

Owensboro High School



Photo by Nathan Seaton

**1800 Frederica Street
Owensboro, KY 42301
Grades: 9-12
Principal: Anita Burnette**

Owensboro High School is a stately Owensboro landmark that is situated in the center of the community and serves approximately 1,000 students grades 9-12. Owensboro High School's Class of 2009 was offered in excess of \$5 million in scholarships. OHS students are accepted into the finest colleges and universities in the nation. The school continues to be well represented by students who are National Merit Scholars, Regional Academic All-Stars, Governor's Scholars and Governor's School for the Arts participants. The school offers the Commonwealth Diploma, Comprehensive and Academic level diplomas.

Mission Statement of Owensboro High School

Owensboro High School will provide all students a safe and caring environment with maximum opportunity for successful transition to adult life through authentic learning experiences to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for living independent and responsible lives.

Philosophy of Owensboro High School

The basis of the philosophy of Owensboro High School is that students are unique individuals with varying needs, aptitudes, and abilities: thus, in cooperation with the community and parents, the school strives to assist students to be informed, responsible, and productive members of society.



Owensboro High School

Owensboro High School exists today as a culmination of 138 years of secondary education in Owensboro. The high school is the flagship of the Owensboro Public School District.



The Owensboro Public Schools were established on March 13, 1871, when an act to organize such a system was passed by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky. In 1872, Owensboro High School was established at a site on Walnut Street, the first of three locations it eventually would occupy. The school board rented the building for \$350 that year. This site was the Lower Ward School that was divided into three grade levels: primary, intermediate and senior. Nine grades were offered at that time with grades 8 and 9 considered high school. In 1875, a grade was added with only the ninth and tenth grades being considered high school.

Elizabeth Neicum Gasser, Valedictorian Class of 1876.

According to Superintendent J. H. Gray in the district's *Annual Report for 1872-73*, the administration recognized the need to make school attractive to its students in order to keep them interested in coming to school. At the same time, even though strict rules were followed there were only 8 instances of punishment during the spring term of 1873. The high school

consisted of four departments—the department of Language, of Mathematics, of Natural Science and of Belles-Lettres (from the French for literature, literally “fine letters”, literature that is appreciated for the beauty, artistry, and originality of its style and tone rather than for its ideas and informational content.) The Languages were optional, but other disciplines were obligatory. German was optional, but many students began the subject in lower grades and continued into high school.

In the beginning, the high school had two grades (8th and 9th) and served only white children. In 1880, the Kentucky General Assembly established free public education for African American children that resulted in separate schools being established in the mid-1880s.

On October 10, 1892, twenty years after high school classes were established in ward schools, the high school finally had a new, modern facility on the southwest corner of Ninth and Frederica streets, where it was added on to several times. The 11th grade was added in 1892 and 12th grade in 1894. The eight members of the Class of 1895 were the first students to complete the twelfth grade.

By the late 1890s, OHS was considered accredited by several large universities and, a few years later, gained accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. The high school was considered so modern that the Kentucky Education Association met there in 1912 so that teachers from across the state could see the facility.

However, as early as 1905, the School Board realized they would eventually need a larger high school. OHS might have been named Carnegie High School. Board member Dr. D. M. Griffith proposed that individuals designated by the Board “write to Andrew Carnegie and propose that he give \$50,000 and the Board give \$25,000 to purchase land for the erection of a high school and library building.” He proposed that the building be named the “Carnegie High School and Library.” The Board charged the Board President with selecting the committee. But, three months later the idea was dropped because the committee couldn’t agree on terms of the proposal. The city did get a Carnegie Library and, ironically, 100 years later, Owensboro High School and the public library became partners in a land exchange when the public library built a new facility on Frederica Street. OHS received the former library building at the corner of Griffith and McCreary avenues as a result of the swap.

Girls’ athletic activities took on an organized structure when the Board employed Miss Elizabeth McCarty to coach girls in basketball and to develop girls’ “physical culture.” For a period of time in the late 1890s most classes were divided into male and female classes. Several students traveled into Owensboro on the Louisville, Henderson & St. Louis train line everyday from as far away as Hawesville and Lewisport to attend OHS. The school remained at this location until the completion of the current building in 1924. OHS attendance boundaries coincided with the city limits at that time.

