

PROSPECT STREET SCHOOL: FROM THE ASHES OF BRIDGEPORT SCHOOL

Leta McAlpine fidgeted nervously in her front row seat at Brownsville's Opera House. She looked up at the stage where Campbell Jones, her Bridgeport High School classmate, was delivering the first line of his oration on the topic "Self Reliance." The audience had already applauded the performances of nine of her thirteen classmates, each of whom had performed a recitation or an oration on this Commencement night. Leta glanced down at her program again, her eyes drawn immediately to her own name near the end of the list of speakers. She would be the thirteenth graduate to address the audience, to be followed only by the valedictory oration given by the top student in the Class of 1908, Alice B. Steele.

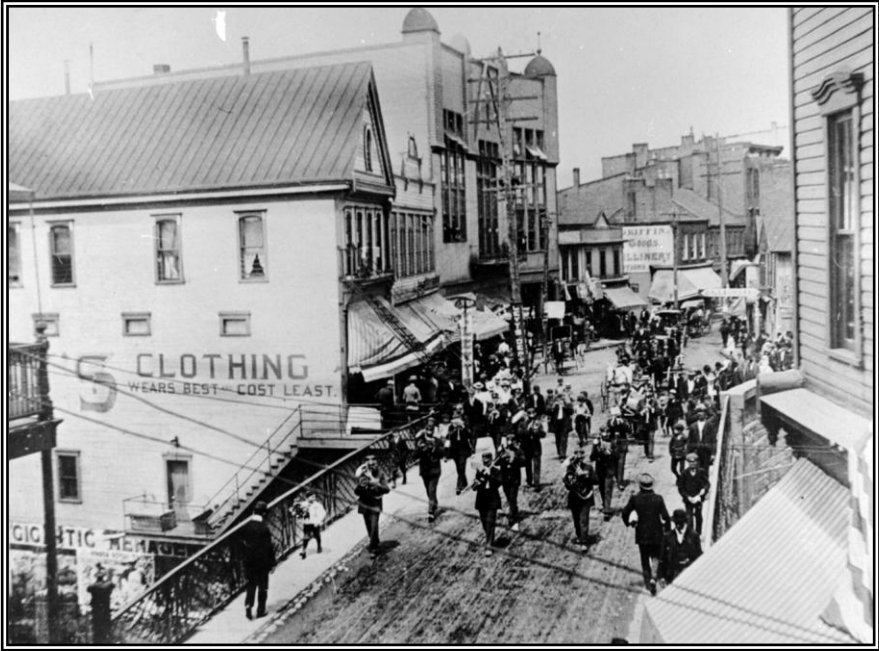
"Robert of Sicily, brother of Pope Urbane . . ."

Leta silently mouthed the opening line of her recitation to herself, only half listening as her friend Campbell Jones enthusiastically extolled the virtues of self reliance to his audience. The Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem that Leta had selected for her recitation this evening, "King Robert of Sicily," was nearly 1,700 words long. Leta had memorized it and had repeatedly practiced reciting it during the past several weeks.

She prayed that Jane Marshall was not as nervous as she was. Jane, another member of the Class of 1908, would be accompanying Leta's recitation on the piano, playing "Hearts and Flowers" as background music. Leta hoped that by the time her turn came in the program, the audience would not be too weary of listening to recitations and orations to be attentive. She loved Longfellow's moralistic tale of a boastful king who found himself transformed into a pauper, unrecognized by his subjects, learning a lesson in humility that . . .

But what was happening?

Leta's mind was rudely snapped back to reality by the occurrence of something out of the ordinary. Just as if she had awakened from a sound sleep, she could not initially discern what had ended her reverie. She



Bridgeport High School's 1908 Commencement ceremony was held in the Opera House, the tallest building in the center of the photograph.

peered intently up at the stage, where Campbell Jones had stopped his oration and was now looking uncertainly toward Professor Sheely. Leta became aware of an apprehensive murmur circulating through the audience.

Her heart began to pound when she heard, from someone directly behind her, the word "smoke." Just then, as if deliberately timed to escalate the growing concern within the hall, from somewhere beyond the walls of the Opera House wafted the faint sound of a man's voice in the street below, sounding an alarm. His shouted message was muffled by the intervening walls, but one word was distinct enough to cause all in the Opera House audience to gasp.

