

History of West Hartford's Public School Names

Ethan Zimmer



Preface

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding, and at the request of West Hartford's America 250 Task Force, I set out to uncover the stories behind the names of the sixteen schools in the West Hartford Public Schools system. Education has long been a staple in community life, but the names of those honored in the names of our schools are often overlooked. It is with this document that I wish to shine a light on these people, their accomplishments, and their significance in West Hartford.

When reading, you will find that the names of the schools were not random; many honor former educators, local leaders, and active community members, while others reflect important places and themes in Connecticut's history. Some were enterprising businesspeople and figures from New England's history, and others were geographical landmarks and items from Connecticut's history. I hope that any information you come across spark curiosity about your community; what I have written for each namesake is *not* the complete story, and I highly encourage you to research further to find other interesting details I didn't cover.

Before you begin reading, please note that I have ordered each school by the construction date of their first building (as seen in the book *Celebrate! West Hartford* by Butterworth, Grant, and Woodworth). This does not always represent the true year the current school buildings were constructed or when the schools were founded; for instance, even though Hall High School's current building has been in use since 1970, the school itself was founded in 1924.

I am grateful to the West Hartford America 250 Task Force for entrusting me with this project, and to the West Hartford Public Library and other historical resources that helped make this research possible. Through this project, I have seen that by learning who our schools were named for, we can better understand the shifting priorities of our community over time.

Enjoy and happy 250th!

Ethan Zimmer
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Hall High School (1924)



Hall High School was named after William Hutchins Hall, West Hartford's first Superintendent of Schools. A West Hartford native, Hall was born on November 24, 1845, in a farmhouse near Fern Street and Mountain Road. In 1872, Hall was chosen to be the principal of West Hartford's first high school (located on the second floor of the Center School at 14 North Main Street), where he was also its sole teacher.

Aside from teaching, Hall was also quite involved in Connecticut politics; he was elected to represent West Hartford in the Connecticut General Assembly's House of Representatives in 1878 and represented the town in Connecticut's 1902 Constitutional Convention. In 1897, Hall was chosen to be Superintendent of Schools when West Hartford united the nine school districts within its borders, a process that would be completed in 1902.

Hall held this position for 25 years until 1922, whereafter he became Associate Superintendent under Superintendent Lloyd Bugbee. In 1924, Hall laid the cornerstone for William H. Hall High School, now the Town Hall building. The school was opened later that year on September 9th. In his twilight years, Hall (who stressed the importance of understanding local history) wrote a history of West Hartford, which was published by the Chamber of Commerce in 1930. In 1934, he died at the age of 88 and is buried in Fairview Cemetery.

Morley Elementary School (1926)



In 1930, the Fern Street School (built in 1926) was renamed Morley Elementary to honor scientist and West Hartford resident Edward Williams Morley. Born in Newark, New Jersey on January 29, 1838, Morley spent his childhood in West Hartford, where he developed a passion for chemistry. In 1860, Morley graduated from Williams College and later studied theology at the Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. However, Morley soon refocused his efforts on science, becoming a professor of Chemistry, Geology, Natural History, and Mathematics at the Western Reserve College in Ohio, where he taught until retiring in 1906.

During his career, Morley made great contributions to science, most notably his 1895 discovery of the relative atomic weight of oxygen (as a ratio to that of hydrogen's) as being 15.879. It was this discovery that, in 1907, earned him the Sir Humphry Davy Medal from the Royal Society of London, an award also received by Pierre and Marie Curie. From 1906 on, Morley lived in West Hartford, where he died at age 85 on February 24, 1923.

Florence E. Smith STEM School (1926)



Smith STEM School was named after local educator Florence E. Smith. Born in Hebron in about 1891, Smith graduated from the Willimantic Normal School (now called Eastern Connecticut State University) and later received her Bachelor of Science degree from New York University. Starting in about 1911, she taught at schools in Hebron, Cromwell, and New Haven and was principal at schools in Cromwell and East Hampton before accepting a position as principal of West Hartford's Seymour School in the fall of 1926. At the time, the school had about 800 students enrolled.

