

A Brief History of Phoenix Elementary School District #1

By Ruth Ann Marston, PhD.

Phoenix Elementary School District #1 was created May 5, 1871, the first free public-school district in Arizona. Its creation was the direct result of the division of Maricopa County from Yavapai and the subsequent appointment of John T. Alsap as Probate Judge and County Superintendent of Schools – reporting directly to Territorial Governor A.P.K. Safford, who was also the State Superintendent of Schools. According to Alsap, the first lessons began November 27, 1871 in the courtroom of the Maricopa County Court in the Hancock Building. This was the first permanent building to be erected in the new settlement and also included Hancock's Store, a general store opened in July 1871, and a butcher shop. The adobe structure was built on the northwest corner of First and Washington streets and served as the town hall, county offices and general meeting place of early Phoenix.



The 1870 U.S. Census had reported the population of the Arizona Territory at 9,658. The Salt River Valley population was 240: 122 Anglos, 115 Hispanics and 3 Blacks.

Phoenix was a farming community, with 4500 acres under cultivation, established primarily to supply fodder and vegetables to Fort McDowell. Most of the settlers were single men. Most of the Anglos were former soldiers who were seeking new lives, many after fighting in the Civil War (both sides) and Indian Wars. Judge Alsap, who had been appointed as Arizona's first Territorial Treasurer, and subsequently served 4 terms in the Territorial Legislature, was then farming in

what would become Phoenix and seems to have actively conspired with Governor Safford to create Arizona's public-school system. The schools were expected to be open for 6 months a year.



Phoenix's first school teacher, Jean Rudolph Darroche, is surrounded by members of his 1871 class in this old photo. The girls are (from left, seated) Martha Roberts, Eula Murray, (second row) Lizzie Kirkland, Flora Murray, Amanda Roberts, Marilla Murray, (back row) Anna Murray Ethinda Murray, Ann Kellogg, Sadie Osborn, Rosa Osborn, Mary Kellogg. The boys are (front row from left) Alex Kellogg, Billy Roberts, (second row) Jose Rodriguez, Will Kellogg, George Kirkland, (back row) Francisco Rodriguez, Angela Moreno, John Osborn, Eli Hargrave.

After a series of four untrained male teachers, Phoenix got its first professional teacher, Nellie Shaver Smith, and its first school building, "Little Adobe" (between Van Buren and Monroe on Center (Central) in 1873. It was added to and replaced by Central School, 201 N. Central Ave. (4th known brick building, furthest N. building in Phoenix, when it opened in 1880).

There was no high school in Phoenix, or in Arizona. On April 10, 1874, President Grant issued a patent to Judge Alsap for the present site of Phoenix. The total cost of the Phoenix Townsite of 320 acres was \$550, including all expenses for services.

By 1880 Phoenix had a population of 2,453 and a school enrollment of 379 pupils. In 1885 The Territorial Normal School was established in Tempe to train teachers. Tucson was granted funding by the Territorial legislature to establish the University of AZ (Phoenix received the Insane asylum which was considered far more important). On July 4, 1887 the first Southern Pacific train arrived from Maricopa Wells, allowing more market access for Phoenix crops. A population of 3152 in 1890 had required 2 new schools, East End School, 8th St. and Washington and West End School at 6th Ave. and Madison to be opened in 1889 when Arizona territorial government offices permanently moved to Phoenix from Prescott. Phoenix was still a struggling agricultural community of dusty streets and open town ditches, periodically almost destroyed by flood, fire, disease or drought but schools were teaching students they would be an important part of the future.

In 1892 Phoenix Indian School opened as part of Phoenix City Schools (until 1931?), which also, moved from high school classes in Churchill house to open what would become Phoenix Union H.S. District in 1895 with about 90 students in 3 courses of study: Latin, English and Business. Classes in Phoenix had progressed from all grades in one room with one teacher to single grade classes of 30 or 40+ organized military fashion with rigid curricula. In 1895, the Santa Fe, Prescott and Phoenix Railroad completed its route to Phoenix, allowing access to markets and students to attend colleges in the East.

