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Thompson Island: Learning By Doing

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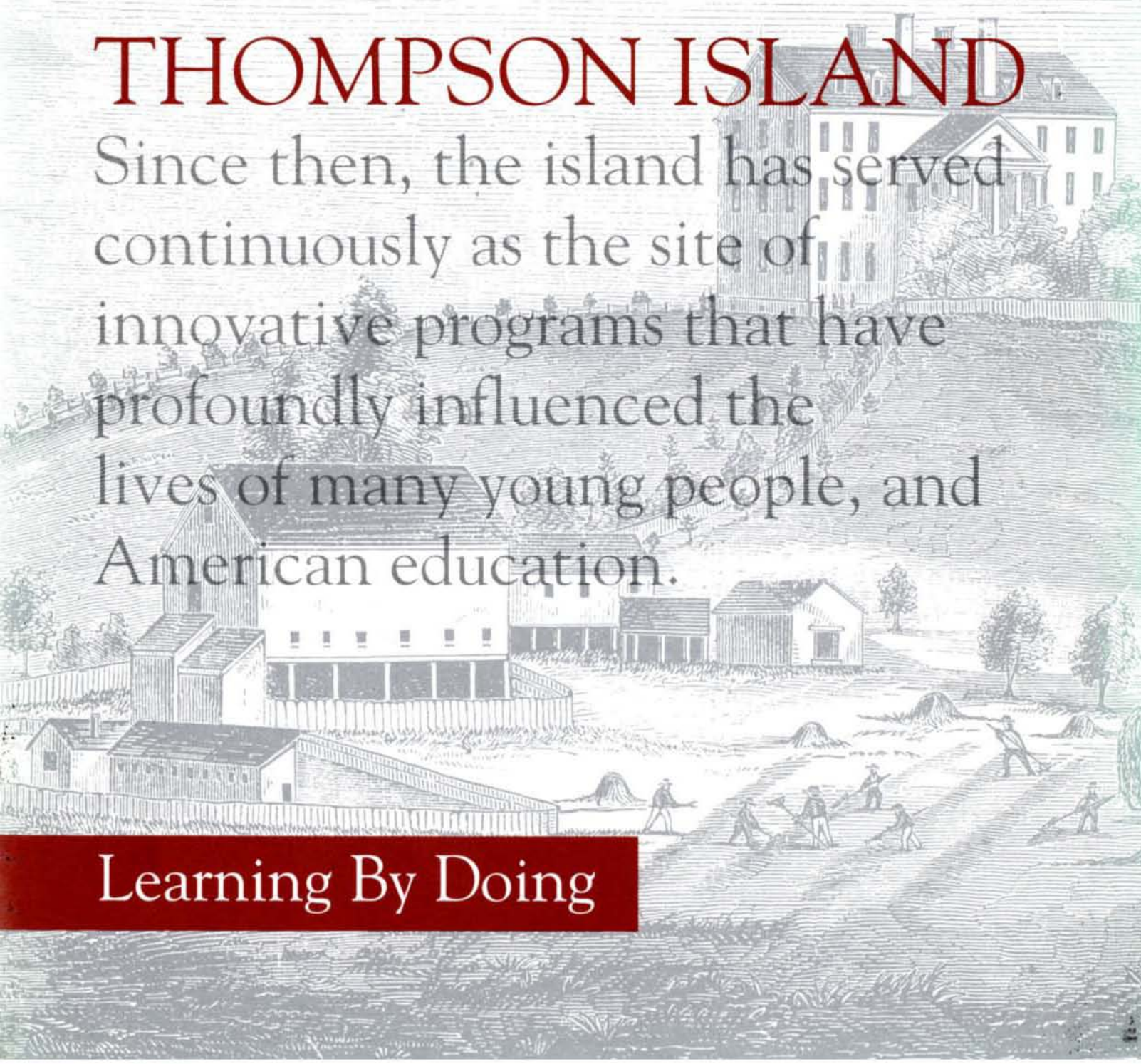
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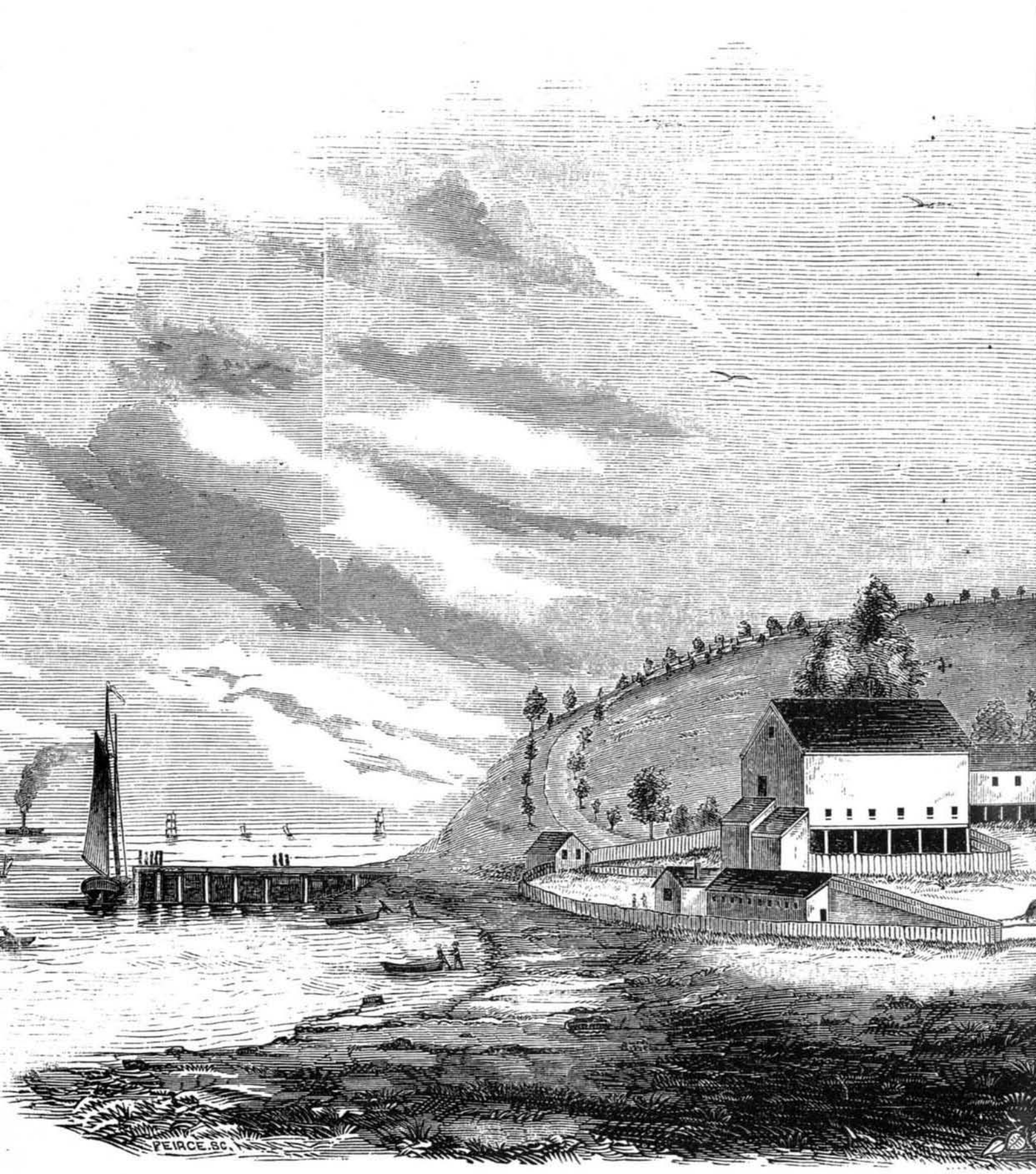
More than 150 years ago, a group of concerned Boston citizens established a unique educational institution on

THOMPSON ISLAND

Since then, the island has served continuously as the site of innovative programs that have profoundly influenced the lives of many young people, and American education.