This would be the start of Smith's long career in West Hartford, as she remained the principal of Seymour School for over 30 years until 1958. By this point, the school had been renamed the Florence E. Smith School in 1948. On August 24, 1976, Smith passed away at the age of 85. Smith's career in education did not go unnoticed in her lifetime; besides Seymour School being named after her during her principalship, Smith also saw her name featured in *Who's Who in American Education* from 1951 and 1952 onwards.

In September 1996, Smith School became a magnet school along with Norfeldt Elementary.

Charter Oak Elementary School (1930)



Charter Oak Elementary derives its name from two possible sources. One of them was the Charter Oak Park, a popular racetrack that opened in 1873 near the intersections of Flatbush and Oakwood Avenue, where the current school building stands today. However, both the school and the racetrack most certainly derive their names from the Charter Oak, a famous piece of Connecticut folklore.

The story of the fabled tree dates to 1662, when King Charles II of England gave Connecticut's General Assembly a charter that allowed the colony to self-govern without royal interference. This period of self-governance lasted until 1687 when King James II formed the "Dominion of New England", a group of colonies in the Northeastern that would be under royal control. King James II sent Sir Edmond Andros to take over Connecticut and seize the charter. It is said that as representatives of Connecticut and of Andros met in Hartford, Captain Joseph

Wadsworth took the charter to prevent its seizure. He hid it in a hollow oak tree on a nearby property — the tree later known as the Charter Oak.

The Charter of 1662, granted by King Charles II, provided the basis for Connecticut's government until the adoption of the state constitution in 1818.

Sedgwick Middle School (1931)



Sedgwick Middle School was named after William Thompson Sedgwick, a prominent biologist and figure in the West Hartford community. Born on December 29, 1855, in West Hartford, Sedgwick graduated from West Hartford High School in 1874. He went on to get his bachelor's degree from Yale University, graduating from the Yale Sheffield Scientific School in 1877. Shortly thereafter in 1879, Sedgwick was offered a fellowship at Johns Hopkins University and later received his doctorate from the school. In 1883, he took up a teaching position at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later became the head of the school's Biology Department — a position he maintained until his death. He was widely regarded as an authority on public health and sanitation, and wrote a textbook called

the *Text Book on General Biology* in 1886. After a long career, Sedgwick died on January 25, 1921 at the age of 65.

Like many influential figures of his time, Sedgwick’s legacy is complex. In a 1914 editorial published by *The New York Times* titled “[Feminist Revolutionary Principle is Biological Bosh](#)”, Sedgwick argued against the growing feminist movement using flawed biological reasoning. These views were reflective of prevailing social views of the period and were also seen through a scientific lens as well.

Sedgwick Middle School opened for students in 1931.

Webster Hill Elementary School (1949)



Like Braeburn, Webster Hill Elementary is named for its location on Webster Hill Boulevard. The namesake of the street is derived from its proximity to the Noah Webster House, where the author of the American Dictionary (and the “Webster” in Merriam-Webster dictionaries) lived as a boy.

Bugbee Elementary School (1952)



Like Hall High School, Bugbee Elementary School was named after another one of West Hartford's school superintendents, Lloyd H. Bugbee. Bugbee was born on March 19, 1889, in Hartford, Vermont. As a young man, he went to Dartmouth College and the Teachers College of Columbia University, whereafter he accepted a teaching position at Rockville High School in Vernon in 1912. Shortly thereafter, in 1913, he accepted a teaching position at Springfield Massachusetts Technical High School. In a third job change, Bugbee became principal of West Hartford High School in 1917, a position he held until 1922 when he succeeded William H. Hall as Superintendent. Bugbee held this position for 25 years until 1947, concluding his educational career and relocating to his native Vermont. He died on January 2, 1975, at the age of 85, and was cremated in Lenox, Massachusetts.

Duffy Elementary School (1954)



Duffy Elementary School was named for Louise Day Duffy, an active member of not just the West Hartford community, but also in state and national politics. She was born in West Avon in 1885 and graduated from West Hartford High School in 1902. After receiving her degree from Smith College in Northampton in 1906, she went on to teach at Windsor High School between 1906 and 1907. She then accepted a teaching position at West Hartford High School, where she taught between 1908 and 1912. While teaching there, she coached one of West Hartford High's first girls' basketball teams.

