

The Allen School: Pioneer in Institutional Physical Education

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Physical education as a genuine curricular entity in North American schools is well into its second century of history. Even though the first state statutes for physical education programming in the nation's public schools were passed into law as early as 1866 in California the wide scale practice of the activity is really an early twentieth century development. Prior to 1866, however, there were both private and public school experiences from which the real lineage of school physical education evolved. Duly investigated and standing the test of time as being the first important incident in that lineage was the physical education experience at the Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts between the years 1823 and 1834. Although the tenure of Karl Beck and, indeed, the Round Hill School itself, were shortlived, the two provided a cornerstone for the movement that would eventually become the North American physical education profession.

Following on the heels of the Round Hill experience but bearing more important future ramifications in the development of school physical education was the function of the *West Newton English and Classical School* of West Newton, Massachusetts, an institution of learning referred to with affectionate zeal by Newtonites as simply, "the Allen School." The Allen School's unique undertakings in the areas of exercise and sport reflected the educational wisdom of its founding fathers, Horace Mann, Cyrus Peirce, and especially, Nathaniel Topliff Allen, after whom the school was nick-named. Their collective wisdom, coupled with the presence and exertion of Dioclesian Lewis and Catharine Beecher and the interpretations of physical culture expressed by Dr. William A. Alcott, promulgated the educational philosophy which provided an educational setting "progressive in spirit and liberal in outlook."

Formally opened in mid-January, 1854, the institution, over a period of years achieved several noteworthy landmarks in educational history. Among the most significant were: (1) the development of coeducational curricula, (2) the formation of North America's first pure kindergarten based on the concepts of Froebel, and (3) the pioneering of the cause for black students being integrated into the mainstream of American education.

A study of physical education at the Allen School establishes that from the very outset of the school's history much attention and emphasis was laid on the proper physical, as well as mental and moral development of the pupils. It became the first secondary school in North America to construct a gymnasium building. Every afternoon was devoted to outdoor sports, weather permitting; otherwise indoor sports activity was undertaken in the gymnasium, its accompanying bowling alley, or even in the Lyceum Hall, where roller skating on the heavily waxed floors gave both boys and girls great pleasure. Cricket clubs, baseball and football clubs were a part of the life of the school.

Physical education at the Allen School received specialized attention other than that given to it naturally through the media of sports, games, and less structured exercise. The first lectures ever given in an educational setting based on the teachings of William A. Alcott, as reflected in his book, "The Laws of Health," were delivered at the Allen School as common fare in discussions of health and fitness. And there at the Allen School, that apostle of temperance, Dr. Dio Lewis presented the first classes in free gymnastics to be

taught in Massachusetts. Allen School educators, too, played critical roles in the drama relating to one of educational history's most controversial issues — the challenge to the play, games, and gymnastic calisthenics concept of physical education by compulsory military drill.

The West Newton English and Classical School, known also as the Allen School, should be accorded its due place in the ranks of the real pioneers of institutional physical education on the North American continent.