Learning By Doing





THOMPSON ISLAND

Learning By Doing



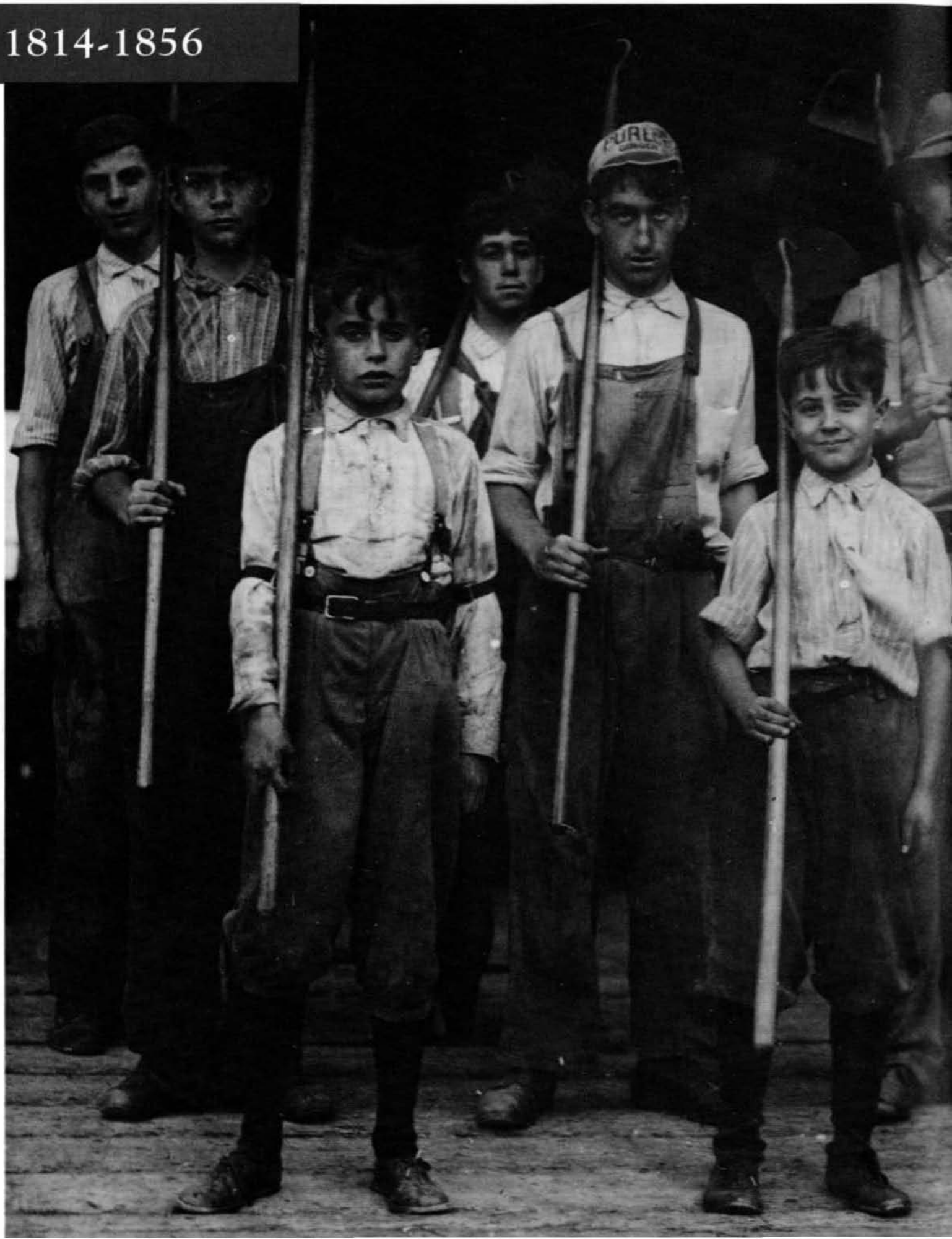
Thompson Island has provided unique and outstanding educational services to young people for more than 150 years. The following narrative and historical photographs chronicle how five successive organizations have each pursued the original goal of using the island's remarkable resources to improve the lives of youth from Boston and the surrounding area.

A continuous Board of Trustees has governed the island during the past century and a half. Currently, the resident organization is known as the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center. Although it is new to the island, Outward Bound is proud to carry on the progressive traditions described in this booklet by offering challenging hands-on learning experiences to many of Boston's most deserving youth. We plan to develop the island into a place as well known and respected as it was in centuries past, with a program revised to fit the needs of the 21st century. We trust that these pages will reveal to you the sources of inspiration and the rewards that have motivated so many Thompson Island supporters in the past, and encourage you to join our new generation of friends for this enduring urban treasure.

Board of Trustees
Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center
1991

Thompson Island c.1850

1814-1856



The Evolution of A Farm School



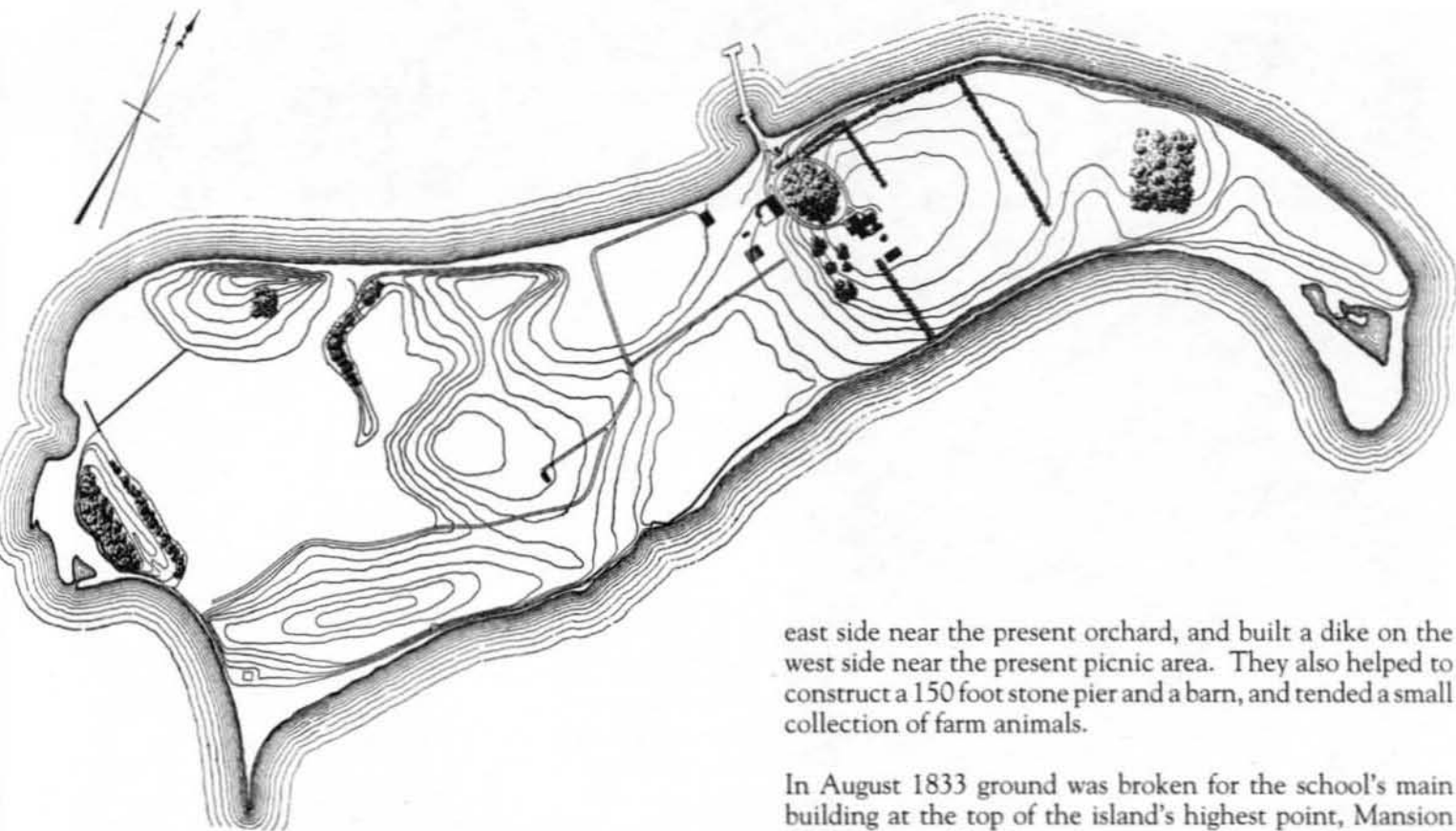
Early on Easter Monday in 1833 a small party led by the Reverend Eleaser Wells landed at Thompson Island, said a few prayers in front of the island's only building—a farm house—planted some potatoes and a mulberry tree on the largest hill, then hastened back to South Boston, fearful of being swamped by the violent gales beginning to lash Dorchester Bay. Among this party were three young men, all former members of the Boston House of Reformation. And so began the Boston Farm School, an educational institution that would have a profound influence on the lives of many young people, and on American education.

Founding the School

One source of inspiration for the Farm School was the successful Boston Asylum for Indigent Boys located in the city's North End. Founded in 1814 by an influential group of Bostonians concerned about the welfare of young boys who were orphaned, partially orphaned, or made destitute by the War of 1812, the institution provided a safe home for its members, who attended the local public school.

In 1832 another group of citizens decided that adding a work component to this arrangement would be an effective way to deal with non-orphaned youths who were deemed "at risk," but had no court record. These young men would "be instructed in agriculture, gardening, or other useful occupations as would contribute to their present maintenance and tend to form in them habits of industry and order...." The group quickly raised \$24,000; they spent \$6,000 of it to purchase Thompson Island in Boston Harbor, and named Reverend Wells, a former reform school director, as superintendent of the new Boston Farm School.

Two months after his Easter Monday foray, Reverend Wells, two assistants, and fourteen young men moved to Thompson Island. That first summer they cut hay, drained a pond on the



east side near the present orchard, and built a dike on the west side near the present picnic area. They also helped to construct a 150 foot stone pier and a barn, and tended a small collection of farm animals.