"Fire!"

Members of the audience looked at each other in alarm and immediately began rising from their seats and reaching for their overcoats. Everyone in the room knew that if there were a fire, the wooden Opera House would go up in flames like a pile of dry kindling. Many of the wooden buildings that had once populated Brownsville's Neck had already met that same fate.

"Don't worry," came an authoritative and assured voice from near

the back of the hall, “it is just a blaze at a stable up on the hill near the school. There is nothing to be alarmed about, ladies and gentlemen. There is no fire here. Please remain seated.”

The Opera House was nowhere near Bridgeport High School. The three-story schoolhouse dominated the top of the hill south of Dunlap Creek, towering majestically over Bridgeport from its location near the top of Prospect Street. The equally imposing Opera House was in the Neck, Brownsville’s downtown business district, dominating the west side of the main thoroughfare just before the street doglegged to the east.

Upon hearing the calming words, the audience, many of them elderly and in attendance to witness the high school graduation of grandchildren, breathed a collective sigh of relief and settled back in their seats. On the stage Campbell Jones, after taking a moment to collect himself, received a nod from Professor Sheely and resumed his oration with renewed vigor. Leta tried her best to concentrate on Campbell’s message, but a troubling thought immediately set her mind to wandering again. What if it had been the schoolhouse? And on this night, of all nights!

Bridgeport High School had stood proudly on Prospect Street since her grandparents’ time. It was a source of pride that a small community like Bridgeport had such a fine brick schoolhouse. Leta could not imagine what her life in Bridgeport would have been like without the school. Within its walls, she and the thirteen classmates with whom she was now graduating had formed lasting friendships and received a wonderful education.

Leta hardly noticed the polite applause that greeted the long-overdue climactic line of Campbell Jones’ oration. The Brownsville orchestra immediately launched into its second overture of the evening as Leta continued to dredge her memory, trying to recall what she knew about the history of the school.

Someone – perhaps her grandmother – had told her that there had been a school on Bridgeport hill for as long as anyone living could remember. In fact, the first school in Bridgeport had stood on nearly the same spot, a stone school built by the Society of Friends back when Quakers had dominated the community to the south of Dunlap’s Creek.

Then in 1852, the town fathers had ordered that a new school be constructed there, purchasing the lot for \$400 and constructing and furnishing the present Union School for less than \$5,000. A newer section had been added around 1896, and Leta could remember when the high school section had been remodeled just two years ago. It was truly a fine structure, and it marked Bridgeport, which just that year was planning to officially change its name to South Brownsville, as a

progressive community indeed.

What a shame, Leta thought, for Campbell to have had his oration interrupted by a scare like that, and all because of a burning stable. As Leta abandoned her thoughts of her school's history, she was startled to realize that while she had been daydreaming, two more speakers had made their presentations.

Julia Hurst had spoken on the topic, "Gaining the Heights," imploring her fellow graduates to work hard and climb high in their lives. Frank Garwood, in a declamation entitled "The Chance of a Young Man," had gleaned from the lessons of history that the road to success was to master your business, live within your income, save money, and improve leisure hours. Be ready and your chance will come, Frank proclaimed. They can who think they can.

And just like that, it was Leta's chance, and she was ready. Taking a deep breath, she glanced at Jane Marshall, who had taken her seat at the piano and was carefully arranging the sheet music to "Hearts and Flowers." And then the unthinkable happened.

"It's the school!" came a frantic shout. "The school is on fire!"

Cries of concern erupted throughout the audience, and the patrons began talking excitedly among themselves and looking uncertainly toward Professor Sheely, as if unsure whether to abandon such an important ceremony short of its culmination. Professor Sheely huddled with County Superintendent C. G. Lewellyn and Principal O. O. Saylor, and after a brief but urgent conference, the professor signaled to the audience that he wished to make an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Professor Sheely declared, "it has been decided that despite the events elsewhere in the town, the commencement exercises shall continue." He proceeded to introduce the next speaker, Miss Leta D. McAlpine, who would recite the poem, "King Robert of Sicily," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Miss McAlpine's presentation, continued Professor Sheely, would be followed by the valedictorian's speech and remarks by the county superintendent and the principal.

