

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name BELKNAP SCHOOL

other names/site number DISTRICT NO. 8 SCHOOL

2. Location

street & number 509 GREENVILLE AVENUE

not for publication

city or town JOHNSTON

vicinity

state RHODE ISLAND code RI county PROVIDENCE code 007 zip code 02919

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this x nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property x meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide x local

Edward Anderson
Signature of certifying official

10/14/2010
Date

Executive Director
Title

RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official

Date

Title

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	private
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
		buildings
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

MUSEUM/Work in Progress

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation: BRICK; STONE/granite

walls: WOOD/weatherboard, shingles

roof: ASPHALT

other:

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The Belknap School is a one-story wood frame one-room schoolhouse with a front gable asphalt roof featuring a small bell tower; clapboard walls; wood shingles in the front gable end and on the bell tower; original wood windows, doors, and trim; a projecting hipped-roofed enclosed front entrance pavilion with separate entrances for boys and girls; and a raised brick and stone foundation. Located near the intersection of two main roads through what was once farmland in northeastern Johnston, the Belknap School was built in 1892 to replace an earlier (ca. 1790) one-room school on the same site, and remained in use until 1938. At the time of its construction the Belknap School was considered the most modern of Johnston's several one-room rural schools: it was relatively commodious, with seating for 40 pupils, and its dual entrances and bell tower gave the building a notably more formal institutional appearance than its predecessor had had. While it ceased to be used for academic purposes some seventy years ago, the Belknap School has changed little since then, and is now the only surviving one-room schoolhouse in Johnston that still retains its historic architectural character inside and out. Acquired by the Johnston Historical Society in 2002, the school has recently undergone a five-year rehabilitation project and is intended to be opened to the public as a museum, outfitted with period school furnishings and equipment.

Narrative Description

SEE ATTACHED CONTINUATION SHEETS

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION

Period of Significance

1892-1938

Significant Dates

1892-1893

1937-1938

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance begins when the school was constructed, and ends when the building ceased to be used as a school.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

N/A

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria)

The Belknap School at 509 Greenville Avenue in Johnston, Rhode Island, built in 1892, retains a high degree of integrity of location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, and meets Criteria A and C for listing on the National Register. Under Criterion A, the Belknap School (the second of that name) represents a lingering tradition of rural one-room schoolhouses in Johnston during a transitional period in the town's history of public education, when the long-standing system of district schools was beginning to be modernized and consolidated. (The Greenville Avenue site also has associations with Johnston's earliest educational efforts: the town's first school building, ca. 1790, was located here and also called the Belknap School.) Under Criterion C, the 1892 Belknap School, which was considered a model of its type at the time of its construction, is a well-preserved example of a late 19th century one-room rural public school building. It is also Johnston's only surviving one-room schoolhouse that still retains its original interior and exterior architectural character (the few other survivors having been much altered).

Narrative Statement of Significance (provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance)

SEE ATTACHED CONTINUATION SHEETS

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

SEE ATTACHED CONTINUATION SHEETS

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

BELKNAP SCHOOL
509 GREENVILLE AVENUE, JOHNSTON

Name of Property

PROVIDENCE CO., RI

County and State

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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N/A

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NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (continued)

The Belknap School is set back approximately 25 feet from the north side of Greenville Avenue; it faces south, and measures 26 feet across the façade by 37 feet deep. (*Photos 1 through 5.*) The building's exterior is in very good condition after a 2004-2009 repair/rehabilitation project. The scope of repair work included: rebuilding the chimney at the north end of the roof; replicating the original bell tower (based on a historic photograph) above the south gable; replacing in kind some wood elements including gutters, clapboards, shingles and trim pieces; repairing the asphalt roofing and installing new roof shingles; replacing the two front doors with period units; and painting. An oval wooden plaque containing the date 1892 has been affixed to the façade by the Johnston Historical Society,

The raised foundation is brick and has granite block corner posts; the foundation walls below grade (seen in the basement) are also stone. A hipped-roofed entrance pavilion runs the full width of the south façade, and has two 5-panel wooden doors topped with 2-light wood transoms near each end of the pavilion. (When facing the building, boys entered through the left or west door, and girls through the right or east door.) The doors flank a centered pair of 1/1 wood double hung sash windows. Each door is reached by a short concrete stairway (a mid- to late-20th century alteration); the west stairway has a simple metal pipe railing. A small, square, single-light window is centered in the front gable. The bell tower has a flaring square base, open belfry with railing and bracketed cornice, and steeply pitched pyramidal roof topped by a metal ball finial; its bell is original to the school and was recently reinstalled after having been stored off site for many years.