In August 1833 ground was broken for the school's main building at the top of the island's highest point, Mansion Hill. Designed by Boston's premier architect of the period, Charles Bulfinch, this building was to become a massive five-story structure that contained virtually all the accommodations required of a boarding school for 100 youths and their faculty: three large dormitories; staff quarters; classrooms; library and recreation areas; kitchen and dining room; laundry; lavatories; storage areas; and administrative offices.

While the Bulfinch building was under construction Reverend Wells and his students lived in the old wood-frame farm house a quarter-mile to the south that was built to house the farmers who tended herds of sheep and cattle pastured there for the summer by their off-island owners. When the main building became habitable in October 1833 Captain Daniel Chandler, a veteran of the War of 1812, was hired to replace Wells as superintendent. He and a small band of students left the farm house and moved to the new facility.

By 1834 the directors of both the Boston Farm School and the Boston Asylum for Indigent Boys were facing their own separate crises. The Asylum's overcrowded structure in the North End was crumbling, and the Farm School was badly in need of cash. In 1835 the two institutions decided to merge; a new "Boston Asylum and Farm School for Indigent Boys" was approved by the General Court of Massachusetts. The Asylum contributed to the new partnership \$20,000 from the recent sale of its downtown property, and fifty two additional students; the Farm School contributed the farming operation, its new main all-purpose building, and its beautiful island location.



Main building and stone pier, c.1840



The Boston Asylum and Farm School for Indigent Boys admitted "worthy boys of sound character" from Massachusetts between the ages of five and eleven. Parents or guardians were required to "relinquish" their offspring to the School. By law the School remained the formal guardian until the youngster reached the age of twenty-one, even if he returned home or was apprenticed out to a farm home when he reached "working age," which started then as early as twelve years old.

A Unique Approach to Education

In these early days there was much to do, and funds were always limited. The boys were put to work completing the main residence and constructing farm buildings, planting and harvesting crops, building dikes, piers and floats, and more. But the school also initiated and remained committed throughout this period to a broad-based educational program which would nourish all aspects of the individual.

Although at first the academic program was often relegated to evenings or rainy and cold weather days, an 1839 report by one of the school's trustees, Henry Rogers, indicates that classes were by then in session every weekday. The boys split their time evenly between academic study and work projects.

Moral and religious education was also of pre-eminent importance, and "It was the aim of the Managers, as far as practical, to make the whole discipline and instruction of the pupil whilst upon the island, bear upon his moral and religious nature," wrote Rogers. As in many educational institutions at that time, the boys received regular non-denominational Christian religious instruction and attended Sunday chapel services, which often included sermons and lectures from visiting ministers.

View from Mansion Hill of the south end of the island with farm house center left, photograph William Garrison Reed



Reverend Eleaser Wells, first superintendent of the Boston Farm School, 1832-1833



Cornelius C. Felton, superintendent from 1839-1840

Robert Morrison, superintendent from 1841-1856



In retrospect, these early founders had a remarkably modern, “holistic” approach to education. “The wholesome influence of the school, regular labor on the farm or in the house, the example and frequent conversations of the teachers,” and daily prayers and hymn singing were all vital components for intellectual, physical, social, moral and spiritual growth. By the 1860’s the School was known locally, and to some degree nationally, for its educational accomplishments. It had a particularly strong Board of Managers, and its first superintendents included Cornelius C. Felton (1839-1840), a professor of Greek at Harvard who later became that college’s president, and Robert Morrison (1841-1856), a public school teacher who later became mayor of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Much of the School’s early reputation was built on its farm program. Not only was it the first elementary school in the country to teach farming; it was also the first to integrate so thoroughly the teaching of farm concepts, skills, and values associated with good land management. In the early 1840’s the young farmers were learning in the classroom and in the fields the “principles of agriculture, horticulture and botany,” in a course of study that featured soil and seed analysis, plant and tree identification and cultivation processes. The farm was central to the economy of the community and the boys were central to the farm. Everyone played an active role in milking the cows, driving and taking care of the horses, planting, weeding and harvesting crops, and ridding the environment of unwanted pests, including brown moths and rats. Closely allied with these farming tasks were projects which sensitized the young men to the principles of nature: recycling projects involving driftwood and other found objects on the beaches; cutting and hauling dead wood for the fireplaces; building dikes and planting willows to protect fragile embankments.

Domestic work and community service were also important components of the work program. Students were assigned to



the school's bakery, kitchen, dining room, laundry, sewing room, and the boiler rooms. They cleaned floors and washed windows, did minor repairs such as replacing broken glass and painting woodwork, raked leaves, cut lawns, and shoveled snow.

The waterfront with its collection of boats was another important classroom. Sailboats and rowboats were used for traveling between the island and the mainland before 1875, when the school acquired a steam-driven vessel named the *Jane MacCrae*. The young boys helped to keep the boats in good working order, served as deck hands and cargo haulers, and rowed instructors and guests back and forth to the mainland.

Island living also gave the students a healthy respect for the harsh, unyielding quality of the sea. In April 1842 the school's sloop *Polka* capsized in a squall north of the island near Spectacle Island; all aboard — twenty-seven boys, their teacher, and the boatman — were lost. Fifty years later another school sloop went down quite close to the island, drowning eight boys and a teacher. In the Great Storm of 1898 several large schooners lost their moorings in Boston harbor and crashed into the School's steamboat, utterly destroying it.

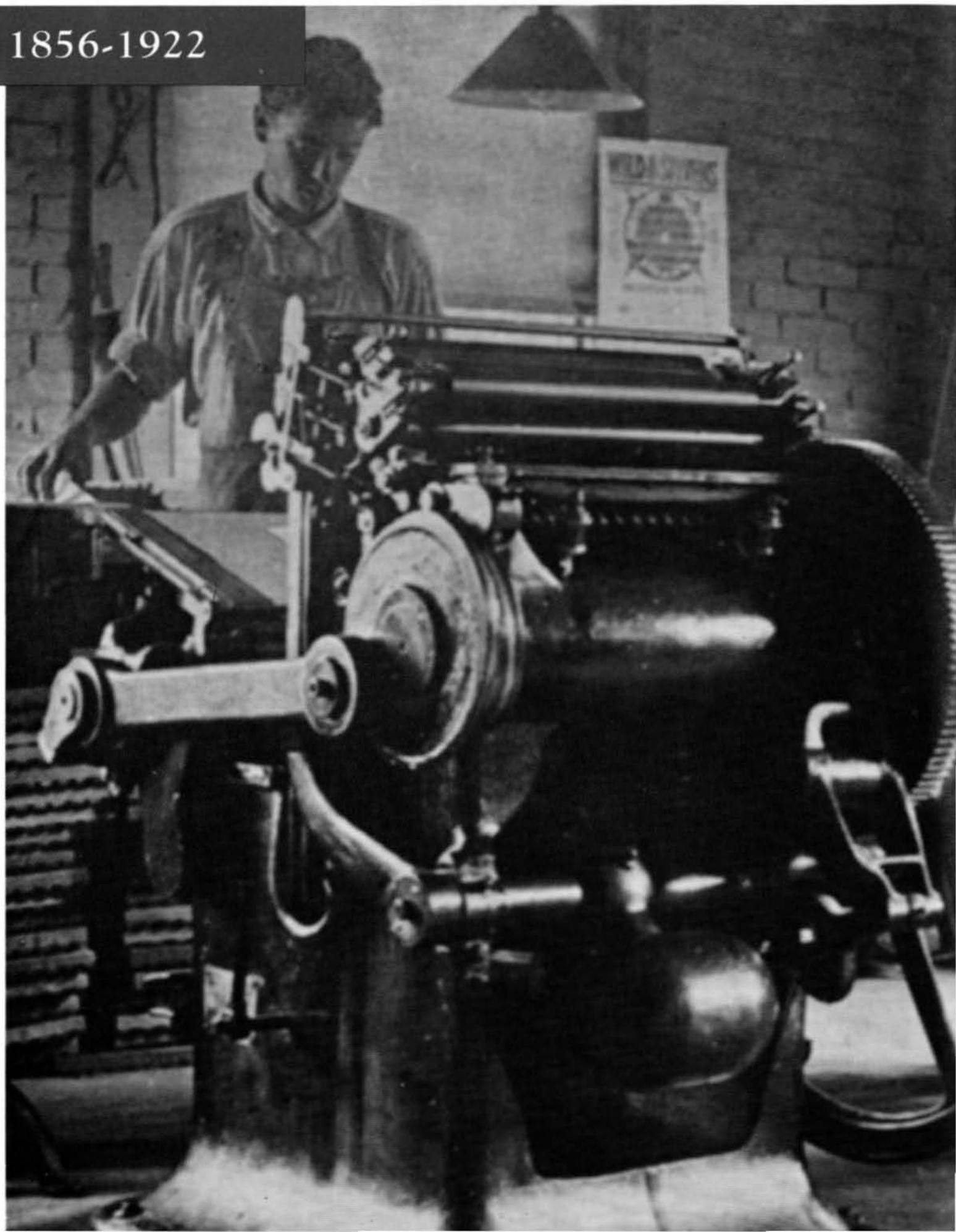
Recreational activity always ranked high in importance alongside study and work. Four hours each day were set aside for play. There was a large playground with swings and slides behind the main building. Beach walks, swimming, picnics, baseball, marbles, wood carving, sailing trips, offshore rowing, sledding, skating, and rides in the superintendent's carriage or sleigh are mentioned in early records. Holidays were always special occasions, often marked by unique forms of entertainment. On Washington's Birthday the boys waged "King Philip's War," a massive snowball fight between the "Indians" (the younger boys) and the "Settlers" (the older boys). July Fourth brought races and a picnic on the

front beach, and Christmas and Thanksgiving were marked by feasts in the main building's festively decorated dining hall. Off-island trips occurred at least once a year.