The audience, still in a state of excitement, yet not wishing to deny the remaining speakers their opportunity to participate in their own graduation ceremony, began to quiet as Leta McAlpine haltingly approached the front edge of the stage. For her, the astonishing turn of events was a nightmare. She was about to give her graduation recitation, a twelve-minute memorized Longfellow poem, to an audience who could think of nothing but the rumored conflagration that was occurring even as Leta prepared to utter her first line.

As she approached the footlights in a daze, she wandered perilously

close to the edge of the stage. Professor Lewellyn gently guided her to a safe spot, where she stood silently for a moment, then nodded toward Jane. The strains of “Hearts and Flowers” filled the room.

*Robert of Sicily, brother of Pope Urbane
And Valmond, Emperor of Allemaine,
Appareled in magnificent attire,
With retinue of many a knight and squire . . .*

As the rhythmic words of a legendary nineteenth-century American poet were recited from memory by a courageous Bridgeport girl, the flames consuming the school where she had studied the classics licked higher into the night sky. The proud building that had opened its doors the year after Longfellow penned his matchless “Song of Hiawatha” was now illuminating the sky over Dunlap Creek with a shower of sparks erupting from its collapsing roof. As the flames reached ever higher, the dying schoolhouse seemed determined to signal its fiery farewell to the last class that would ever pass through its doors.

***FROM THE ASHES OF BRIDGEPORT HIGH
SCHOOL AROSE PROSPECT STREET SCHOOL***

*King Robert, who was standing near the throne,
Lifted his eyes, and lo! he was alone!
But all apparelled as in days of old
With ermined mantle and with cloth of gold;
And when his courtiers came, they found him there
Kneeling upon the floor, absorbed in, silent prayer.*

As Leta McAlpine recited the final lines of Longfellow’s poem, “King Robert of Sicily,” she wondered if anyone in the Opera House audience was paying any attention to her at all.

“I really had the feeling that no one was listening,” she recalled many years later. “I wasn’t even sure I was saying anything. But I lived through the ordeal somehow.”

Leta’s recitation of the classic poem had seemed interminable, even to her. She could sense that all in attendance here in the Brownsville Opera House were on the edge of their seats. Sadly, the cause of the audience’s excitement was not the gripping tale of King Robert of Sicily, but rather the stunning rumor that Bridgeport High School, from which

Leta and thirteen other students were graduating in this very ceremony, was at that moment in flames on Bridgeport hill.

Leta felt compassion for Alice Steele, whose valedictory address was next on the program. Leta smiled weakly as she finished reciting her poem. The distracted audience applauded politely and anxiously consulted their programs. Leta knew they were mentally calculating how much longer it would be before they could dash from the building to see for themselves what was happening on upper Prospect Street, the site of Bridgeport High School.

Leta walked across the stage to rejoin her classmates in the lower box seats, the class's place of honor for the evening. At the back of the huge stage, which was gaily decorated in the class colors of amethyst and gold, was displayed the Latin motto of her class: "Non scholae sed vitae discimus." Leta settled into her seat as Alice began her valedictory address, relieved that her recitation was over and anxious for the commencement program to end. She too wanted to hurry across the creek and up Scrabbletown Hill (High Street) to witness the shocking demise of her beloved school.

As Alice Steele addressed the audience on the topic "On Life's Threshold," Leta tried to imagine the tumult that was occurring outside the Opera House. She could hardly believe that only three nights ago, she and her thirteen classmates had sat together happily at the Baccalaureate service in the Second Methodist Episcopal Church on Second Street. They had listened as Dr. S. B. McCormick, Chancellor of the Western University (now the University of Pittsburgh), had emphasized the importance of maintaining high ideals and striving for better Christian citizenship.

Dr. McCormick's message had been well received by the overflow audience. Classmate Nell Waggoner had played the organ masterfully, and as Leta glanced appreciatively toward Nell, she tried to recall exactly where each of her fellow classmates had been seated at the service. In addition to Nell Waggoner and Jane Marshall, she could easily remember the placement of the other girls in the class. There were the two Margarets, Connelly and Mason, plus Ellen Springer, Julia Hurst, Bertha Jones, Helen O'Donnell, and Alice Steele.

Leta smiled as she recalled the antics over the years of the four boys in her class -- Billy Acklin, Frank Garwood, Campbell Jones, and Lacey Brown. How patient Mr. Pratt, the photographer, had been as he had posed all of them for their class photograph at the school . . .