The east and west side elevations both have 3 bays of large wood 2/2 double hung windows topped by 2-light wood transoms which butt up against the cornice frieze; there are also two 3-light wood sash in the basement level on each side, which do not align with the windows on the main floor. The rear (north) elevation has no fenestration. All windows are original and framed in flat wood trim. Other wood trim elements include a water table, narrow corner boards, a belt course on the rear elevation and a slender box cornice with returns that incorporates gutters behind a crown molding.

The very simple interior layout of the school is largely intact. Upon entering by either front door (*Photo 6*), one passes through a short vestibule and another 5-panel wooden door into the single classroom, which occupies all of the floorspace under the main roof. (*Photos 7 through 10.*) The space between the vestibules forms the cloakroom, which is entered from the classroom by another pair of 5-panel wooden doors. The cloakroom, which was originally shared by all students, now has a mid- to late-20th century partition wall between the two south windows subdividing the space in half;

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this minor alteration is the only change to the original interior layout. On the north wall of the cloakroom are two back-to-back, enclosed, steep, narrow wooden stairways: one on the boys' side leading up to the attic and bell tower, and another on the girls' side (*Photo 11*) leading down into the basement. The attic stairs are original; the basement stairs have been rebuilt.

The school's character-defining interior finishes have survived due to a combination of relatively minor alterations conducted in the latter half of the 20th century (when the building was rented to an American Legion Post), and the recent rehabilitation project. A dropped ceiling in the classroom was removed, and the original lath-and-plaster ceiling (which had previously suffered significant water damage from a leaky roof) was covered over with skim-coated sheetrock. Linoleum tile flooring has been removed, and a new wood floor installed. The original lath-and-plaster classroom walls, which had also suffered both water damage and staining from cigarette smoke, were covered by skim-coated sheetrock. All original wood matchboard wainscoting and trim remain intact, including chalk ledges underneath the blackboards and bullseye corner blocks at the top corners of windows and doorways. A new slate blackboard has been installed at the front of the classroom. The rear chimney, which projects into the room on its north side, has wood wainscoting and trim, as well as a section of black-painted plaster that mimics blackboard (reproducing finishes that existed before rehabilitation). Finishes in the entry vestibules and the cloakroom are also the same as in the classroom. Both attic and basement are unfinished; however, the full basement has a new poured concrete floor.

Like most rural one-room schoolhouses of its era, the Belknap School never had any interior sanitary facilities. Historic photos show a small outbuilding at the rear (northwest) of the school, which apparently contained separate privies for boys and girls. This outbuilding no longer exists.

At the rear northeast corner of the school is a small (12 feet by 16 feet) 1-story concrete block addition (*Photo 3*), with a side gable asphalt roof, concrete foundation, and concrete deck and steps on its south front. (The roofline indicates that the addition may have been built in two stages.) Constructed in the 1970s, the addition was built by American Legion Post No. 92, which occupied the former school as a tenant from the late 1940s until 1998. The addition previously held a kitchen, bar, and restroom; it currently houses a new restroom as well as auxiliary space for the planned museum use. (*Photos 12 and 13*) While this addition is not a contributing feature, its exterior appearance has been modified to be consistent with the historic school: it has wood clapboards and trim, as well as a 5-panel wood door with 2-light wood transom and a single small 6/6 double hung wood sash window on its south front, all dating to the 2004 rehabilitation project. The interior is finished with skim-coated sheetrock walls and ceiling, and synthetic wood flooring.