Although the school strenuously resisted pleas from distraught mothers who experienced a change of heart after granting the school legal guardianship of their sons, parents, families, guardians and others were invited to visit the island on specially designated Friends Days. Once a month in warm weather, large commercial vessels, schooners, and later the Boston-to-Nantasket paddlewheeler, brought more than a hundred guests for a festive day on the island, and each June alumni returned for their own Friends Day. Students could visit their homes for only a two-week period in the summer, but frequent school excursions brought them to mainland historic sites and museums. In the 1840's the school instituted an annual march up State Street that culminated in a formal greeting by city officials.



1856-1922



The Industrial Age



After the Civil War, New England's economy gradually shifted from agrarian to industrial, and non-farming trades became more promising career options for youths growing up in eastern Massachusetts. During this dynamic period the school was guided by a far-sighted superintendent named William Morse, a farmer by trade, who responded to these changing demands by expanding the Thompson Island curriculum.

Morse introduced a full array of manual skills and trades, including blacksmithing, drafting, carpentry and printing. In 1881 he oversaw the construction of a new industrial building, named Gardner Hall after benefactor and Board president George Gardner. Its top floor was a large gymnasium, the middle floor housed carpentry and printing shops, and the basement had blacksmith and paint shops.

Two "Firsts" in American Education

Gardner Hall was the site of the first school printing program in America. Once they learned the rudiments, the boys began printing stationery, report cards, laundry check-off lists, announcements, class rosters, band concert invitations, graduation programs, and other items for island consumption. When Bostonians saw the quality of their work, the shop soon began receiving work requests from mainland clients as well.

Morse also introduced major improvements in the farm program during his tenure. In 1861 he oversaw construction of a huge stock barn which housed hay, carts, carriages and livestock, including around thirty cows, some draft horses and a few pigs. In later years he added a large hen house and a corn barn, the only remaining farm building on the island today.

In 1868 he began to replace the school's grade cows with purebred Jerseys, and initiated the individual flower garden program. Each boy was assigned a ten-foot-by-ten-foot plot to grow flowers and vegetables, and each spring prizes were awarded for the most attractive and productive gardens. These plots also served as small labs for a flourishing horticultural program.



William A. Morse, superintendent from 1856-1888

Charles H. Bradley, superintendent from 1888-1922



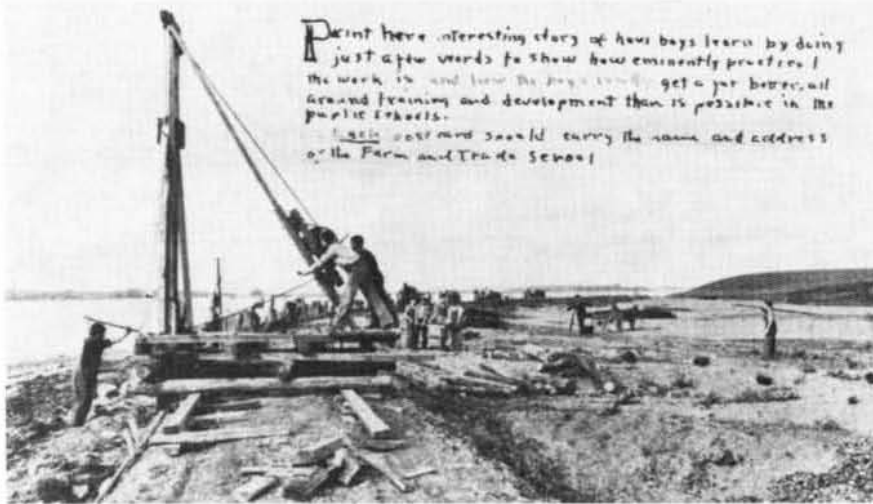
But perhaps Morse's greatest legacy was an artistic one. Some time in the early 1850's a group of a dozen boys, left to entertain themselves, created a small "orchestra" using combs covered with tissue paper, their own voices and one violin. As soon as he heard them, Morse began encouraging gifts from the Board of Managers to purchase a small collection of instruments, and appointed his brother, John Morse, as the band's director. John Morse increased the instrument collection, purchased uniforms, and for fifty years led the first school band in America. He recruited more than half the student body and started a second band for beginning students. As newspapers lauded their musicianship, band members led the school on its annual downtown Boston parade to meet city officials, and were invited for other ceremonial occasions such as Boston's 1000-piece 1869 Peace Jubilee. Many alumni went on to productive careers in music, including six who became members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The Bradley Years

By 1888 the school was generally known as "The Farm School"; the official title "Asylum" had slipped away except on official documents. Enrollment stood at 100 as it had for more than thirty years, and admission was limited to youths between ten and fourteen years of age.

Most students left the island when they were fourteen after completing the equivalent of an eighth-grade education; others remained until they were fifteen or sixteen. Boys with good home situations returned to the legal custody of their families or guardians; others went into apprenticeship on farms or estates under the school's custody until age twenty-one. Employers had to provide a good home and employment and, if appropriate, ensure that the boys were enrolled at the local public school to round out their education.

In 1888 the Board of Managers appointed the school's first superintendent with a background in education, twenty-eight-year-old Charles H. Bradley. It was Bradley who



Driving pilings to control erosion at high tide mark, late 1800's

refined, expanded, and applied the concept of “learning by doing” throughout school life.

In 1889 Bradley introduced Cottage Row, a model community administered by the boys, complete with housing, a town government and judicial system to teach citizenship, and a student-run bank. The following year he adopted a Swedish curriculum designed to teach woodworking, drafting and hand-tool skills (Sloyd). In 1897 he launched *The Thompson Island Beacon*, a student-written, student-printed newspaper. In 1900 he opened the Farm School Trading Company store to teach money and business skills, and in 1905 he introduced a student-built and managed weather observatory. This observatory was a two-story shingled wooden structure resembling a windmill without arms. Its top was a railed platform that held various instruments; in the enclosed room below boys could write up their results and post maps and charts. For years, teams of students recorded basic weather measurements and telephoned them in to the local U.S. Weather Bureau.

During his tenure Bradley initiated many other important environmental education activities on Thompson Island. In an effort to control erosion on the island's fragile shoreline the boys planted trees on the banks and pounded pilings with manually operated piledrivers along the northeastern and southwestern shores. They helped haul granite boulders to build a seawall at the bottom of the steep cliffs to the northwest, and constructed dikes and ponds on both the eastern and western shores. The student Sanitation Department of Cottage Row fined boys for creating litter and rewarded bounty hunters with a penny a tail for killed rats. Bradley instituted recycling of paper and rags before the turn of the century, and in 1906 constructed a compost shed along the west beach for leaves, manure, and any garbage not fed to the pigs.

Bradley made efforts to modernize the island's physical structures as well as its curriculum. In 1909 he oversaw construction of the Power House, with a top floor for the

Thompson Island's weather station, used for the first school meteorology program in America





The *Mary Chilton*, the island's first ten-oared boat, c.1902



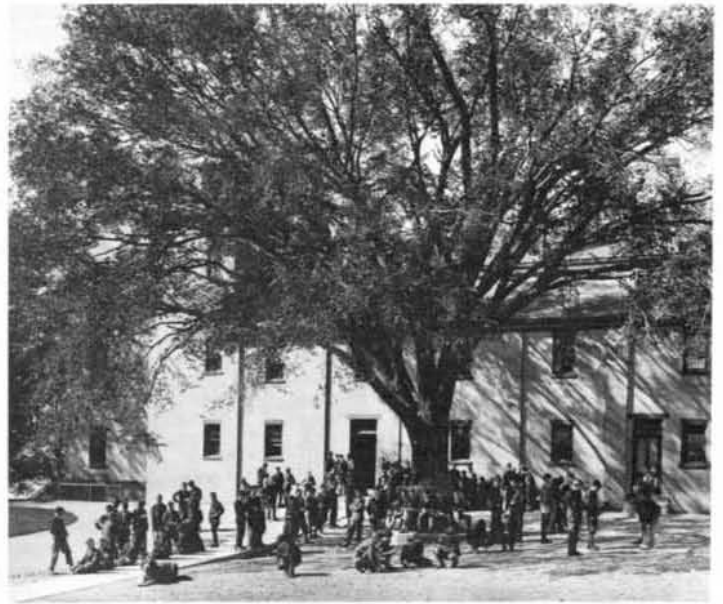
woodworking center or Sloyd room, and middle floor rooms for the expanding trade and industrial courses. The basement housed a huge new coal-fired burner for the island's centralized steam system, and served as the distribution point for the new system that brought electricity from the mainland. Bradley also introduced a new water system to bring Boston water from Squantum to the main building, replacing the island's old cistern collection system. Following a tragic sea accident in 1906 he installed a telephone system to communicate with the mainland.