In addition to being an early educator in West Hartford, Duffy was also highly involved in civic life, serving on the West Hartford Board of Education during her career. She also joined the Connecticut Federation of Democratic Women's Clubs in 1922, and became its vice president in 1934. In addition, she was the founder of the West Hartford League of Women Voters. Furthermore, Duffy was chosen by the Connecticut General Assembly to head the "State Commission to Study the Pauper Laws" in 1935, with the goal of studying historical definitions of being a pauper in Connecticut to attempt to change the stigma that surrounded the word. In 1932,

Duffy attended the Democratic National Convention with Hartford Mayor William J. Rankin, the same convention where Franklin Roosevelt won the Democratic nomination for the Presidency.

On May 6, 1973, Duffy died at the age of 88 and is buried in Fairview Cemetery.

Whiting Lane Elementary School (1954)



The Whiting Family has had a long history in West Hartford that spans several centuries, though Whiting Lane Elementary’s namesake can be traced to one specific member of this family, Alfred Whiting. Born in West Hartford on March 21, 1824, Whiting would go on to lead a career as a respected local entrepreneur. In 1851, Whiting purchased a plot of land south of Farmington Avenue and east of Quaker Lane and started a nursery business. He grew several varieties of fruit-bearing trees and “shade and ornamental trees”, and it is even said that some of the trees on

Whiting Lane were planted by Alfred Whiting himself. Whiting lived on the same property as his nursery. His driveway off Farmington Avenue would ultimately become Whiting Lane. In 1852, Whiting constructed a greenhouse on the property for experimentation with flowers – a practice known as florticulture. As his business grew, it would ultimately occupy two acres of greenhouse space.

Aside from his prominence in local business, Whiting was a well-respected member of the community. As William H. Hall put it, Whiting was “a generous-hearted man, greatly interested in the progress and development of [West Hartford], and although never seeking public office or position, a truly public-spirited progressive citizen”. On May 5, 1905, Whiting died at the age of 81, and would bequeath his estate to his daughter, Helen.

King Philip Middle School (1955)



Even though King Philip Middle School was named in 1954 after the street on which it is located, the true origin of the name is representative of New England’s colonial history. When some of the earliest English settlers came to settle New England, Metacom (c. 1638-1676) was the sachem – or supreme tribal leader – of several New England tribes such as the Wampanoags. The son of the sachem Massasoit, Metacom (or Metacomet) was, as described by historian Marguerite Allis in 1934, a “man of brains and courage” and displayed this attitude so effectively that English settlers often referred to him as “King Philip”. This title lends its name to King Philip’s War (1675-1676), a conflict between English settlers and several Indigenous tribes. In this war, King Philip led several tribes, such as the Narragansetts and Wampanoags, against the English. However, Philip was on the losing side of this war; his forces

were crushed and, in 1676, was killed in Mount Hope, Rhode Island, effectively ending the war.

Braeburn Elementary School (1956)



Opened in 1956, Braeburn Elementary School was named after the road it is located on, Braeburn Road. This name, however, refers to the area's geography; “brae” is a Scottish word referring to a hill slope, and “burn” (also Scottish) refers to a brook that runs nearby the school.

Conard High School (1957)



Conard High School was named after Frederick Underwood Conard, an engineer and former Board of Education Chair in West Hartford. Conard was born on December 17, 1891, in Brooklyn, New York. He attended the Manual Training High School in Brooklyn, afterwards receiving his master's degree in engineering from the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. After college, Conard became an engineer for the Public Service Corporation of New Jersey, but soon after enlisted in the Army in May 1917 as the United States entered World War One. He was a member of the 6th Engineers of the 1st Regiment, Chemical Warfare Division in France, ultimately attaining the rank of Captain. He would continue his service in the active reserve until 1939, where he ultimately attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

To continue his engineering career, Conard began work at the Underwood Computing Machine Company in 1919. In 1924, Conard assumed the role of head of a portable typewriter plant in Bridgeport but left in 1929 when he temporarily relocated to Illinois. He would later return to Connecticut, as president of the Niles-Bement-Pond Company (a machine tool producing company) in 1947. Aside from

his career in engineering, Conard was also president of the YMCA and active in the Boy Scouts.

On March 14, 1954, Conard died at the age of 63. Conard High School opened in 1957.