In 1900, with the first phones and first automobiles in town, Phoenix (Pop. 5544) annexed territory and grew from .5 square miles to 2.13 square miles. Phoenix Union H.S. became a separate District in 1902 to better serve students in neighboring farming communities which were united by SRP to control floods and droughts with construction of Tonto (Roosevelt) Dam beginning in 1906. Phoenix built Linville School, between 1st and 2nd Streets on Lincoln St., in 1903, Ulysses S. Grant School, 5th Ave. and Grant, in 1907 and Millard Fillmore School, 9th Ave. and Fillmore, in 1909. Phoenix' last standing Territorial School, John Adams School, 8th Ave. and Adams, was built in 1911.

In 1910, with a population of 11,134 (10% Mexican, 4% Black, 1% Chinese) Phoenix had segregated schools: Mexican (with Chinese), White, Black, and Indian – preparing for the Constitution which had to be approved for statehood. Though only Blacks were required to be segregated, during the 1910s through the 1930s racial lines were drawn more clearly in Phoenix through real estate decisions, redlining, and race-restrictive housing covenants. A “color line” was established (People of Color were not allowed to live north of Van Buren) and all white schools in the District were north of the line (an exception within Phoenix #1 was that, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, a small group of middle class Mexican Americans purchased scattered lots and homes in today's Garfield Neighborhood, between 7th to 16th Streets, from Van Buren to Roosevelt Streets). Communities were adjusted to conform to the colors of students served by schools and by the increasing commercialization of downtown, which took over residential areas.

In 1911 Martin Van Buren School opened at 17th Ave. on the north side of Van Buren, in the former Country Club. The school was renamed and added to as Capitol School after President Taft signed the Statehood Proclamation in 1912, but the 1911-1912 Whooping cough and polio

epidemics were the overshadowing school concerns. In addition to Capitol, 19 new school sites in Phoenix #1 were developed between 1912 and 1940.

Beginning in 1911, Roosevelt Dam ensured a more reliable, less destructive water supply for a wider area. Transportation and farming were increasingly mechanized. Phoenix began to grow by annexation of neighboring communities, from its original size of 0.5 square miles in 1881 to 5.1 square miles in 1920, 9.6 square miles in 1940 and the current size and shape of the Phoenix #1 District during the WWII years. Some of these contiguous areas applied to be part of the District as they were built, or as part of development or annexation before 1950. Others developed and maintained their own school districts. Along with the rest of Arizona and the U.S., schools were profoundly affected by epidemics of childhood diseases and flu, WWI and the Great Depression.

By 1940 Phoenix had already become the largest metropolitan area in the southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, Southern Texas and Utah). The Capitol of Arizona (within Phoenix #1) still relied on agriculture and the school curricula was largely unchanged. Although women had been able to vote since 1912, girls were still trained in homemaking skills and for traditional occupations. Mr. John D. Loper, the longest serving Superintendent in Phoenix 1 history (1909-1944), kept stability by publishing organized expectations for students and teachers; classrooms, schools and the district as a whole. Every crisis meant that special needs services were curtailed. Often the most disabled students were kept at home or sent to the Children's Colony at Randolph.

When WWII brought women into occupations traditionally reserved for men we lost teachers. Class sizes of 40+ were common; Schools were organized on the "Platoon System." Concerns over loved ones lost or in danger, victory gardens, making sense of world geography and history, blacked out windows and air raid drills, rationing and shortages of materials, preparing to serve in the war effort...all of these were shared by students. In addition, defense plants and military training brought a major influx of people into the Valley. Signs over Central Avenue exhorted residents to rent space in their homes to defense workers, who even slept under dining room tables.

At the end of the war, many people came back to Phoenix with their friends and families. Gas was cheap – often less than \$.25 a gallon. People could commute from farther away.

Commodities were available, if still taxed. Communications with those left behind were better. Materials were finally available to builders. People whose lives had been disrupted were restless and looking for something better. They were used to working and fighting beside those of different colors. The Arizona Supreme Court declared in 1953 that separate schools could not be equal, and population shifts with profound effects on schools accelerated. This was also a time when the role of schools was greatly expanded by food surpluses for school lunch programs, mass immunizations for polio and other diseases and by cultural exchange programs. Schools had always been centers for community social activities. Now they became centers for social services.

