

20 Devens Street, Mary Colbert Apartments-old Harvard School (1871/72)

From Boston Landmark Commission's Charlestown Historic Resources Study 1981 (E. W. Gordon, Consultant)*:



Number 20 Devens Street is a large red brick, granite trimmed primary school building designed in Second Empire /High Victorian Gothic style. It has a tripartite main façade with a projecting center pavilion, which has five bays. There are flanking two bay "wings", and eight bay sidewalls. The façade has a striking polychromatic sensibility with red brick contrasting with light gray granite trim. Horizontal accents are provided by continuous belt sill and lintel courses. The main entrance, on the Devens Street façade, is set within a wide slightly pointed segmental arch. The granite arch is repeated at

the central pavilion's first-floor windows and the five closely spaced windows on its third floor as well as the two third floor windows on each of the flanking wings. All other windows have hood moldings with tabs.



20 Devens

5/15

There is raised granite lettering which reads "Harvard School 1871" on the wide granite course above the center pavilion's second-floor window. An identical date plaque appears above the second-floor windows of the Prescott Street façade. The building is enclosed by a pyramidal mansard roof on its central pavilion, and a hip/mansard roof encloses the wings. The roof slates are mostly intact.

Architect: Samuel FJ Thayer

Original owner: City of Charlestown

The Harvard school is architecturally significant as a fine example of early 1870s Second Empire/High Victorian Gothic primary school design. In typical second Empire fashion its main façade is divided into three parts with a projecting center pavilion capped by a low pyramidal slate shingle covered roof. Formally finished on all four sides, its walls are characterized by a striking polychromatic effect achieved by contrasting red brick materials and granite trim-e.g. belt courses, sill and lintel courses. Particularly noteworthy are slightly pointed segmental arches in High Victorian Gothic tradition. The Harvard School, built in 1871/72 represents the work of important Boston architect Samuel F J Thayer.

The Harvard School was evidently built to replace the old circa 1840s Harvard School (still extant but considerably altered for condominiums) at 47 Harvard Street. This school was named for John Harvard, early settler of Charlestown, minister of First Parish Church on Town Hill (1630s) and founder of Harvard College. It is interesting to note that a public school was established in Charlestown five years after its settlement in 1629. The first Harvard Grammar School built after the revolution was completed on Town Hill in 1801. The grammar school still extant at 47 Harvard Street dates to circa 1847-48.

The "new" Harvard School house on Devens Street was erected in 1871 at a cost of \$125,000. The school was "divided into upper and lower departments, the upper constituting the grammar department and the lower, the writing department". A *Charlestown Enterprise* reporter, in an article dated April 20, 1918 noted that "architecturally it is a most attractive structure of three stories and still has a comfortable look of quiet and dignity". The reporter also notes that "the field from

which this school drew its scholarship included the streets largely in those sections locally dubbed "The Gate," near the Navy Yard gate, (and) "Happy Valley" as the locality about the state prison, Town Hill and the Training Field. The "Gaters" were among the poorest but turned out many good students. In sports, teams generally consisted of the "Gaters" versus "Prison Pointers" and these two Charlestown groups versus the "Glass House Bullies" from East Cambridge.

The Harvard School was designed by Samuel F J Thayer, a lifelong native of Boston. He entered the office of J D Towle at the age of 16-leaving to enlist in the Union Army during the Civil War. On returning to civilian life he started his own architectural practice. The Harvard School represents an early important commission but evidently it was his victory in the prestigious competition for the Providence City Hall in 1874 that really boosted his career and led to other public commissions. His best-known works, in addition to the Providence City Hall, were town halls in Brookline Massachusetts, Stoughton Massachusetts, and the Nevins Memorial in Methuen Massachusetts. My (E. W. G.) guess is that Moses A Dow, who owned considerable property on Town Hill/Harvard Street and in Stoughton Massachusetts-most notably the late 1860s Dow block-was probably responsible for hiring Thayer, architect of Stoughton's City Hall, to design the Harvard School. He was also responsible for the design of Dartmouth College's library building, Wilson Hall, the Farragut House at Rye, New Hampshire, and the Potter Building, Boston. The Harvard school was adapted for reuse as elderly housing in 19__.

Bibliography:

Atlases- 1875

Charlestown Enterprise April 20, 1918, p. 2

The New Enterprise Dec. 6, 1884, p. 1 "Historical Note"
Buildings on Paper: Rhode Island Architectural Drawings, 1825-1945, p. 235
BPL Architects File- F J Thayer

*Digitized and edited, without change in content, from the scanned record in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System, and with addition of current photographs. In the case of houses that have been altered since the survey, these photographs may not entirely correspond to the architectural description. If earlier photographs of suitable quality are available, these have been included.

R. Dinsmore