Wolcott Elementary School (1957)



Wolcott Elementary School was named after Henry A. Wolcott, a civil engineer. Born 1866, Wolcott joined several engineering societies throughout his career. He was also active in community affairs, serving on the Board of Selectmen and the Boards of Education and Finance. In addition, Wolcott owned the land that currently encompasses Wolcott Park from 1907 to the mid 1950s, operating a farm known as “Wolcott Farm”. He died on July 12, 1941.

Norfeldt Elementary School (1958)



Norfeldt School derives its name from Eric G. Norfeldt, a local physical education coach and director for West Hartford Public Schools. Born on March 14, 1898, Norfeldt would go on to get his bachelor's and master's degrees in physical education from Springfield College in Massachusetts. In 1924, he became the head basketball, baseball, and football coach at Hall High School, where he continued to mentor teams until 1950. Many student athletes in the teams he led would go on to become professional athletes in college and minor league teams. In addition, it is a little-known fact that in 1949, Norfeldt also coached the *Hartford Courant's* baseball team — which was part of the “New England Newspaper League” — that won the Connecticut Eastern Division Crown. He would go on to coach the team once more in 1950. After battling illness for a period, Norfeldt died at age 58 on February 23, 1957. In addition to Norfeldt School, there also Eric G. Norfeldt Field, youth baseball field at 490 Park Road.

Aiken Elementary School (1964)



Aiken's namesake is derived from Mary Louise Aiken, a career educator in West Hartford. Aiken was born in 1909 in Saratoga Springs, New York. She eventually relocated to Springfield, Massachusetts and graduated from Springfield High School. Aiken was a graduate of Mount Holyoke College, but also studied at such schools as Harvard, Boston University, and New York University as well. In 1931, Aiken began to teach math at Sedgwick Middle School, beginning her 30-year long career with West Hartford Public Schools. She would go on to become the math department head at Sedgwick as well as a guidance counselor for the school. In 1957, Aiken received a "Career Teacher Classification" as a reward for her service to West Hartford's schools. She died on June 22, 1961, at the age of 52. In 1964, an elementary school located near the north end of King Philip Drive was named after her, as well as a scholarship fund made to help college-bound Sedgwick students.

"Miss Aiken", as she was called, led a very well-rounded life. For one, she was very well versed in aviation math, composing works such as "Implications of the Air Age" for the Connecticut Department of Education and collaborating on textbooks like "1,000 Pre-Flight Problems" and "Aviation in the Modern World" for the Civil Aeronautics Administration. She was also active in her community,

being a member of the Hartford Mount Holyoke Club and First Church in her lifetime.

Bristow Middle School (2004)



The namesake of West Hartford's newest school, Bristow Middle School, is reflective of the town's history with the institution of slavery. Bristow exemplifies the long-term efforts of many subjected to slavery to break the bonds of captivity.

Born in 1731, Bristow (after being brought to North America as part of the slave trade) first appears in military records from the French and Indian Wars, in which he served under the command of Col. Phineas Lyman in the First Connecticut Regiment from 1757 to 1761. Bristow appears again in 1775, when he bought his freedom from West Hartford resident Thomas Hooker for £60 (roughly \$16,400 USD in today's money). He did not appear again until 1788, when he bought a gristmill in Bristol, Connecticut from Elijah Gridley for £60. This mill would be sold by Bristow in 1792 for £85.

In his later years, Bristow was living with Sarah Collins, the widowed wife of his former enslaver, Thomas Hooker. Ultimately, in March of 1814, Bristow died of peripneumonia at the age of 83. He is buried in West Hartford's Center Cemetery, and his gravesite is listed on the Connecticut Freedom Trail, the state's Black history trail. Although the surviving records of his life are limited, Bristow's story reflects both the presence of slavery in West Hartford's past, and the efforts of those who fought to overcome it.

About the author

Ethan Zimmer is a student at Hall High School and the student chair and lead researcher for the America 250 West Hartford School Names Project. His research focuses on the historical origins and civic significance of the town's public school names, using archival and primary source materials.

Ethan is a junior officer on Hall High School's Model United Nations team and a junior varsity member of the All-American Model UN travel team. He also co-founded the Hall Research Club to support student scholarship and the publication of a student research journal. In 2024, he was the West Hartford Spelling Bee champion and placed second in the Connecticut State Spelling Bee. Ethan plans to study history in college and pursue a career in the field.

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