The school! Now Leta felt the same anxiety that had already gripped the audience as she realized that their impressive twelve-room school house was burning even as these commencement exercises

dragged on. Mercifully, Alice Steele had kept her valedictory oration brief, and now Mr. C. G. Lewellyn, the county school superintendent, was speaking. He set aside his prepared address because of the events transpiring outside, made a few appropriate remarks, and then formally presented the fourteen graduates with their diplomas.

Principal O. O. Saylor's address was similarly succinct, and the ceremony ended poignantly with the entire class singing its farewell song, which Leta and Nell had composed to the tune of Auld Lang Syne. Leta felt a tightness in her throat as she sang, realizing that this sad farewell to old Bridgeport High School might be far more permanent than she or Nell could ever have anticipated.

When the Rev. Charles R. Harman, pastor of the Central Presbyterian Church, uttered the word "Amen" at the end of the closing benediction, there was a rush for the exits by young and old alike. Leta joined the exodus, realizing that everyone had the same destination in mind: upper Prospect Street, where Bridgeport High School was burning.

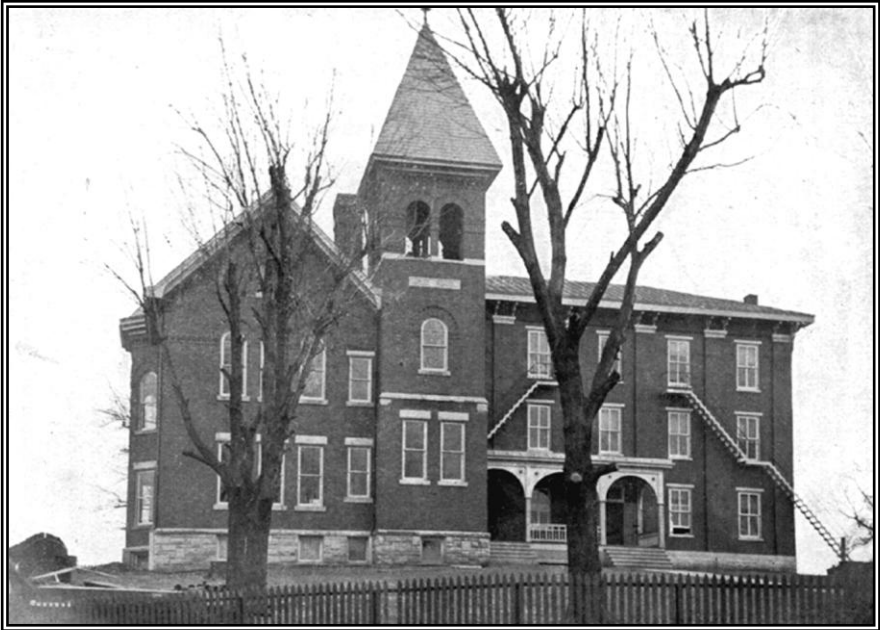
As Leta hurried toward the stairs leading to the Opera House's ground floor, she realized that it was nearly ten o'clock. Almost half an hour had passed since the audience had first heard the supposedly false alarm of a fire at the school. As she struggled to keep up with the throng descending the stairs, Leta thought she recognized a young man ahead of her, escorting a girl she knew.

"Isn't that McCready Huston?" she wondered, eyeing the slender twenty-three-year-old who had taught school in Brownsville for four years before landing a job with the Uniontown *Morning Herald*. She recalled noticing Huston seated in the gallery with Sara Lenhart during the commencement ceremony. Now Leta could see that like everyone else, he and Sara were hurrying to get out of the Opera House and join the excited crowd, drawn like moths to the flames arising from Bridgeport hill.

Leta stepped out of the Opera House onto the sidewalk. Without consciously deciding to do so, she raised her hand to cover her mouth and nose, only then realizing that the night air was thick with acrid smoke. Squinting to protect her suddenly stinging eyes, Leta noticed that everyone was staring to the southwest, many pointing to something in the distance. She followed their upraised arms with her eyes and gasped in horror at what she saw. The night sky across Dunlap Creek was a brilliant flickering orange, and the town was being showered with hundreds of tiny glowing cinders floating lazily downward into the Neck.