In 1907 the Board of Managers bolstered Bradley's modernization efforts by officially changing the school's name to "The Farm and Trades School," both in deference to the curriculum changes which had taken place during the past thirty or forty years, and to clarify that the school was not a public reform institution. In addition, they wanted to strengthen the island's image in the public mind; unfortunately the Boston harbor islands had developed a reputation as a repository for people and services that society needed, but did not want in its mainland backyards. These included hospitals for patients with contagious or incurable diseases, a holding station for newly arrived immigrants, a prison, a reform school, a gambling casino, a rendering factory and dump, and various military installations and ammunition depots.

In 1921 Bradley contracted a terminal illness. He resisted efforts to make him retire, and one year later died on the island. "For thirty-three years and eleven months, Mr. Bradley had been the 'Pilot' of our School," wrote one of his students. "His record is hardly equalled in the records of educational men and women....Through his energy and persistence this School is what you see it today....If you are ever looking for an ideal to follow in life, think of Mr. Charles Henry Bradley, the man who did a thing thoroughly if he started it and the man who fought for his school through sunshine and shadow."



Students laying electrical cable from barn to pier, 1914

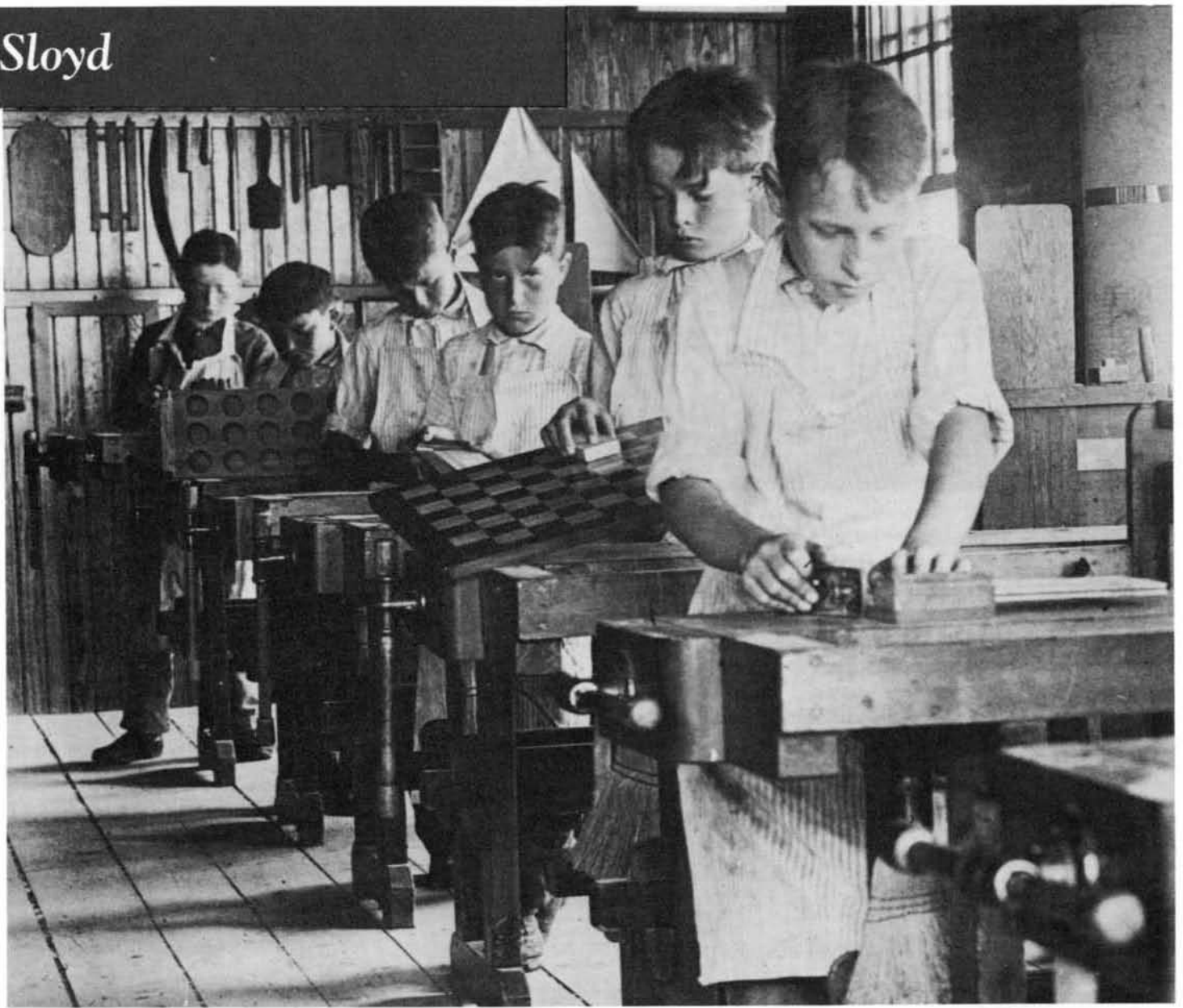


Gathering around the old elm behind the Bulfinch Building, c.1900

Ice hockey on skating pond, c.1920



Sloyd



Sloyd woodshop, 1913

Sloyd, developed in Sweden, was first introduced to the American elementary school curriculum by Farm School superintendent Charles H. Bradley. Sloyd was a highly structured, disciplined method for training students to use hand tools, learn the principles of mechanical drawing and blueprint reading, and execute woodworking projects of increasing complexity. It offered detailed, step-by-step instruction for each tool: where to place it in exact relationship to the workbench, feet and hands; how to apply and move it, and so forth. Students began with replicas of simple models such as a wooden box or tray. They progressed through a series of successively more complicated models which required additional skills until they could build inlaid desks and other fancy furniture. Photographs of these pieces and the few remaining models treasured by the school's older alumni attest to the students' high standards of craftsmanship.



May 1897
"The Printing Office"

There are six boys to do the work: a foreman and five assistants. There are two job presses — a "Ben Franklin Gordon" and a "Universal" — also a large paper cutter, a proof-press, a lead and brass rule cutter and a card cutter. There are ninety types. Most of the types are in job cases but all book types are in "upper" and "lower" cases.

We do all the printing for the school and many outside jobs which take in a great variety of different things such as bill-heads, statements, cards, checks, letter-heads, etc. The school report was printed here and it contained four half-tones, a map and twenty pages of type. There is a small stove in the Printing Office to heat the room. Elbert West is foreman and the following are assistants: Howard Ellis, Merton Ellis, Ernest Curley, Leo Decis and Harry Leonard. The form of the Universal is 10x15. We have a small "Official" press which is what the Printing Office commenced with. We earned enough with the "Universal" to buy the papercutter, types and other things. The "Official's" chase or form is 4x5. There are four large books, two for samples of outside printing, one for samples of the school's printing and one for copies. We go to work in the morning at half past seven and work until quarter past eleven and go to school in the afternoon, while those who go to school in the morning work from one until five o'clock in the afternoon.

Elbert L. West

May 1913
"My First Day at the School"

When we arrived on the island we were taken to the wash-room, where we washed up for dinner. We enjoyed our dinner very much

because we were hungry, on account of not having any dinner until half-past one. Next we took our bath, and then went to the clothing-room, where we were fitted to uniforms. Then one of the boys took us to the drawer-room, where we deposited our luggage. We then went outdoors to have some fun. We watched the boys playing marbles. I felt out of place as it was the first time I had met any of the boys. After that we went to the gymnasium, and I had the good luck of being the first one there and so had the first choice of anything I wanted to use. I chose the ring near the platform. We had a good time, such a good time that I almost forgot about home. I swung so much that I made a good many blisters on my hands. Now I am not in such a hurry to be the first one to get the rings.

George F. Kendall

January 1917
"Beacon Articles"

On certain days we have *Beacon* articles to write. They correspond to composition work in public schools. We have for subjects work we have been doing, entertainments that have been given, holidays, improvements and various other things. They are corrected, passed to the office, inspected there and if they pass they are sent to the printing-office where they are set up and make up the *Beacon*. There are about twenty-five articles to each *Beacon* besides many other things.

Franklin P. Miller

Cottage Row



In the summer of 1888 Superintendent Bradley noted the pleasure the boys derived from constructing fragile play houses from abandoned bed ticking and scraps of wood. When the weather turned cold he sensed their dismay at losing this outlet. The following spring, when the boys made a request to build more permanent structures, he supplied them with wood. Applying lessons they learned in the woodworking shop, they built twelve small playhouses to establish Cottage Row, a learning community with its own government.

