and the generations of students to come.



*New central courtyard surrounded by both the new addition and the old building*

The text for this booklet is taken in part from  
*A Legacy of Learning: The History of the West Chester Area Schools*  
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West Chester Area School District  
829 Paoli Pike, West Chester, PA 19380  
484-266-1000 ~ [www.wcasd.net](http://www.wcasd.net)

04/07

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*This booklet was produced by the Communications Office of the  
West Chester Area School District  
Editor: Florence Miller ~ Graphics Designer: Ginny Zahn*