According to Hugh Potter's *History of Owensboro and Daviess County, Kentucky*, published in 1974, the first public high schools were started in the county in 1909—one at Utica and one at Whitesville. "Previously, county students had taken their high school training at the Owensboro High School. Those who lived near Owensboro continued to attend OHS at the county's expense until the first Daviess County high school began in 1914.

The OHS Class of 1923. The last OHS class to graduate from the old OHS.



It was on Friday, March 28, 1924, when Owensboro High School moved to its third and current location at 1800 Frederica Street.

A building marker in memory of W.H. Stother, M.D., honors an OPS School Board Member who was the major supporter of building the new building. According to a story in the May 16, 1978, issue of *The Scoop* by Chuck Clark, it was Dr. Stother who fought for a new facility. In 1920-21, while on the school board, he campaigned to raise the money to buy bonds for construction. He and a number of other interested citizens organized a parade on January 20, 1921, to gain support for the school. Support was strong. Bonds were finally sold April 7, 1922. Dr. Stother reportedly said, "The old city high school was the most pitiful sight a man has seen. It was so overcrowded that the children had to be taught in the basement and even in neighboring houses." For his efforts, the Class of 1924 dedicated the school to his memory.

Groundbreaking for the new facility had taken place on September 11, 1922. The architect was A. F. Hussander of Chicago, IL, represented on site by A. A. Pullman. The building was originally to have been completed by September 1923, but construction was delayed primarily by weather conditions. Construction costs for the original building totaled \$286,000. The 7.7 acre site cost \$20,000.

On moving day, the students planned to walk the nine blocks from the old high school to the new one, carrying their belongings with them. Since this was to take place in the middle of the day, classes would resume at the new high school on the same day. The weather interfered with the plans for the walk to the new building, however, and a downpour of rain brought out many parents to transport students by car.

On the same day, March 28, 1924, seventh and eighth grade classes began occupying the old high school building as the first student body of Central Junior High School. With more classroom space, the enrollment of Owensboro High School (also called "Senior High") continued to grow. Originally, Senior High was to have been a 10th-12th grade facility, but in

the end that would have created overcrowding at the Junior High Facility and all four grades were located in the new building. The grade configuration has changed several times throughout the years. More than 1,000 community members toured the building upon its dedication.

Course offerings included Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, the Sciences and English, European and American History, Civics, Latin, French, Home Economics classes, Geography, Law, Psychology, and a variety of Business courses.

The 24 high school teaching staff members were highly educated. Among the faculty were teachers whose names live on through OHS awards including Alice Hite (English), Mary Barret (Math), Mary Lou Mobberly (English), Ada E. Schaefer (English), Cora Lee Webb (Art), Newton Parrish (Physical Director) and Marguerite Moore (Home Economics). J. O. Lewis was Principal. Superintendent J.L. Foust oversaw the planning and building of the high school at 1800 Frederica Street and would continue to be a leading force in the school's development until he retired in 1947.

According to the student publication, *The Voice*, during that first spring in their new building, the Rose Curtain Players produced the play, *Tweedles* by Booth Tarkington in their "...beautiful new assembly hall." The Senior Class put on the play, *Come Out of the Kitchen*, but performed it at the Grand Theatre. Students were wearing Red and Black (replacing the school's original colors of Orange and Black) and "...were wearing the 'O'." While the boys were the "Red Devils," the girls' basketball team in 1924 was known as "The Red Angels." At lunchtime in the new building, students had to line up behind teachers and march to the cafeteria to avoid "wild rushes of the student body." In 1924, 36 boys and 57 girls graduated from the high school. The "on to college" rate in those days was about 50%.

Although students actually moved into Senior High's current building on March 28, 1924, the facility was not dedicated until Friday, April 4. At that time, the public was allowed to examine the modern high school and attend a dedication ceremony in the new auditorium. Featured speakers at the dedication included School Superintendent J. L. Foust, Mayor J. H. Hickman, and University of Louisville President A. Y. Ford, who was an OHS graduate.