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive black and white photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: BELKNAP SCHOOL, 509 GREENVILLE AVENUE

City or Vicinity: JOHNSTON

County: PROVIDENCE

State: RI

Photographer: KATHRYN J. CAVANAUGH

Date Photographed: MAY 14, 2010

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

- 1 of 13. Exterior, looking NE at west side elevation and south façade.
- 2 of 13. Exterior, looking NW at south façade, east side elevation, and northeast corner addition.
- 3 of 13. Exterior, close-up of northeast corner addition, looking NW.
- 4 of 13. Exterior, looking SW at east (side) and north (rear) elevations of the northeast corner addition, and the north elevation of the main building.
- 5 of 13. Exterior, looking SE at west (side) elevation of the northeast corner addition, and north (rear) and west elevations of the main building.
- 6 of 13. Interior, west entrance, looking N into the main classroom (typ. finishes for east entrance as well).
- 7 of 13. Interior, main classroom, looking NE.
- 8 of 13. Interior, main classroom, looking NW.
- 9 of 13. Interior, main classroom, looking SE.
- 10 of 13. Interior, main classroom, looking SW.
- 11 of 13. Interior, east cloakroom, looking SE (typ finishes for west cloakroom as well).
- 12 of 13. Interior, northeast corner addition, looking NE (museum exhibit space towards restroom).
- 13 of 13. Interior, northeast corner addition, looking S towards entrance.

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The school stands on a lot measuring 123.75 feet wide by 132 feet deep, for a total land area of 16,335 square feet. The site materials are simple: an asphalt paved parking lot (in poor condition) covers the front yard; the side yards are lawn; and the area behind the building is wooded. Several granite posts marking the side boundaries of the property apparently date to an 1892 expansion of the late 18th century "School House Lot." The original lot was about half its current size - only 67 by 55 feet, or 3,685 square feet; the ca. 1790 school was also smaller than its 1892 replacement.

The Belknap School stands just northeast of the T-shaped intersection where Greenville Avenue crosses the northern end of Atwood Avenue (RI Route 5). In the 18th and 19th centuries, this intersection served as a village center for several surrounding farms, at various times boasting a hotel, a tavern, several stores, a church, and a school. Besides the Belknap School, the only other non-residential survivor of this period is the small Belknap Chapel (1891), which stands on the south side of Greenville Avenue southeast of the school and has a similar architectural character. This area today has a mix of uses: east of the school are several early to mid 20th century 1 and 1-1/2 story single-family homes; to the west is a late 20th century 1-story concrete block commercial building housing an auto repair business; directly across the street to the south is a modern subdivision of 2-story vinyl-sided single-family houses; and across the street on the southwest corner of the intersection is a modern gas station. Although Johnston has evolved in recent decades from a rural to a suburban area, there is still a fair amount of undeveloped land north and west of Belknap School, reminiscent of the days when this part of town was mostly farmland.

[END SECTION 7]

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NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (Continued)

Until the late 18th century in America, access to any level of formal education largely depended on one's race, gender, and socioeconomic status. White children of European descent had a huge advantage in this regard, as schooling was generally not available to children of color. Boys had more opportunities than girls, who – assuming they were allowed in the schoolroom at all (since some parents did not believe in educating females) – were typically excluded from more advanced academic pursuits, including college or university. Well-to-families could either hire a private tutor or send their children to a private school or academy; but families with moderate or more limited incomes had fewer options.

Public schools, as we understand the concept today, did not yet exist, but in larger towns it was fairly common to build a community school with funds raised through a public lottery. (Church construction was often financed the same way.) Such schools would be open to all local white children, but attendance was optional and students had to pay tuition (since the lottery proceeds did not cover ongoing expenses such as building maintenance or the teacher's salary), and buy their own books and supplies. In villages and rural areas, a group of parents might pool some funds together to build and operate a "subscription" school, which only their own children could attend. Alternatively, children could attend a "dame school" operated by a female neighbor (usually a spinster or widow), or a Sunday school taught by the local minister, where they could at least learn their letters and numbers and to read the Bible, in exchange for a small fee or some bartered goods or services. Parents could also teach their children at home, at least as far as their own education would allow.