Cottage Row was one of the first boys' towns in America. This excerpt from Bradley's initial Proclamation describes its salient features:

The government organized by the property owners shall be for the general protection, advancement of good order, adjustment of individual rights, and to assist in teaching the duties of citizenship.

All matters pertaining to Cottage Row and its government shall be entitled to and given the same respect as is due other branches of the school work.

The officers of the cottage government consisting of board of aldermen (3), clerk (1), police (3), street commissioner (1), and jury (5) shall perform their duties with the dignity becoming officers in such positions.

The board of aldermen may elect a janitor for the Cottage Row Hall and Club House, and a director for the Natural History room.

Charles H. Bradley
Superintendent

Ownership of one share gave a boy full citizenship privileges, including the rights to attend town meetings, hold elected office, and participate in the justice system. Although Cottage Row was supervised by the staff, and instructors could attend meetings, adults did not participate in the construction and maintenance of buildings, in decision making at town meetings, or in the police and court systems.

"Sentences for caught offenders are apt to be very practical," remarked one island observer. The boy "found annoying 'Nannie'," the goat tethered on the campus, was condemned to feed and water her for a month. This article in the *Beacon* describes another exemplary case.

On the night of the seventh of August there was a trial. Several boys had been arrested by the Cottage Row Police for playing marbles on Sunday, for being on the gymnasium apparatus and for flying kites. First the benches were put around the elm. Then all the boys sat down and the judges sat at a table in the middle. The Chief of Police was called out to keep order. Then the clerk read the warrants and the prisoners came forward. Some were fined 20, some 25 and some 35 cents. Then the judge said the trial was over and boys went to bed, while the prisoners went up to the reading room to make out their checks.

Joseph T. Gould
September, 1917

Each of the cottages, typically owned by three to five boys, was "furnished according to the taste and means of the owners." Books, pictures and ornaments covered the walls, and homemade furniture or pieces claimed from the beach filled up the interior. Some cottages served public purposes, such as Audubon Hall, which housed the boys' pets and natural history collections, and City Hall, the community's library.



1922-1975



The Modern Age



To the casual observer the Boston Farm and Trades School did not change dramatically in the thirty years following superintendent Bradley's death in 1922. The institution's historic mission to serve "worthy boys" from economically and socially disadvantaged homes remained intact, and except for a gradual increase in its median age, the student body was much as it had been since the 1830's. Although the boys came from all corners of New England, most were from eastern Massachusetts, and Boston youth were given highest priority. A study conducted in the 1930's revealed that only four percent of the boys came from families in which the mother and father were both alive and living at home; fifty-three percent had lost one parent by death; eight percent had lost both parents, and the others were from broken homes. As in the past, the school was widely known for its farm program and its educational philosophy of learning by doing.

New Demands, New Responses

However, Bradley's successors Paul F. Swasey (1922-1926) and William M. Meacham (1926-1955) did make significant alterations in the school's approach to education in response to changing demands from the outside world. Following World War I, as the government instituted child labor laws and other policies encouraging American youths to stay in school longer, The Boston Farm and Trades School gradually extended the students' stay on the island and shifted its focus to basic academic subjects. What began in 1833 as an elementary school grew to a middle school in the early part of the century and became a four year high school by the 1950's.

In the 1930's the Board of Managers' Admissions Committee began to express concern about IQ's and other formal measurement standards. "It is the opinion of your superintendent," Meacham reported to his Board of Managers in March 1930, "that the most unsatisfactory boys, the most troublesome boys, and the potential runaway boys are always the boys of lowest intelligence. A recent intelligence test given at the school substantiates this belief. For many years it has been the wish of Manager Walter B. Foster, a member of the Admissions Committee, to devise some method of testing the intelligence of the candidates for admission and to do as



William Meacham, superintendent from 1926-1955, with his wife and two children

Opposite page: Coach Ray Thomas and the 1947 undefeated Football Team (won 7 - lost 0)

much investigating as possible in order that only the most satisfactory boys should be selected...."

Despite this shift, however, the school's leaders also invested considerable time and money in modernizing the farm operation. Meacham added a cattle barn and dairy building to the stock barn and, partially in response to an outbreak of tuberculosis, replaced the herd of cows with a new purebred Guernsey herd in the late 1920's. He built a new poultry house and a modern chicken hatchery, and the boys raised more than 2,000 meat chickens annually to sell or exchange on the mainland for meat products.

In the mid-1930's the school embarked on the largest building program in its history, funded initially by a \$100,000 donation from the Charles Hayden Foundation, and later supplemented by a large endowment from the Liversidge Institute, a sister home-school forced to close in 1940. Adams House, a new brick residence dedicated in 1936 for the superintendent and his family, and Bowditch House, completed in 1939, were named for Arthur Adams and Alfred Bowditch respectively, both former board presidents. Bowditch House provided new kitchen and dining facilities on its main floor, an infirmary and a dormitory for twenty or more seniors on the second floor, and a bandroom and storage space in its basement.

Three dormitories, then known as the Hayden Dormitories, followed in 1941 at the outbreak of World War II. Each of these solidly-built buildings, which together with Bowditch formed a quadrangle behind the Bulfinch Building where the boys' individual gardens once grew, was a model for its time. Each housed about twenty-four boys, with staff quarters at the end of each floor. There were six double rooms on the first and second floors, common rooms with fireplaces and bathrooms with showers on all three floors, storage rooms and a darkroom on each groundfloor. In the 1970's one of these buildings was re-named Albee Hall after school admin-



istrator Clifton Albee, one was re-named Thomas Hall after administrator Raymond Thomas and his wife Wilhelmina, and the third was re-named Baxter Hall after former head engineer and business manager Charles Baxter and his wife Mildred.

Despite the addition of these four buildings the student body remained the same size it had been in 1860, when it occupied just one building. The extra rooms in the Bulfinch Building were converted into classrooms, a study hall, administrative offices and resident staff housing.

In 1941 Meacham also added a new athletic field on the former site of Cottage Row, dismantled in 1939. This signaled the school's shift in educational priorities: the athletic playing fields were now the prime locus for character building. In the early 1930's athletic director Ray Thomas had begun urging the school's intramural football, basketball and baseball teams to begin competing with outside schools, and during the 1940's and 1950's his varsity and junior varsity teams were competitive with some of the best public and private high schools in greater Boston. The Farm and Trades School Marching Band, now a well-known institution, performed throughout New England and regularly won top prizes in state and regional competitions.

Island life was not strongly affected by World War II, although headmaster Meacham (the title "superintendent" was dropped in 1936) often mentioned the shortage of instructors and support staff in his reports. Rationing was in effect, but the island had its own ready food supply. The school did wage a short battle with the Navy, who wanted to take over the island to store ammunition; the staff were enrolled as air raid wardens and the boys salvaged valuable scrap materials from the beaches.

As the war progressed each month's *Beacon* carried more and more letters and news of the school's graduates in the armed

forces. As in World War I, the Farm and Trades School was well represented. One listing cited 242 graduates: twenty-one commissioned officers and 152 non-commissioned officers. Many alumni served in military bands, and the island had its share of military heroes and tragic deaths. "Dick Martin," Meacham wrote in a *Beacon* tribute to a twenty-one-year-old alumnus killed on a bombing run over the Bismarck Sea in March 1943, "was one of the finest of all our great family of fine boys. He was a boy's boy, a tall lad, full of mischief...a star basketball player and excellent French horn player...."

Another Transformation

At the end of the war, storm clouds gathered over Thompson Island. Student enrollment dropped steadily: from eighty-six boys in 1945 to fifty-nine in 1954. The problem of finding qualified staff was persistent, as teachers were lured away by higher mainland wages. Rapid increases in annual expenses induced by post-war inflation were coupled with shrinking revenues. And there was growing feeling among board members that the farm was no longer an appropriate educational vehicle. As early as 1938 Meacham had raised questions about the usefulness of the farm program, but he continued to pay his academic teachers less than instructors for farming, industrial arts, and woodworking, and less even than the boat operator, bookkeeper, and nightwatchman.

The Board of Trustees commissioned several outside studies on the school's condition and prospects for the future; the last and most thorough study was conducted by Educational Research Associates (ERA) which then guided the school through its next transformation. ERA's conclusions about the school's finances epitomized their general view of the school: "The overall financial picture presented by the school is one of an organization, plagued by deficits, which is steadily consuming its free capital funds and which, although



Top left opposite page: Student in dorm room, 1962

Top right opposite page: Houghton D. Pearl, headmaster 1955-1968

our opinion is outside the financial realm, seems to have failed to maintain a modern plant and equipment. The situation is analogous to the so-called "dying industry," which meets deficits by drawing on capital until it is no longer capable of obtaining current funds for operating purposes. Although such a condition is some years away for the Farm and Trades School, the handwriting is on the wall and remedial action should not be long delayed."