The original structure of the current building consisted of the three-story section, the auditorium, and a gym. The spacious new high school was 253 feet long, considered one of the best equipped schools in the country and had the following features:

First floor –district superintendent's office, ROTC classrooms, gymnasium (The superintendent's office was located at OHS from 1924 to 1958); 946-seat auditorium and library. (The library was on the third floor, moved to the first floor in 1966 and moved to the 2nd floor in 1996.)

Second floor--principal's office, teachers' lounge, auditorium balcony, and additional classrooms

Third floor--cooking room, biology and chemistry labs, classrooms, and cafeteria. (The cafeteria could accommodate 600 students in 2 shifts. Beginning March 31, 1924, students were required to eat in the cafeteria, bring their own lunch, or eat at home according to an

article in the March 30, 1924, *Owensboro Messenger*. The paper reported that, “It is decreed that the day of the lunch wagon, drug store, and groceries at noon time has gone by.”)

The construction of OHS was unique in itself. It is one of the oldest high schools in the state and is among the few multilevel high schools in Kentucky.

Graduating classes increased in size each year until January 20, 1926, when the school held its first mid-year commencement. This early graduation, which reduced the number of four-year graduates, was controversial and later dropped because of the feeling that three-and-a-half-year graduates missed out on college preparation and scholarship opportunities.

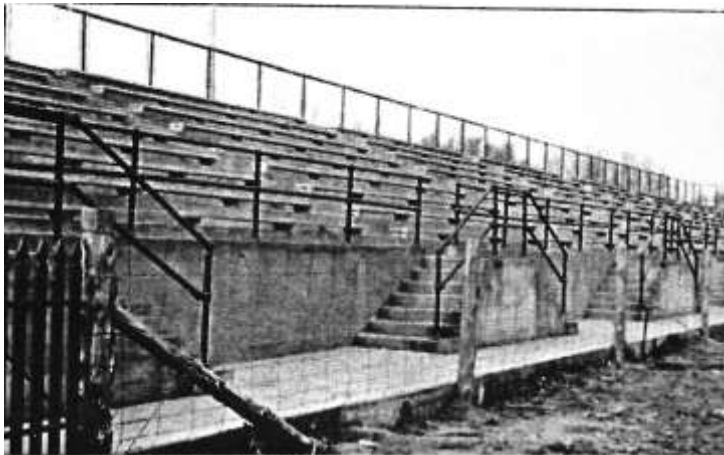
In 1929, an elaborate May Day program complete with a May Court and the crowning of a May Queen was part of the school’s annual tradition.

Dances such as Sadie Hawkins, Homecoming, and prom were not allowed by the School Board until December 1938 when repeated requests finally persuaded Board members to allow dances in the OHS gym provided that dances were “strictly” regulated.

Several years after the founding of OHS, Western Colored School was established as a combination grade school and high school for African American children and, in 1932, Western High School opened. Beginning in September 1955, African American students were given the option of attending either OHS or Western High School. One African American student enrolled full time and 30 African American students from Western came to OHS to participate in R.O.T.C. but remained enrolled in Western. Over the next five years, more African-American students chose to attend OHS. Western was dissolved as a high school in 1962 after integration took place and there were only 14 in the Western Class of 1962.

World War II took its toll on the OHS graduates and their families. The 1943 OHS yearbook was dedicated to those serving in the war. In 1943 and 1944 alone, 33 OHS graduates died in battle. It was a harsh time for young men who often left school early to enlist.

In 1944, Central Junior High became so crowded that the 9th grade was moved to OHS. As the enrollment of Owensboro High School continued to increase in the 1930s and 1940s, a need for more classrooms and other facilities evolved throughout the school district.



Rash Stadium

*The original Rash Stadium
(West Side)*

The November 21, 1945, issue of *The Scoop* tells the story of Rash Stadium. Dr. O. W. Rash spearheaded the initial fund drive for the west side of the stadium in 1924.