Notwithstanding these various options, anything beyond rudimentary academics was rarely provided, or even sought, for working-class children whose labor was needed to help support their families. A far greater educational priority for these children was learning practical life skills like farming, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, ironworking, carpentry, selling goods and produce at market, feeding and clothing a family, managing a household, and child care. At the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (barring the kindness of some benefactor or a strong motivation to learn on their own), children typically had no access to education at all: their parents had no way of paying for it, and unless they had had some schooling themselves, could not pass even basic literacy on to their offspring.

By the time of the Revolutionary War, however, a new concept of education had begun to percolate in the American consciousness. National leaders like Thomas Jefferson asserted that an educated populace was essential to a well-ordered democracy, and social progressives like Rhode Island Lieutenant Governor Jabez Bowen had begun advocating for free public schools:

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“The education of youth, being a thing of the first importance to every society, as thereby the minds of the rising generation are formed to virtue, knowledge and useful literature, and a succession of able and useful men are produced, with suitable qualifications for serving their country with ability and faithfulness; and, institutions of this nature are the more useful by how much the more liberal and free enjoyment of them is.” (Bicknell, p. 655)

After the Revolution, as the United States acquired additional territories and created new states, a new federal law was enacted requiring communities to allocate land for public schools; and in the mid-1820s, Congress directed that all states establish permanent funds to support public education in local communities. Although the actual availability of such funding, and the quality of public schools, continued to vary widely across the country throughout the 19th century (and beyond), by the end of the Civil War the concept of a free public education had become an American ideal.

In Rhode Island, sporadic efforts to establish public schools occurred in some larger towns, such as Providence and Newport, in the latter half of the 18th century. An organized “free school” movement emerged in about 1789, but its supporters faced considerable public and political opposition from those who did not see the value of a formal education for all citizens, or did not wish to pay taxes to educate someone else’s children. After a decade of argument, the General Assembly enacted Rhode Island’s first free school law in 1800, only to repeal it after just three years. Another quarter century of heated debate ensued before legislation was finally adopted in 1828 to establish a statewide taxpayer-funded public school system.

Although ostensibly now mandated to be “free” and “open to all,” in reality most local schools were neither. Many communities found that even a combination of state and local funding did not cover all their school costs, and so they continued to charge fees for tuition and books; and only white boys and girls aged 6 to 15 could enroll in school. (Attendance was encouraged but not compulsory, and easily hindered by work obligations, financial issues, parental indifference, cultural constraints, family relocation, and truancy.) Governance of public schools was placed in the hands of each town, which established a School Committee to create local school districts and to oversee their day-to-day operations. Local control of schools made the use of public monies for education more palatable to some taxpayers, but it also meant that public schools were inherently subject to the vagaries of local values and local politics, which affected every aspect of school life, from choosing a curriculum to hiring and firing teachers to keeping school buildings in good repair.

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N/A

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The archetypal school building in 18th and early-to-mid-19th century America (and indeed, well into the 20th century in some rural areas) was the one-room schoolhouse. Intended to serve a small population living in the immediate vicinity, and built with whatever financial resources, materials, and construction know-how were on hand, one-room schoolhouses were usually sited within walking or riding distance of the students' homes. They were typically simple and functional in design, often resembling a modest house, with a rectangular footprint, gable roof, a double hung multilight windows, and a single front door. (As the 19th century progressed, some one-room schools reflected elements of church design, with an entry vestibule at one end featuring separate entries for boys and girls, large windows on each side, and sometimes a bell tower: features that emphasized the school's importance to the community.) The size of a one-room school – generally 1 story tall and no more than 30 by 40 feet in area – was dictated by the basic constraint that teachers and students had to be able to see and hear one another. Often the teacher's desk would be set on a short raised platform at one side of the room, which had both practical and symbolic advantages: it helped to focus students' attention on the teacher, visually reinforced the teacher's authority, and also provided a place for student recitations.

Although the one-room schoolhouse has a highly nostalgic image in American mythology, in reality it was usually cramped, poorly lit and ventilated, ineffectually heated, inadequately and uncomfortably furnished, and had only the most rudimentary sanitary facilities. It also typically had only one teacher (sometimes assisted by a few older students), whose daily challenges were to present an appropriate curriculum to a group of students of varying ages and learning levels, to maintain control and discipline, and also to manage housekeeping chores such as bringing in water and firewood, sweeping the floor, and cleaning the outdoor privy. Such an environment was hardly conducive either to effective teaching or successful learning, never mind good behavior.