Leta gasped in alarm as a live spark landed on her shoulder, threatening to burn a hole in her homemade lawn dress. She swatted it

more vigorously than was necessary to extinguish it. Then, anxiously scanning the sky for other threatening sparks, she fell in with the multitude hurrying across the Iron Bridge toward Bridgeport. It was clear to everyone in the crowd that the flames toward which they were hurrying were not emanating from a burning stable, as had first been erroneously reported in the Opera House.



Bridgeport Union School was built in 1852-53 on the former Quaker meeting house site and was destroyed by fire on Commencement night, May 6, 1908. Prospect Street School replaced it on the same site.

Finally arriving breathlessly near the top of Prospect Street, Leta stood with the crowd in the cool May night and watched men frantically trying to maneuver a hose into position to combat the raging inferno. The men had been washing down the pavement in the Neck when the alarm had sounded. They had immediately rushed to the scene, but their efforts were hopelessly ineffective against the roaring flames. Only a fortuitous easterly wind saved the home of R. L. Aubrey, which was nearest the school, and the other nearby structures.

It was a long and emotional night. When dawn came on Thursday morning, the crowd had gone home, chattering as they dispersed into the cold night, exhausted from the evening's events. By daybreak, all that remained of the three-story building was a heap of smoldering ash

surrounded by four blackened brick walls.

On the ash-littered lawn in front of the ruined school was an odd anomaly. Protruding vertically from the ground, straight as a ramrod, was the charred trunk of a sapling that had been planted only a few days earlier. The Bridgeport High School Class of 1908, not realizing it would be the last class to graduate from that building, had started a tradition of planting a tree on the school grounds.

On Friday, the town's weekly newspaper, the *Clipper-Monitor*, reported the details of the fire. The newspaper, formed in January of the previous year by the consolidation of the *Brownsville Clipper* (established 1853) and the *Brownsville Monitor* (established 1889), published a skillfully rendered pencil drawing of the school as it had appeared before the fire, while describing the Wednesday night blaze as "a most tragic and pathetic thing."

According to the newspaper, "the fire started in the basement, presumably from where the old toilet places were being disinfected with fire." Describing the loss of the school as "a serious calamity to Bridgeport borough [which officially became South Brownsville Borough less than a month later]," the newspaper predicted that "the school board will take prompt action towards replacing the structure which has been a school home for three generations." It was suggested that the building's successor would "doubtless" be only two stories high and that the walls of the newer section of the lost building might be used in constructing the replacement structure.

From the ashes of Bridgeport High School would arise Prospect Street School, which some of our readers attended and many residents remember. Next I will share the details of the amazingly fast construction of Prospect Street School, which opened its doors to students just six months and ten days after Bridgeport High School was destroyed by fire.

PROSPECT STREET SCHOOL WAS BUILT IN AN AMAZING SIX MONTHS

"Barring the dramatic incident of the burning school house," reported *Brownsville's Clipper-Monitor* two days after the fire, "it was a most pleasant occasion."

The "pleasant occasion" was Bridgeport High School's 1908 commencement exercises, an unforgettable ceremony whose stunning encore was a roaring blaze that destroyed the school. The 1908-1909

school year was scheduled to begin in September, and the borough's school directors – R. C. Rogers, Joseph Gray, George L. Moore, Alex Lockhart, R. R. Bulger, and A. D. Pringle – faced the challenge of replacing the burned building as quickly as possible. They wasted no time tackling the job.

A week after the fire, the *Clipper-Monitor* reported that “the Bridgeport school board is taking prompt action in order that the borough may have a new school building in the fall. Two important meetings have been held, one on Friday [May 8, two days after the fire] and the other on Monday evening [May 11].”

In the year 2005, we have become accustomed to school construction and renovation projects taking several years for selection of an architect, design of a new or renovated building, awarding of bids, and actual construction of the building. A century ago, events moved much more quickly, as was demonstrated by the Bridgeport school board's actions in the weeks following the fire.

Within five days of the blaze the board had met twice, and the *Clipper-Monitor* informed its readers that “architect [A. C.] Fulton [of Uniontown] has been employed and is now making preliminary sketches. By the later part of the week they will be ready and if satisfactory, plans for the foundation will be drawn up at once and a contract for this portion let. The board has money enough to do that much without waiting for any bond proposition. The emergency is great and requires prompt measures.”