The Scoop reported that the project actually began in 1922 when the new

OHS was being built. The team had to play at the old baseball park near Legion Park. Large crowds stood to watch entire games. Dr. Rash made the remark, “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could build a fine stadium for the boys?” The men who were with Dr. Rash agreed. Then, the Doctor suggested the plan for asking 100 men to contribute \$100 each for the new stadium. *The Scoop* article goes on to say that when Dr. Rash had the money he approached the Board of Education and asked where the stadium should be built. The board decided to build the 1,500 seat stadium on the west side of the school.

East Side Rash Stadium

After the stadium was built, people naturally began to call it “Rash Stadium.” But, Dr. Rash’s efforts did not stop then. In 1940, he decided the school needed a larger stadium and began to collect money for an addition to the stadium which cost approximately \$30,000. At Dr. Rash’s suggestion, the public donated \$4,000. The School Board furnished another 25 per cent and the federal government through the Public Works Administration, contributed 75 percent of the labor. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the school district entered into an agreement with the government to use WPA workers to improve and enlarge the football stadium. Improvements included a running track, repairing the old seating area on the west side of the stadium, building a concrete wall around the football field and adding seating, a band stand, and a press box on the east side of the field. A field sprinkler system was also installed.

Sportswriter John Potter wrote in the September 12, 1941, issue of the *Messenger-Inquirer* that OHS would play in the new stadium for the first time that night against Dawson Springs (a game OHS won, 26-0). He reported that it would be a night of “firsts” with new head coach Houston Elder, new game jerseys for the team, and a new stadium. Potter wrote: “With the addition of the new stadium to the old, which has stood on the west side of the field for years, automobile parking on the sidelines for the purpose of watching football games from the inside of motor vehicles has been eliminated.” He also reported that “the playing area had been moved 50 feet to the south, placing the south goal nearer Ford Avenue.”

The 3,400-seat stadium was dedicated on September 21, 1941, in pre-game activities at the OHS-Evansville Reitz Memorial football game. Sixty-five years later, the next major facelift for Rash Stadium was the conversion to synthetic turf. Work on the stadium was the first phase of a building project at the high school under the leadership of Superintendent Larry D. Vick and the Board of Education that will include a new gym and fine arts facilities. Dr. Vick had the pleasure of kicking the first field goal on the new field during a practice session on August 2, 2006. Then, on September 8, 2006, the Red Devils played their first regular season home game against John Hardin High School on their new synthetic turf field. For the Red Devils, it was their 1,000th football game. The position of the 50-yard line moved once again, this time a few yards to the north.

Other expansions of OHS occurred as follows: ROTC building in 1948; north wing, music hall, cafeteria, new gym, and conversion of old gym in 1960; library and front classrooms in the mid-1960s; football locker room and horticulture building in 1974; elevator installed in 1982 to make the building more accessible; renovation of school auditorium and front halls in 1986; the second floor media center, additional classrooms in 1996; and a new gym and fine and performing arts expansion underway in 2008.

The original 800-seat gym was hailed as one of the best in the state. The March 30, 1924, *Owensboro Messenger* stated that “If the students of the Owensboro Senior High School do not excel in every line of athletics in coming years, it will not be because every modern equipment for the development of the muscle has not been provided for them.”

In 1958, portions of the building were updated. By the 1960s the old gym was converted into two levels of classrooms as a direct result of the Sputnik era when the Soviet Union beat the United States into space. Those added rooms became foreign language, biology, physics, and mathematics classrooms and the current gym was added. The National Defense Act paid half (\$59,000) the cost of that project.



OHS in the 1950s would soon grow with major additions added.

As OHS grew, more courses were offered and facilities and teaching materials were improved. By the late 1950s more emphasis was placed on areas of “concentration.” Department chairpersons were named.

On February 9, 1962, Superintendent Kenneth Estes recommended to the Board that Western High School be closed at the end of the school year. Citing the need to integrate and to provide all students a greater variety of electives than was possible for a school of 73 students (the number projected for the following year), Dr. Estes encouraged the Board to take the action that “... Western High School be discontinued as a segregated school for Negroes.” Vote on the motion was unanimous and it was declared carried. In the fall of 1962, all remaining Western High students were transferred to Owensboro High School. Retired OHS Principal and OHS graduate Bill VanWinkle credits Dr. Estes and Mr. Goodloe, the Western Principal, with a smooth transition.

