

# Records of the City Board of Public School Commissioners, 1812–1935

*The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library  
Compiled by Celeste Wiley, January 2008*

Collation: 4 linear feet.

Description: This collection consists chiefly of commissioners' correspondence, 1874–1934; journals and minutes, 1812–1912; and financial records, 1871–1934.

The minutes in particular contain a wide variety of information about the public schools including (but not limited to) the financial struggles of the Board after the Civil War; the controversy of the application of corporal punishment; the development of hot lunches served at the schools; and the disparities between colored and white schools.

Historical Note: In 1710 the South Carolina General Assembly passed its first act to provide free schools for public education. A 1712 revision of this law established a free school in Charleston and ordered one opened in each parish as soon as schoolmasters settled therein.<sup>1</sup> Despite these provisions, publicly supported education in South Carolina progressed slowly and unevenly throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century.

Public education in the state began in earnest in December of 1811, when the General Assembly passed an act establishing “free schools throughout the state.”<sup>2</sup> According to this act, the state legislature appointed commissioners in each election district to serve three-year terms. By March of 1812, the Board of Free School Commissioners (BoPSC) had established five schools for the parishes of St. Michael and St. Philip.<sup>3</sup> Along with the formation of the schools, the construction of new school buildings, teachers' salaries, school supplies, and building maintenance were all provided through a combination of a state legislated budget and additional city taxes collected at the request of BoPSC.

Over the ensuing years, the board's name changed from “Free School Commissioners” to “School Commissioners” to “Public School Commissioners.” (The various terms referring to what is now commonly known as public education appear to be used interchangeably throughout the nineteenth century, with the term “Free School” essentially disappearing from the records around 1870). Towards the early twentieth century, separate boards formed to oversee the various public schools (i.e., elementary schools as well as high schools and normal schools), although all fell under the jurisdiction of the city and there was much overlap of members on the various committees.

In 1839 the High School of Charleston was created specifically to provide college preparatory classes for young men.<sup>4</sup> Despite being a public school, the High School of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cooper, ed., *Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 2* (Columbia: A. S. Johnson, 1837), 342–46; 389–96. “Free school” refers not only to the schools' lack of tuition but also to their system of teaching; mainly that students are not segregated by grade and are all taught together according to one's abilities.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Cooper, ed., *Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 5* (Columbia: A. S. Johnson, 1839): 639–41.

<sup>3</sup> Journal of the Committee of Free Schools, 1812–1834.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Clifford Clark, *A History of the First Hundred Years of the High School of Charleston* (1993), 9.

Charleston did charge tuition until its full incorporation into the Public School System of Charleston in 1925.

In 1857 the state legislature passed an act providing funds for a normal school (a school for training teachers) in the parishes of St. Michael and St. Philip. The BoPSC purchased a lot at the corner of St. Philip and Beaufain Streets in 1858, and the new school, functioning as both a high school and normal school for women, opened in 1859. The school closed at the height of the Civil War, and for a brief period at the end of the war the Freedman's Bureau controlled the use of the building. In 1867 the Bureau returned control of the school to the BoPSC, who reopened it once again as a high school for women<sup>5</sup>. The Normal School was renamed the Memminger School in 1874, in honor of the Charles P. Memminger, the long-time director of the BoPSC who had proposed the school's creation in 1857.<sup>6</sup> The Memminger School operated until 1950, when issues with the building's structure convinced the board to have it demolished.<sup>7</sup> Construction of a new, modern building on the original site began in 1953, and a year later it opened as Memminger Elementary School.

In 1866 a new law required public education be made available for African-Americans. In December of that year, the BoPSC officially moved to form a special committee to oversee newly formed colored schools. Following the war, the Freedman's Bureau also occupied the Morris Street and Meeting Street schoolhouses and operated them as schools for colored children. The Bureau returned control of the Meeting Street School to the BoPSC, but continued to use the Morris Street School (later named the Simonton School) as a school for colored children. By 1870 the BoPSC special committee also oversaw the Shaw Memorial School, a private educational institution created for black students that became public due to complications in funding. Among the extant BoPSC records there is significant information about the creation of these schools, particularly regarding Charleston Colored Industrial School (later named Burke High School) that opened in 1911.