In 1838, educational reformer Henry Barnard wrote one of the first school plan books to be published in the country: *School Architecture, or, Contributions to the Improvements of School-Houses in the United States*: Barnard strongly believed that a school's physical environment had a fundamental relationship to a student's inclination and ability to learn, and also a deep, enduring impact on the development of a student's body, character, and soul as well as intellect:

The location should be dry, quiet, pleasant, and in every respect healthy ... it will sometimes be necessary to select a location a little removed from the territorial center of the [school] district. If possible, it should overlook a delightful country, present a choice of sunshine and shade, or trees and flowers, and be sheltered from the prevailing winds by a hill-top, or a barrier of evergreens. As many of the pleasant influences of nature as

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possible should be gathered in and around that spot, where the earliest, most lasting, and most controlling associations of a child's mind are formed. ...

The style of the exterior should exhibit good, architectural proportion, and be calculated to inspire children and the community generally with respect for the object to which it is devoted. ... Every schoolhouse should be a temple, consecrated in prayer to the physical, intellectual, and moral culture of every child in the community, and be associated in every heart with the earliest and strongest impressions of truth, justice, patriotism, and religion. ...

No public edifice more deserves, or will better repay, the skill, labor, and expense ... for here the health, tastes, manners, minds, and morals of each successive generation of children will be, in a great measure, determined for time and eternity. (pp. 54-56)

Illustrated with elevation drawings and floor plans, *School Architecture* outlined practical design guidelines for exteriors, interiors, yards, mechanical equipment, and furniture; the basic guidelines could be adapted to schools in both large and small communities, as well as to the latest architectural styles. (Given his characterization of a school building as a "temple of learning," it is no surprise that Barnard was particularly fond of the Greek Revival.) Considerable attention was paid to the health-related aspects of interior design, such as natural light, fresh air, heating and cooling systems, well-built and properly sized furniture, ease of circulation, and better sanitation. He also promoted separate entrance lobbies (containing cloakrooms and washstands) for boys and girls, which, he observed, "will prevent much confusion, rudeness, and impropriety, and promote the health, refinement, and orderly habits of children." (p. 56). In addition, Barnard asserted that a properly outfitted school would provide a library (open to the entire community), a large room for recitations and communal gatherings, a sizeable yard or playground, private toilet facilities (again separated by sex), and its own well for a water supply.

In addition to promoting better learning through school building design, Barnard also advocated major systemic changes. In his view, expecting any individual teacher to have the appropriate knowledge and skills to instruct, motivate, and control a widely diverse group of students, and to expect those students to progress academically, while all jumbled together in a one-room schoolhouse, was asking for frustration and failure. Barnard's solution was to classify the schools by grade – Primary School (for children under age 8), Secondary (or Grammar) School (ages 8 to 12), and High School (ages 12 to 16) – with separate classrooms and teachers for each grade as well as age-appropriate curricula and performance standards. Recognizing that some school districts served populations too small to justify the construction of a multi-room schoolhouse, Barnard argued that "ungraded" one-room

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schools should still provide a standard age-appropriate curriculum presented by a professionally qualified teacher.

In 1845, Rhode Island established a State Commissioner of Public Schools; the first person to fill that office (until 1850) was Henry Barnard. Following his lead and that of other educational reformers, the remainder of the 19th century was characterized by a series of architectural, programmatic, and administrative improvements in public education. School building design guidelines and regular maintenance programs were adopted. Curricula, textbooks, teacher qualifications, promotional requirements for students, performance standards for teachers, and the length of the academic year were all eventually standardized. Fees for tuition and books were abolished, finally making public schools truly free of charge. Graded schools (and later separate elementary, grammar, and high school buildings) became increasingly common, especially in cities and larger towns. A State Board of Education was established in 1870, followed in 1871 by the Rhode Island Normal School which provided teacher training and certification. As of 1872, Rhode Island public schools were required to admit all children residing in a given school district, including those older than 15, regardless of race. (The same law also precluded manufacturers from employing children under age 12, and restricted the number of hours that children between the ages of 12 and 15 could work, so that they would have more time to attend school.) In 1902, education became compulsory for all Rhode Island children up to age 13 (or 15 if they were not regularly employed); and the state assumed responsibility for addressing absenteeism and truancy. By 1904 all cities and towns had shifted from a district system to a consolidated town system, a change authorized by state law in 1884 (amended in 1894) to create a more centralized and cohesive supervisory authority on the local level.