Ironically, as Bridgeport Borough worked feverishly to replace its burned school, two nearby school districts were also moving toward new buildings. During the summer, the Brownsville Borough school board contracted to have W. A. Hazlett of Connellsville erect a new twelve-room school on the site of the Commons (opposite “Bowman's castle”). The new building would include an auditorium and would replace a school house at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Church Street, on the site where Brownsville General Hospital was later built.

Meanwhile, across the river in Blainesburg, East Pike Run Township was looking forward to opening its new \$5,000 Blainesburg School in September 1908, a four-room building that would house 135 pupils.

The Bridgeport school board's major concern was how it would finance immediate construction of a new school. In 1853, the now-destroyed Bridgeport building had been constructed and furnished at a cost of less than \$5,000. A \$6,000 bond debt was still owed on it, most likely incurred when a new \$11,000 section had been added to the building around 1896.

“As the matter looks now,” the *Clipper-Monitor* explained, “it will require \$45,000 to erect a suitable building or a bond issue of \$35,000, subtracting the insurance money [\$10,000]. An attorney has been requested to draw up the legal proposition for a bond issue. As soon as it is ready a special election will be called, which requires 30 days’ notice.”

The *Clipper-Monitor* editorialized that the school board should not build an extravagant replacement for the burned school, stating that “many citizens, doubtless, would like to see a magnificent building rise upon the ruins of the old, but the best opinion is it will be wise to proceed cautiously. If the town grows, some time a ward school will be required in Harlem and one towards the Woodward farm. That being true, it would be folly to build too large a school on the old site. A moderate, substantial building, however, will be justified for it can always be used for high school purposes.”

Ironically, less than one week after the fiery demise of Bridgeport High School, approximately sixty people met in the Bridgeport Borough building to plan the creation of a fire department for South Brownsville (the new name by which the borough would be called as of June 5, 1908). One week later at a subsequent meeting, the department was organized, officers were chosen, a membership limit of thirty was set, and fundraising efforts began. The new South Brownsville Volunteer Fire Department hoped to assure that the new school house and other borough buildings would stand a greater chance of surviving a fire.

On June 29, the school board, with an eye toward constructing a fire-resistant school, decided to order steel beams for the school’s first floor. “This is a part of the fire-proof plan for the lower story,” explained the *Clipper-Monitor* on July 3, “and the steel must be ordered early in order to have it when needed.”

The school board awarded the contract for the foundation of the new building to the Brownsville Construction Company, and by the end of July, the foundation for the new school was nearly complete. The *Clipper-Monitor* reported, “Mr. Ebbert will begin laying brick this Thursday. The chimneys or stacks have to be started first and then the walls. As soon as the walls proper are started, about 25 men will be employed.”

The *Clipper-Monitor* also revealed some details about what the finished building was expected to look like. “The basement story rises well above the ground and contains 54 windows,” the newspaper said. “There are playrooms for the small boys and girls to be used in bad weather, toilet rooms, heating apparatus, etc. The first floor will rest on the walls and great steel beams.

“The brick in the main portion of the walls can be laid in about five

weeks of good weather. The contractor promises to have the building enclosed with heating arrangements, etc. in place so school can be opened Nov. 1. The plastering, then, will not be done until next summer. The first story and the stairways will be fireproof and the main stairway will be 11 feet wide.”

During the summer, the school board elected its faculty and administrator for the coming year. Named were O. O. Saylor, principal; Mr. Sheely and Miss Lindsay, high school; and Miss DeLaney, Virgil Hess, Miss Shook, Mr. Hiller, Miss Bakewell, Miss Britton, Mrs. Jeffries, Miss Martin, and Miss Mitchell, elementary.