Although the creation of colored schools seemed to begin in earnest, by the late nineteenth century their creation and care rapidly declined. The frequent references to these schools in the BoPSC minutes indicate extreme overcrowding and other problems. Through what can at best be described as a thin veil of racism, the BoPSC regularly disregarded suggested solutions and requests for help from the colored schools' faculty and staff.

In December 1882 the South Carolina legislature passed an act reorganizing the city of Charleston into twelve wards and another act dividing the city into six school districts. The latter act also redefined the composition of the School Board. The voters of each district elected one commissioner each, while the governor appointed four commissioners--two at the referral of the Board of Trustees from Charleston High School and two at the referral of the Board of Trustees from the College of Charleston.<sup>8</sup>

Note: For further information, see: "The Public School System of Charleston Before 1860," Nita Katharine Pyburn, *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. LXI, No. 2, April 1960, 86–98. The information contained therein was taken almost entirely from materials in this collection.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Taylor, *A History of Memminger Normal School* (1941), 13–15.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, 18.

<sup>7</sup> "Reasons for Closing Memminger," *Charleston Evening Post*, 23 July 1949.

<sup>8</sup> *Charleston Year Book*, 1882, 274.

Records of the City Board of Public School Commissioners, 1812–1935  
Collection Outline

Series:

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|---|-------|
| I. Correspondence, 1874–1934  | BOX 1 |
| II. Financial Records, 1871–1934  |       |
| A. “An Investigation,” W.S. Smith, Treasurer, Commissioners of Public Schools, City of Charleston, S.C., 1934   | BOX 1 |
| B. Miscellaneous Loose Financial Statements (1872–1891)   |       |
| C. Public School Tax Collection, 1876–1879  |       |
| D. Public School Tax Collection, 1880–1893  |       |
| E. Public School Tax, 1890–1893   |       |
| F. Public School Tax Arrears, 1880–1891   |       |
| G. Receipts and Vouchers, Public School Commissioners, 1872–1908 (two folders)  |       |
| H. Warrants, 1871–1908  |       |
| I. Ledger, Commissioners of Public Schools, 1890–1916   | BOX 2 |
| J. Ledger, Commissioners of Public Schools, 1912–1924   |       |
| K. Cash Book, City Board of School Commissioners, 1 October 1893–30 June 1908   | BOX 3 |
| L. Ledger, City Board of Public School Commissioners, 1908–1924   |       |
| III. High School of Charleston, 1853–1935   | BOX 4 |
| A. High School Fund, 1853–1881  |       |
| B. Miscellaneous materials, 1860–1935   |       |
| C. <i>Proceedings Upon the Occasion of Opening the School House, corner Meeting and George Streets, January 3, 1881</i>                                       |       |
| D. Receipts and Vouchers, 1872–1885 (two folders)   |       |
| IV. Journals and Rough Minutes, 1812–1928 (Seven volumes and one folder)  |       |
| A. Journals of the Commissioners of Free Schools of the Parishes of St. Philip & St. Michael, 27 Jan 1812–28 July 1834  | BOX 5 |
| B. Minutes of Commissioners of Free Schools of the Parishes of St. Philip and St. Michael, January 1844 to January 1858                                       |       |
| C. Minutes of Commissioners of Free Schools, Jan. 1855 to June 1870; Minutes of the Charleston City Board of School Commissioners, 1 July 1870 to 5 Nov. 1873 |       |
| D. Minutes of the City Board of School Commissioners, 12 Nov. 1873 to 7 Dec. 1887   | BOX 6 |
| E. Minutes of the City Board of School Commissioners, 19 Dec. 1887 to 5 July 1899   |       |
| F. Minutes of the City Board of School Commissioners, 14 Oct. 1899 to 13 Dec. 1907  | BOX 7 |

G. Minutes of the City Board of School Commissioners,  
1 Jan. 1908 to 4 Dec. 1912  
H. Miscellaneous Loose Minutes, 1834–1928

BOX 8

BOX 1