The history of Johnston's Belknap School reflects these broader statewide and national trends. Johnston is a town of about 24 square miles in north central Rhode Island, just west of Providence; the Woonasquatucket River forms part of the boundary between the two municipalities. Originally part of Providence, Johnston was formally established as a separate town in 1759. Its first official town meeting was held on April 18 of that year at Benjamin Belknap's farmhouse, which was near the intersection of two well-traveled highways in northeastern Johnston: the Killingly Road (now Greenville Avenue), which led from Providence to Killingly, Conn.; and another road now known as Atwood Avenue (RI Route 5). In the later 18th century, this intersection became a village center of sorts for a cluster of neighboring farms. Named after the Belknap family, the village at various times boasted a hotel, a tavern, several stores, a Baptist meetinghouse (built by lottery subscription in 1761), and Johnston's first school (the predecessor of the present building), which was built by subscription in about 1790.

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The seven subscribers of the original Belknap School were William Mathewson, Jeremiah Manton, Abraham Belknap, Jr., Jonathan Patt, Valentine Sweet, and Edward Manton (representing Captain Seth Tripp), all yeomen of Johnston, and William Bushee, a physician of North Providence (which abuts Johnston to the northeast; the town line is not far from Belknap). The Subscribers' Articles of Agreement, dated January 16, 1790 (Deed Book 3, Page 176), indicates how tightly this type of school was controlled by its benefactors: they restricted student enrollment (each subscriber was entitled to send to the school "as many Persons or Children as shall be his equal Proportion, according to his right or part thereof," but non-subscribers could not enroll their children); they set an occupancy limit for the schoolhouse (a maximum of 24 "Schollars," unless the subscribers agreed to accommodate more); they gave themselves the authority to hire a teacher and to set the length of the school term; and they even specified the design and construction requirements for the schoolhouse itself:

Whereas it appears to be necessary for the Education of the present Youth and rising Generation that a School House should be built in some convenient place between the dwelling house of Jeremiah Manton and the Baptist Meeting House; therefore We the Subscribers in order to accommodate our children with sufficient room for the purpose aforesaid, do hereby covenant and agree to build a School House of twenty-four feet in length and twenty feet in width, and that a Chimney shall be built at one end thereof with an Entry and Door on one side of the same and a Closet on the other side thereof; the Subscribers hereby agreeing to plank, clapboard, window, plaister [*sic*], and completely finish said house and every part thereof, and that the same shall contain four large windows, and each window twenty-four squares of glass ...

The original seven subscribers apparently got right down to the business of erecting the schoolhouse, which was sited on the north side of the Killingly Road (now Greenville Avenue) on part of William Mathewson's farm. (The Mathewson Farm remains, though reduced in acreage, on the south side of the road a short distance west of the Belknap School; it was listed on the National Register in 2000.) By 1792 the schoolhouse was standing, and some shares in it had already changed hands (Deed Book 12, Page 606); thus when William Mathewson sold a small lot (measuring 67 by 55 feet) to the other six subscribers on June 5, 1794, the "new school house" standing on it was already somewhere between two to four years old (Deed Book 3, Page 175).

A photograph of the original Belknap School (published in the 1892 and 1897 Johnston School Committee annual reports) shows a very simple one-story wood-frame structure that reflects the original subscribers' specifications, and looks like a small house: four bays wide by one bay deep, with a stone foundation, side gable roof, clapboard walls, a chimney at the ridge aligned with a

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doorway near the east end of the south façade, and 12/12 double-hung sash windows. No photographs of the interior apparently survive, but this building is repeatedly referred to as a one-room school in later town records and multiple other sources.