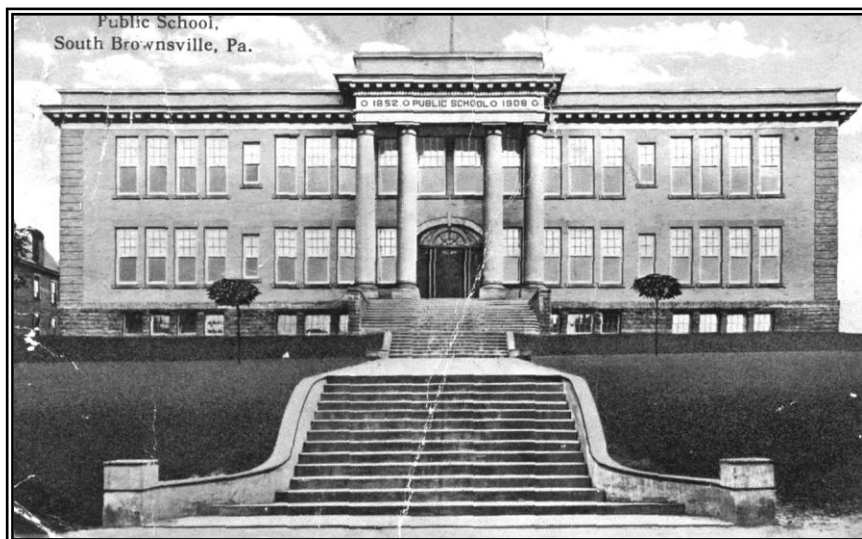
Although they were hired, they had no building in which to teach and no students to instruct, so through September and October, they received no pay. When it became clear in mid-October that the building would not be ready to open by the November 1 deadline, the thirty-seven high school-aged students began attending classes in the basement of the Central Presbyterian Church.

By Thanksgiving, students in the remaining grades were informed that their school year would begin on November 30. R. C. Rogers, president of the South Brownsville school board, announced that students should come to the new school “on Saturday morning [November 28, 1908] to receive their books and to prepare for opening session on Monday.” The school year, he continued, would continue until July 1909, making for an eight-month term.

Opening exercises went off without a hitch on Monday morning. “The heating and ventilation equipment seem to work perfectly,” the *Clipper-Monitor* gushed, “and with such a furnishment [*sic*] for cleanliness and pure air, the pupils ought to make a better record this year than ever. The board has secured a new building in about six months, an enviable feat. The teachers were paid for November, a bit of generosity on the part of the school directors that is much appreciated by all concerned.”

The new building was two stories high with a deep basement. It was made of a light shade of pressed brick with chipped brick trimmings and a native stone foundation, the stone being from the Miller quarry in South Brownsville. In the interest of fire-resistance, the stairways were of iron and the treads and platform of “marbleithic” material.

The front of the building was not to be completed until the following summer. According to the *Clipper-Monitor*, it would be “surmounted with a porch in classic design, formed with stone monoliths, or stone columns, each shaft in one stone instead of in short sections, thanks to one of the members of the board who will bear part of the expense. Wide stone steps lead up to it, the floor will be marbleithic,



Prospect Street School was built in an astonishing six months. 1852 and 1908, engraved over its portico, were actually the years of existence of its predecessor, the ill-fated Bridgeport school building.

triple doors will lead into a wide hall entrance way and this terminating in a large rotunda in the center of the building, which is open to the roof and brilliantly lighted by skylights, being quite different from the old fashioned corridors running through the building and of necessity being so dark that no one could be recognized. From this rotunda a broad stairway leads up to a platform, then parts and lands at each end of the second floor in the rotunda from which doors lead into each of the school rooms.

“To the right of the entrance is the principal’s room which is large enough to accommodate the graduating class. To the left of the entrance is a rest room for the women teachers and anyone ill with a toilet room communicating and a toilet room nearby for the use of the male teachers. At the rear of the rest room is a large library where it is to be hoped a well selected collection of books will be placed by the citizens. In the first floor rotunda is a sanitary, cupless drinking fountain.

“Each of the fourteen other rooms is large and well arranged for modern school work. Two of the larger rooms are separated with a hoisting partition covered with blackboards and arranged to hoist up into a pocket so that the two can be made into an auditorium [that could hold 300 students].”

In 2005, middle and high school students in the Brownsville Area School District have been attending classes throughout a major

renovation and construction project. In 1908, South Brownsville students had a similar experience, prompting the *Clipper-Monitor* to point out, “Some inconveniences will develop, but it will be necessary to make light of them in order to have school at all.”

Who could have imagined that students would be attending old Bridgeport High School in May of 1908, and in November of the same year, students would be sitting at their desks in an impressive new school on the very same site? Construction of the Prospect Street School in so short a time was a remarkable achievement. Although that solidly-built school was demolished a few years ago for construction of the Brownsville Apartments, in the memories of many former students, Prospect Street School will live on.