Thompson Academy

In the late spring of 1955 the Board of Trustees replaced William Meacham with Houghton D. Pearl, who had an immediate and positive impact on the school. Introducing a less punitive discipline system, more liberal vacation and weekend leave policies, an end to mail censoring, increased student access to the telephone, an improved menu, and other measures designed to make island life more comfortable, Pearl bolstered staff morale by de-centralizing control and delegating authority to his newly created senior staff team.

In the spring of 1956 the Board of Trustees, under the leadership of Board president Calvin Page Bartlett, decided to follow an ERA recommendation to "reorganize as a six-year secondary school by dropping off grade 6 and adding grades 11 and 12, with attendant improvements in quality of service together with increase in enrollment." They decided to raise tuition and admit some students who did not need financial help. But "needy but otherwise worthy" youngsters would remain central to the school's mission, supported by scholarships and an increased fund-raising effort.

They also voted to change the name to Thompson Academy, announcing to the public that the school was neither public nor an "institution" with all the negative connotations of that word, and committed themselves to an extensive building and renovation program. They eliminated the farm and



reduced the work program, hiring adult staff to do “insignificant but essential jobs” formerly done by students. And finally, they developed a broader extra-curricular program emphasizing athletics.

Prep school coats and ties appeared on Thompson Island. The first floor of the Power House was converted to modern science labs, and the handsome Alumni Gymnasium was constructed with yet another major grant from the Hayden Foundation. The new gymnasium ushered in an era of high-powered interscholastic athletics which included undefeated football seasons, crack basketball teams, and an array of new sports, including lacrosse, soccer and golf. The average student was now older, and for the first time there were extended vacation periods with few students remaining on the island. In the Academy’s early years, enrollment jumped back to pre-World War II levels and many graduates went on to two- and four-year colleges. Gone, except for their foundations, were the weather observatory, compost shed, root cellar, planting beds, and the farm house in the middle of the island. Fire destroyed the massive stock barn at the foot of the hill and the storage barn at the water’s edge. Gone also were the famous band and the *Thompson Island Beacon*, although the first Academy yearbooks were printed by the students.

In the mid-1960’s the school constructed a new dormitory, later to be named Bartlett House after Board president Calvin Page Bartlett, that housed fifty students on two floors. A master plan and architect’s sketches called for several more buildings to construct a second quadrangle adjacent to the Hayden Dormitories. Headmaster Pearl drew up plans to build a causeway at the southern end of the island to connect the campus with Squantum and Quincy by road, hoping to attract more students and produce the economies of scale that would help the school solve its financial problems, as well as to reduce some of the educational problems generated by isolation.

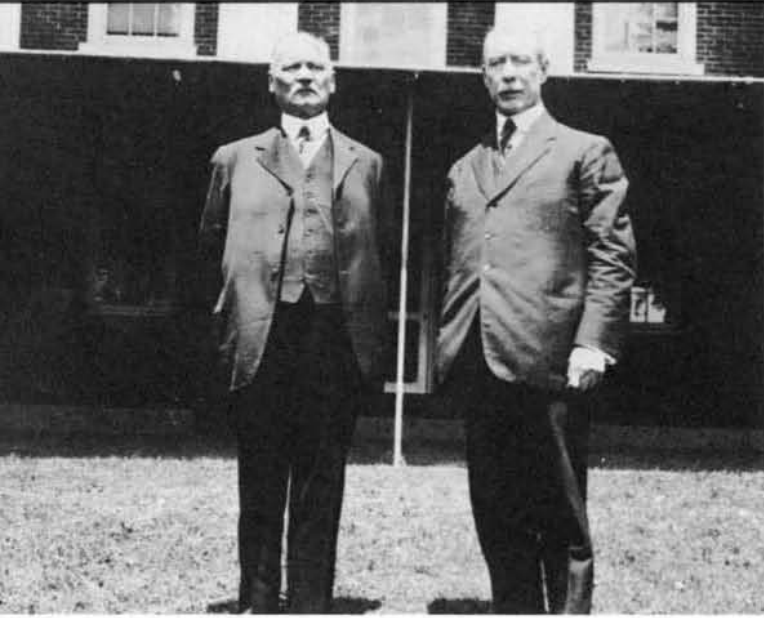
The Board of Trustees, however, balked at these plans. Many began to doubt that an all-male school on a rural island was a healthy option for late adolescents, especially those who desperately needed to learn how to function effectively in a modern urban environment.

In 1968 Houghton Pearl resigned from his post and returned to his native Vermont. He was replaced by a series of administrators who tried to solve the Academy’s mounting financial difficulties: Francis Dibble (1968-1970), George Wright (1970-1973) and John D. Pinto, Jr. (1973-1975). These men were thwarted first by the tumultuous social and educational changes that shook the country in the late 1960’s, and then by two major island disasters. In 1971 the school’s historic Bulfinch Building caught on fire and burned to the ground, and the next year a fierce February storm seriously damaged the pier.

In an attempt to garner more tuition payments the school began to accept minor offenders covered by public programs and to admit day students. But this intensified discipline problems, which were exacerbated by the general racial unrest in Boston following the court order to desegregate public schools. Black students represented about one quarter of the student enrollment in the 1970’s, and the island’s all-white faculty was ill-prepared to deal with both white and black students’ racially motivated confusion, frustration and anger.

As these problems intensified, the Board of Trustees, now under the leadership of Ben Ames Williams, Jr., and the faculty turned to a series of outside consultants to study the island and analyze its resources, survey the mainland to determine current needs, and to execute innovative pilot projects. Finally, in the spring of 1975 the Board voted to graduate its last class, find alternative placements for the remaining undergraduates, and close the school.

Thompson Island Alumni



Thompson Island alumni have made major contributions to American life and culture. Among the best known are:

- Charles Evans, a distinguished librarian and bibliographer;
- "Big Brother" Bob Emory, a radio announcer who achieved fame with his Sunday reading of the comics to the boys and girls of New England;
- Clarence DeMar, winner of seven Boston Marathons and representative of the United States in the 1926 Olympics.