Belknap served as the model for school construction in Johnston over the next several decades: four other one-room schoolhouses were built on a subscription basis between 1807 and 1827, and historic photographs in late 19th century annual school reports indicate that these early schools all had a similar architectural character to that of Belknap.

During the short time (1800-1803) that Rhode Island first adopted legislation mandating free public schools, Johnston also flirted with the idea, albeit much more briefly: a vote in early November 1800 to raise the necessary funds to support free schools was repealed a mere nine days later (apparently without any explanation recorded). Johnston's struggle to overcome the public's resistance to free schools mirrored similar efforts on a statewide level, so it was not until after the passage of the 1828 Free School Law that Johnston first adopted its own public school system. At that time, the original Belknap School was assigned to School District No. 8 (out of 10 districts), and it remained in continuous use until 1892.

Over those seven decades, as Rhode Island's economy became dominated by industrial production; several textile mills were constructed along the Woonasquatucket and Pocasset Rivers in Johnston, with a corresponding population increase in the adjacent mill villages such as Olneyville, Merino, and Simmonsville. However, most of the town's land area, including the Belknap district, remained in agricultural use (Belknap was known for its cider) and relatively sparsely populated. By 1880, Johnston had 5,765 residents, of whom an average of 561 boys and girls regularly attended school. The town's sixteen school districts were overseen by a part-time School Superintendent, and efforts had begun to grade some schools into elementary and grammar levels. In 1885, Johnston's first public high school was established, located in the Odd Fellows Block in the Olneyville section of town, and open to any student who had graduated from a district grammar school in Johnston, and had passed an entrance exam.

In the last two decades of the 19th century, Johnston's school districts upgraded and modernized their buildings, in response both to significant population growth (which virtually doubled, to 11,203 residents, by 1895) and to the increasingly decrepit and outmoded conditions of aging one-room schoolhouses. Noting that Johnston schools collectively had a dismal 51% average attendance rate for the year 1889, and that truancy had been a chronic problem for many years, School Superintendent W.E. Wilson bluntly observed in his annual report:

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It hardly needs to be suggested that one measure which ... would improve the attendance in the districts in which it is most unsatisfactory, would be for those districts to provide healthful and attractive school buildings, located suitably, furnished in modern fashion and adequate to accommodate the number that should be attending those schools, in place of the ill located and antiquated buildings which in the midst of modern improvements of every sort and under the very beams of the electric light, are made still to answer the purpose of school-houses." (1889 report, pp. 10-11)

By this time the original Belknap School was nearly a century old – the oldest surviving schoolhouse in town – and in such poor condition that “the [School] Committee’s respect for its age must have saved it from being condemned long ago” (1887 annual report, p. 5). Local politics also interfered; in 1888 the voters of District No. 8 approved the appropriation of \$2,000 to construct a new school, but a bitter factional dispute about changing its location persisted for another four years, until it was finally settled to build the new school on the site of the old but also to acquire some adjoining land to substantially increase the size of the existing schoolhouse lot; the lot size increased from 3,685 square feet to its present 16,355 square feet (Deed Book 54, Page 17, September 23, 1892). A *Providence Journal-Bulletin* article dated October 30, 1892 included hand-drawn illustrations of both the old and new Belknap schoolhouses as well as this description of the building that was already well under construction:

The structure will be of wood resting on foundation walls of brick, with granite corners. It will cover an area of 26 by 37 feet. It will be a single story in height. The outer walls will be clapboarded, excepting the upper part of the front, which will have a covering of fancy shingles. The roof will be shingled. A bell tower of simple design will adorn the front of the building. A projecting ell seven feet wide will extend along the front of the building to afford separate entrances for the boys and girls and to provide space for cloak rooms. There will be a single school room 24 feet by 28 feet in size, which will seat about 40 pupils. Windows on each side will light the room well and a couple of windows in the front will give light in the cloak rooms. The building is not pretentious enough to require an elaborate system of heating and stoves will be relied upon to make the school comfortable in cold weather.

The newspaper also reported that the original Belknap School was moved and converted to a private residence (despite its decrepitude); its present location and status are unknown.