Many prosperous Black, Chinese and Hispanic families, no longer constrained by the “color line” moved outward from District #1, looking for new homes, upwardly mobile communities, or just because they finally could. African-American and Mexican-American activism was on the rise in the late 1960s and hit its stride after 1970. Chicanos por la Causa became a growing force. In 1972, after Cesar Chavez held a 24-day fast at Santa Rita Hall on Hadley Street to protest a bill passed by the Legislature that blocked organizing efforts by farm workers, Phoenix actually had George Wallace’s far-right American Independent Party fielding candidates against Charter Government.

The 1970s expansion of Sky Harbor Airport razed the Golden Gate neighborhood. The City of Phoenix relocated over 6,000 people cutting communities in half and sweeping away others under the West Approach Land Acquisition Project. White families also moved outward as did stores and banks. By the 70’s Real-estate values plummeted along the path of the I-10 inner loop. Thousands of homes and students were lost to freeways through what would become the downtown historic neighborhoods of District 1.

Downtown was in trouble. Skyscrapers farther north on Central took away offices. Malls siphoned off much retail trade, although a few larger stores remained along Washington. City and business efforts to revitalize the core in the 1970s caused all three big banks to build new headquarters buildings downtown, including Valley National Bank’s Valley Center, the tallest building in the state. The city has moved ahead with the plans for an auditorium and convention center and hotels. These and later efforts at revival were followed by the “sports cure”

(downtown arenas), ASU Downtown, the “Knowledge Triangle” (medicine and bioscience), cyber security and now Phoenix #1 is exploding with new apartment projects, some of which may contain students. The Matthew Henson Project has been rebuilt. Communities around Garfield and Edison schools and Eastlake Park are being rebuilt. Although Ann Ott School remains closed, plans to reuse the 743 lots Phoenix has acquired since 1995 for airport sound mitigation are well underway with district participation.

District student population, which had reached a high of 35,000 in 1965, continued to decline. Dr. Ralph Goita was Phoenix #1’s first Hispanic Superintendent, 1969-1976. By the 1980s, pressures to integrate, special education requirements, and the availability of federal funds for special services led to willingness to experiment with curriculum. and with differing models of instruction such as open classrooms, magnet schools and junior high schools.

Curriculum changed radically as technology advanced. Reading, writing and arithmetic have morphed into focuses on scientific research by hypothesis, testing and conclusions; algorithms for problem solving; accessing technology devices; and online research and evaluation of sources. Due to these challenges and to the rise of approximately 50 nearby charter schools since 1994, Phoenix #1 is a minority-majority school system, segregated mostly by socio-economic factors and by the high quality of special education and other services offered, within a larger more thriving community that actively supports, but may not send students to its schools.

By the era of Dr. Patricia Williams, 1993- 2000 ^[1], the community was ready to come together to take back its schools. Bonds and overrides were passed (the last one by 75%+). Buildings were replaced or refurbished, and architects often bring clients to see what can be done with facilities such as Herrera’s performing arts center and the 1921 Emerson Court. All of the historic buildings have long been on the National Register of Historic Places. Neighborhood property values are driven by the perceived quality of the schools, and 4 neighborhoods in Phoenix #1; F.Q. Story, Willo, Coronado and Encanto-Palmcroft made the New Times “Ten Best neighborhoods in Metro Phoenix” list in 2016. Also, in 2016 Attom Data Solutions, a leading supplier of property data, named Phoenix Elementary # 1 as the sixth most improved school district in the U.S. for property values.

¹*First Black Superintendent for the District as well as in Arizona.*

About the author

Dr. Ruth Ann Marston is the author of "Heroes of Young Phoenix." A long-time Phoenix Elementary School District #1 Board Member, Dr. Marston was President of Board of the Central Arizona Chapter of the Arizona Historical Society for two terms and served for 16 years (11 as President) on the Governing Board of Phoenix Elementary #1.