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- Arthur Adams, 1900-43*
 John Q. Adams, 1952-74
 Karl Adams, 1921-43
 Melvin O. Adams, 1900-20
 William Alcott, 1935-49*
 Charles Amory, 1850
 Jonathan Amory, 1816-25*
 Nathan Appleton, 1817-26
 Samuel Appleton, 1822
 William Appleton, 1825-32*
 William Appleton, Jr., 1850-59
 Samuel T. Armstrong, 1833-37
 Joseph Austin, 1816-32*
 Eben Bacon, 1879-1904*
 Francis Bacon, 1844-77
 Willard Badger, 1832-33*
 Calvin Page Bartlett, 1944-74*
 Cyrus A. Bartol, 1841
 John L. Barchelder, 1930-51
 Richard W. Bayley, 1841-48
 James H. Beal, 1857-66
 George Bemis, 1841-59
 Alanson Bigelow, 1881-82
 Jesse Bird, 1843-56
 John A. Blanchard, 1878-81
 Alfred Bowditch, 1882-1917*
 Charles P. Bowditch, 1874-92*
 E. Francis Bowditch, 1955-61
 Ingersoll Bowditch, 1839-77*
 James Bowditch, 1826
 James Bowdoin, 1827-32
 Samuel E. Brackett, 1843-77
 Martin Brimmer, 1860-73
 Gorham Brooks, 1911-57
 Thomas G. Brown, Jr., 1962-73
 William Brown, 1816-22*
 Stephen H. Bullard, 1869-73*
 Josiah F. Bumstead, 1840-44
 I. Tucker Burr, Jr., 1893-1923
 Alton B. Butler, 1954-56
 Walter M. Cabot, 1965-74
 Eleanor Canavan, 1970-74*
 Thomas G. Cary, 1835-38
 Jonathan Chapman, 1829-31*
 Howard M. Colpitts, 1958-61
 Elijah Cobb, 1839-52
 Joseph Coolidge, 1823
 S.V.R. Crosby, 1911-47
 Caleb A. Curtis, 1891-99
 Charles P. Curtis, 1931-37
 Charles P. Curtis, Jr., 1900-27*
 Thomas B. Curtis, 1828-34
 Tucker Daland, 1890-1942*
 George Danacott, 1834
 George L. DeBlois, 1851-1938*
 Stephen G. DeBlois, 1850-88*
 George P. Denny, M.D., 1940-56
 Arthur Dexter, 1878-96*
 Nathaniel T. Dexter, 1970-74*
 James J. Dixwell, 1841-43
 Malcolm Donald, 1914-19
 Robert W. Duquet, 1962-63
 Harold W. Edwards, 1941-63*
 Henry Edwards, 1840
 William H. Elias, 1823*
 Samuel Eliot, 1866-89*
 Samuel A. Eliot, 1826-27
 William H. Eliot, 1824-26*
 Howard B. Ellis, 1951-52
 Merton P. Ellis, 1946-65*
 John L. Emmons, 1862-82
 A. Conrad Ericsson, 1952-54
 Thomas J. Evans, 1913-34
 Fred T. Field, 1921-24
 Walter B. Foster, 1920-41
 William P. Fowler, 1893-98
 Eben Francis, 1819-20
 Arthur French, 1833
 J. D. Williams French, 1890-1900
 Peter Fuller, 1957-63
 Charles T. Gallagher, 1900-19
 Robert H. Gardiner, 1888-92
 Robert H. Gardiner, Jr., 1914-62
 William H. Gardiner, 1824*
 George A. Gardner, 1879-89
 John Goodhue, 1947
 Olias Goodwin, 1833-34
 Benjamin A. Gould, 1835-59
 Moses Grant, 1833-61*
 Patrick Grant, 1962-74
 Frederick T. Gray, 1840-42
 William Gray, 1833-40*
 Benjamin D. Greene, 1816-32*
 Charles W. Greene, 1816*
 Gardiner Greene, 1823-32*
 Simon E. Greene, 1833-34
 Henry S. Grew, 1883-10*
 Charles E. Guild, 1871
 William Hales, 1834-37*
 N. Penrose Hallowell, 1911-51*
 Bartlett Harwood, Jr., 1954-74*
 Alden B. Hefler, 1920-37
 Bayard Henry, 1965-73*
 Henry L. Higginson, 1877-78
 Clarence P. Hobson, 1957-61
 Joshua B. Holden, Jr., 1900-02
 Dr. John Homans, 1869-84
 John Homans, 2nd, 1885-1902
 Samuel Hooper, 1841-68
 Walter Hunnewell, 1893-1911
 Henry Jackson, M.D., 1903-40
 Matt B. Jones, 1921-24
 George H. Kuhn, 1837-70*
 George Larsson, 1956-62*
 Robert Lash, 1822, 1833*
 Abbot Lawrence, 1827-31, 1839
 Samuel Lawrence, 1833-34
 Hon. Henry M. Leen, 1970-73
 George Lewis, 1958-74*
 Philip H. Lord, 1962-74
 Augustus P. Loring, 1933-65*
 William T. Loring, 1828-32*
 Clarence W. Loud, 1940
 Rev. Charles Lowell, 1816-25
 James H. Lowell, 1924-53*
 John Lowell, 1952-60
 Henry Lyman, 1960-74*
 Theodore Lyman, 1841-88*
 Donald S. MacPherson, 1951-65
 Alfred C. Malm, 1930, 1965*
 Francis C. Manning, 1853-68
 Charles E. Mason, 1911-54*
 Charles E. Mason, Jr., 1944-47
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 George G. Noren, 1945-47
 Edward V. Osberg, 1953-55, 1960-74
 William Foster Otis, 1825-28*
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 David P. Parker, 1817-20
 E. Francis Parker, 1879-90
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 David D. Wicks, 1970-74
 Charles Wiggins, 2nd, 1923-43
 Edward Wigglesworth, 1923-45*
 Richard B. Wigglesworth, 1921
 James C. Wild, 1838*
 James G. Wilde, 1839
 Ben Ames Williams, Jr., 1956, 1962-74*
 John D. Williams, 1835-38
 John E. Williams, 1851*
 Moses Williams, Jr., 1903-74
 Ralph B. Williams, 1908-22, 1941-61
 Frederic Winthrop, 1939-61
 Charles L. Young, 1875-77

1975 to the Present



The New Era



In 1975 the Board of Trustees changed the school's name to the Thompson Island Education Center and appointed as executive director Frank H. White, former planning coordinator for the Academy. With the help of Donald P. Lombardi, an educational planner from M.I.T., White began building a new educational program based on a series of short-term outdoor educational experiences designed especially to supplement the conventional urban public school curriculum.

The program served a broad spectrum of age groups — school children, college students, and young adults — and for the first time Thompson Island welcomed girls and women to its facilities. The new program incorporated those educational features which had worked successfully on the island for 140 years, and also borrowed heavily from two important educational movements: Outward Bound — the creation of Kurt Hahn, a German who emigrated to England during the 1930's — and environmental education.

The typical Outward Bound experience impels students to confront a series of challenges which both stimulate outdoor group interaction and strengthen individual endurance. The process encourages self-reliance, trust, and cooperation, and produces a strong sense of accomplishment. To bring such experiences to urban youth, the island's Bowditch Grove was filled with swinging logs, hanging ropes and tires, climbing walls, slides, and cables strung between trees at distances ranging from three feet to thirty or more feet above the ground. In 1976 the Center built a ropes course inside Alumni Gymnasium that could be used throughout the year.

As a complement to these outdoor experiences, environmental courses increased students' awareness of their surroundings and fostered other group skills. Under the guidance of an instructor, students roved about the island's fields, woodlots, marshes and shoreline, observing nature with binoculars, hand lenses, and the naked eye. They also dug, scooped, seined and collected, mapped, measured, weighed and tested. Then they recorded and finally reported on the phenomena they discovered and observed.

Students doing "Lap-sit" cooperative game, 1989, photograph © Walter Silver



Students in Island School program, summer 1988, photograph © Walter Silver

Hands-on science program in Thompson Island marsh, 1985, photograph © Walter Silver



During this period private support for the island increased by more than 500 percent, and substantial funding came from federal, state and local agencies. With their emphasis on building cooperation and team skills among classmates, these activities were an ideal antidote to the violence, hostility and apathy which many students were experiencing in the schools. The Center received close to \$1.75 million dollars in public agency grants over its ten-year existence, much of it for activities aimed at de-fusing tensions between students of different cultural backgrounds and developing a classroom climate conducive to learning.

The Center also took advantage of the island's natural beauty and proximity to Boston to raise more private funds through group outings and picnics. There was ample precedent for these activities. Since the first decades of the century local civic organizations and neighboring yacht clubs had been allowed to use the island for their summer outings, and often a small charitable donation would follow. Now the Center opened a year-round operation which provided space and support services for summer day camps, field-trips, one-day and residential conferences, retreats and meetings, weddings, reunions and parties. Many college and corporate groups coupled a residential retreat on the island with group-development activities conducted by the Center's staff. In addition to providing additional income, these programs opened the island to the larger Boston community, helping to eradicate the negative image many city dwellers had of the island and its occupants. For 150 years the island had catered to between eighty and 100 students; now upwards of 30,000 people visited annually.

In 1981 the Center initiated a flagship program called the Island School, whose mission is to supplement the public school experience of bright but underachieving youngsters with a sustained infusion of outdoor adventure education linked with basic academic subjects. Middle school students participate in three successive six-week summer residential experiences on the island followed by academic tutoring,



Student doing high ropes as part of adventure/challenge program in 1988, photograph © Walter Silver

counseling and modified Outward Bound activities during the school year. Since its inception more than 200 middle school students have participated in the program and bolstered their academic success.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's the Center made selective changes to the island's physical plant to accommodate these new activities. Baxter House, built as a boys' dormitory, was totally remodeled to accommodate adults. The top floor of Bowditch House was gutted and remodeled into a modern office area. In addition to installing the indoor ropes course in the Alumni Gymnasium, the Center converted its locker rooms into lecture rooms and bathrooms for day visitors. The Power House, now called the Lab Building, and Gardner Hall were modified to serve as classrooms and meeting spaces for conference groups. When summer outings became too large and numerous for existing facilities, large colorful tents graced the ball field and picnic area near the pier.

Despite the success of these innovations, by 1985 government cutbacks for educational programs and inflation were wreaking havoc on the Center's agenda. The problems became exacerbated as maintenance was deferred on its heavily used physical plant.

In 1986 the Trustees of Thompson Island began an extensive evaluation of the Center's programs in light of changing social conditions, the needs of urban learners and the limited resources available to the island. The result of this evaluation was a reaffirmation of the mission of the island: to serve disadvantaged urban youth. The Trustees decided to seek a partnership with another non-profit educational institution that would provide an infusion of new financial and program resources. Because of its well-known success in those areas which had traditionally been the focus of Thompson Island activities, Outward Bound was chosen from among several organizations which expressed an interest in working with the Center.

By mutual agreement the Trustees of Thompson Island, the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, and Outward Bound USA created a new entity in 1988: the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center. Its purpose is straightforward: to inspire in the young people of Boston fundamental qualities of character — self-esteem, empathy for others and caretaking responsibility for the environment. Its goal is to enable all of Boston's inner-city youths to experience the exhilaration of an Outward Bound program on Thompson Island sometime during their school careers.

These programs help young people take control of their lives by developing skills and motivation for achievement; they focus on critical objectives such as reducing the school dropout rate, increasing racial tolerance and preparing students for the challenge of adult life and work. Ranging in length from a day to three years, the programs challenge participants with an unfamiliar physical environment — an open sailboat or an island campsite, for example — and a unique set of social dynamics that demand both teamwork and individual achievement. Through progressively difficult challenges, young people discover strengths they never knew they possessed.

From Farm School to Outward Bound, from 1833 to the present, the Thompson Island pedagogy has remained remarkably consistent ... and powerful. Today, as in the past, this is a place where city youth come to learn by doing.



Acknowledgments

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Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center

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