The new Belknap School opened on January 30, 1893; the Johnston School Committee, in its annual report that year, published a photograph of the new school and complimented District No. 8 on its

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“very attractive and commodious one-room schoolhouse.” (The same photo was published again in the 1894 report – at which time the new Belknap School was characterized as “pleasant and modern” - and also in the 1895, 1896, and 1897 reports.)

A flurry of capital improvements were made to Johnston public schools in this period: three other new schoolhouses were built in addition to Belknap, and about a dozen existing schools were either extensively repaired or expanded (or both). The more populous school districts followed a trend, already seen in larger cities like Providence, of physically separating elementary and middle grades, either within a single multi-room building or within specially dedicated buildings, and correspondingly expanding their teaching staffs. A new high school building was constructed in Olneyville in 1891. Since Johnston was still largely rural, however, 10 of its 16 school districts still followed the one-room, one-teacher, ungraded prototype, even in new construction (like Belknap).

Significant administrative changes also occurred during this period: as of 1893, all Johnston public schools were open 40 weeks per year; and in 1895 Johnston abandoned its district system in favor of a townwide system overseen by the School Committee and a full-time Superintendent. (Johnston’s first School Superintendent, Sarah Dyer Barnes, was one of the first women to hold that office in Rhode Island.) That year, Johnston’s school-age population was 2,187 (out of 11,203 residents).

Three years later, in 1898, the City of Providence annexed the most densely populated industrial villages in eastern Johnston, including Olneyville (meaning that Johnston lost its high school – an asset it did not recover until 1960). As a result Johnston lost nearly two-thirds of its population (which dropped to 4,305 by 1900) – a loss it would not fully recoup until the 1940s. The resulting decline in local tax revenues led to a corresponding decrease in the school budget, which generated an even greater focus on economic efficiency as well as educational improvements. School consolidation, which was happening all over the country in the early 20th century, was widely adopted in Johnston, especially once transportation improvements alleviated the need for students, especially those in rural areas, to live within walking distance of school.

All of this change did not come easily to agricultural communities such as Belknap, where the one-room school (like the local church) was an integral part of village life and in a very real way embodied its rural identity. Located in the heart of its village, the Belknap School had been used by generations of local families not only for schooling but for community meetings and social activities; in the 1920s and 1930s, Belknap hosted a popular after-school 4-H Club. (At the time, the national 4-H Club’s mission was to help rural youth by making connections between public education and country life). But as Belknap’s student population steadily dwindled, the school’s operating costs grew increasingly unsustainable, and in 1933, with enrollment down to about half a dozen children, the school was

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targeted for closure. A protest by local parents persuaded the Johnston School Committee to rescind its order, but the reprieve was brief; by 1937, Belknap had only three pupils, and the town ordered the school to close. This time the parents and a retired long-time teacher took their fight to the State School Board, which overrode Johnston's decision to close Belknap despite the fact that its per-pupil cost was now nearly seven times that for a larger school in a more populous area (*Providence Evening Bulletin*, February 4, 1938). Victory, however, was once again short-lived; Belknap was permanently closed at the end of the 1937-1938 school year, and village children were reassigned to another school.

The Belknap School is one of only four 19th century schools still standing in Johnston, and the only one that retains substantial architectural integrity. The District 3 schoolhouse in Simonsville and the District 11 schoolhouse in Thornton are both currently in residential use, while the District 13 schoolhouse in Hughesdale is a day care center; all three are much altered. After World War II, the Belknap School was rented to the American Legion Post No. 92 for about fifty years, until 1998, and then sat vacant until sold by the Town to the Johnston Historical Society on March 13, 2002, with the proviso that the school be maintained as a historical site, or otherwise revert back to the Town (Deed Book 1003, Page 333). Since that time, the Johnston Historical Society has obtained several grants from the R.I. Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission to restore the school to its turn-of-the-20th-century appearance, and intends to turn it into a museum, furnished with period desks, blackboards, cast-iron potbellied stove, wall clock, books, and other artifacts (many of them donated by alumni of the Belknap School and other local residents). In that role it will once again be open to the public and serve as a community resource.

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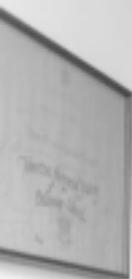


























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