

McGAW NORMAL INSTITUTE

“Normal School- a school for training high school graduates to become teachers”.

In 1849, the Merrimack Normal Institute opened under the leadership of Professor William Russell, born in Scotland, who after 24 years of teaching in the United States, founded the ninth “Normal School” in America at Merrimack, NH. It was a boarding school for both young men and women. Located in Reeds Ferry on the Merrimack River with access to the Concord Railroad to the North and South and the ferry to the East, it was an ideal location. All students lived at the school, being supervised by the principal and his family. They paid tuition and board. There were three departments; the juvenile department training of elementary teachers (one year), using model classes of young pupils; the academic department, with English or Classical divisions including classes for personal edification, and the advanced department, which could then lead to acceptance in a university. The goal of the students was to become qualified teachers and/or to continue to the university level after graduation. A grade of 80% was required to remain in the school. Enrollment varied from 26 to 63. When Professor Russell’s health took him to Massachusetts, he was followed by several other principals. In 1865 Rev. S.W. Howell was elected principal and the school was renamed the “Granite State Military and Collegiate Institute.” After ten years, with interest in a military education lessening, the lease was cancelled, and the building served as tenements. Several of our current residents had parents who were raised in these hallowed halls.

In 1872 the school was generously endowed by Deacon Robert McGaw, who saw the need for a high school in Merrimack, and the following year it was incorporated as the McGaw Normal Institute. With this endowment, Merrimack students were able to attend without general tuition, but some tuition for specific courses of study and books. There was a laboratory, recitation and reception rooms, in addition to sleeping facilities. In the nearby Wheeler Chapel, concerts, lectures and gymnastics were taught. A science room and library were built in 1893. The Christian education was non-sectarian, although students were required to attend religious services of their choice on the Sabbath and had daily chapel services. Students were admitted by examination and advanced to the Higher Institute only if in a superior standing after their first year. There were 8 groups of courses, depending on the future plans and abilities: liberal education, teacher preparation, admission to colleges, medical school admission, business education, agriculture and mechanical arts and instrumental music. Individual courses in music, oratory, shorthand, typing physical training and art were offered to individuals with tuition. A passing grade was 75%, but 80% was required for a diploma. Board was \$3 a week and room rent \$.25 to \$.75 per week depending on location. Daily train transportation was 50% of usual fares. There have been many class reunions over the years.

The school, remained in constant use as Merrimack’s high school with varied enrollment until 1950, when Merrimack began to expand and required an added gymnasium. With the growing population and an aging building, it was decided to tear down the school and build a new high school. The new school was built on Baboosic Lake Road, closer to the center of town, and is now the front section of the James Masticola Upper Elementary School. When it was realized that Robert McGaw had specified that his endowment required his land to be used for education, it was too late to save the old school. To solve the problem, Schoolhouse #3, a two-room district school, located nearby was moved to the McGaw site on Depot Street, to be called “The PTA Kindergarten”, familiar to many of us.

Many prominent people graduated from McGaw School, including General Edward Haseltine, Admiral Sherman Adams and Walter Kittredge, a world famous songwriter during the Civil War.

Chuck Mower had rescued the headmaster's desk, the Institute Bible and the teacher's grade book from 1915 through 1934, and they are now available at the Merrimack Historical Society. Notes for students who left for WW I, to care for the farm, to work in the mills, or to care for family bring back memories of a time gone by. Many students did not attend during the spring planting or fall harvesting. Many girls found the winter walking conditions too difficult, so it sometimes took extra years to complete school in the days when District Schools had one teacher for grades 1-8. Come to visit the one-room schoolhouse that is now the home of the Merrimack Historical Society at 520 Boston Post Road in South Merrimack to see how school was in the 1800- 1900's and perhaps find your grandparents grades in arithmetic, Latin or Pedagogy. The Schoolhouse is open on Tuesdays from noon to 8 PM or by appointment. Contact Anita at 424-5084 or Marc at 494-3318 for more information.