In July 1967, Owensboro High School and all other city schools were recognized together by the National Education Association as one of twenty-five outstanding school systems in the United States.

By 1970, schools were becoming crowded. The Board considered building a second high school, but the amount of property that would be required and the cost were prohibitive. As a result, a reorganization of the system took place to relieve the situation. OHS operated under double sessions during the 1972-73 school year. The 11th and 12th grades attended classes between 7 a.m. and 1 p.m. The 9th and 10th grades went to school between 11:05 a.m. and 5:05 p.m.

Relief for the overcrowded school came in 1973-74 when OHS housed just the 11th and 12th grades in what is now Owensboro Middle School at the corner of Booth and South Griffith was the 9-10 Center. Bill VanWinkle became Principal of Senior High that year and Casey Organ was the 9-10 Principal. Splitting the campuses meant that programs had to serve two locations. Three thousand new books and new furniture were added to the 9-10 Center library. Principal VanWinkle would take OHS through a 20-year period of transition as grade configurations would change, academics and athletics would thrive, and major renovations would take place.

Beverly Chelgren joined the OHS staff as a chemistry teacher in 1970. She remembers the lab before air conditioning. She could open the windows onto Frederica Street and use box fans but it was hard on teachers and students alike to put up with the heat and the traffic noise. The main part of the chemistry lab had four big lab tables that remain there today. She recalls someone telling her that her third-floor classroom had once been the kitchen, which would be logical since the three rooms in the center of the third floor had been the school cafeteria. Mrs. Chelgren recalls the dumbwaiter in the wall. Students today still enjoy trying to locate the wall shaft where food was transported to the school cafeteria that once was on the third floor. When chemistry labs were modernized, fume hoods were installed in compliance with OSHA standards. Adjoining the room was what was once a stock room no longer used because of OSHA standards, but Mrs. Chelgren recalled teacher Gladys Combs telling the story of having taught in the old store room. It was so small that her students had to line up outside the room in the order they were to be seated and file in row by row.

A Vocational Agriculture program was introduced and the greenhouse, which was dismantled in January 2006 to make room for the new public library, was erected in November of 1973. The greenhouse was the site of an annual poinsettia and spring flower sale.

Class offerings nearly doubled at OHS in 1973. The Student Council magazine drive, the major fund-raiser for the school for a number of years, recorded \$23,400 in sales that year. Whether it was academics, sports, drama, publications, music, or extracurricular activities, OHS was thriving. By the fall of 1974, 2,069 students were enrolled in grades 9-12.

OHS remained a divided campus until the fall of 1981. Declining enrollment, reduced state revenue, and the beginnings of a population shift lead the Owensboro Board of Education to move the 10th grade back into Senior High. There was a shuffling of teachers as the District reduced staff. At the same time, the former 9-10 Center became Owensboro Junior High for 8th and 9th graders.

In the 1980s, Senior High's enrollment continued to decline as residential neighborhoods spread outside the school district's boundaries. In 1987, enrollment had declined to 804 (grades 10-12) from a high of approximately 1,750 (grades 10-12). In the fall of 1989, the 9th grade class became a part of the OHS campus bringing the enrollment back to more than 1,000.

By 1986, the original section of the building was showing its age. The wooden classroom floors which squeaked when walked on and the tall hallway ceilings wasted heat and light. The auditorium was in poor condition. In the summer of 1986, ceilings were lowered, wooden floors were carpeted, a distinguished commons area was created, and the auditorium was completely refurbished.



An open house on November 20, 1986, packed the auditorium.

Today, the commons area is highlighted by gleaming trophy cases that attest to the school's achievement in competition. The centerpiece is a large central trophy case in which state championship trophies are displayed. During the renovation of the auditorium, the stage was enlarged, the seats were replaced, the walls were refinished, and new lighting and sound equipment was installed. By 2010, more improvements will be completed for fine and performing arts facilities.

The completion of the \$750,000 renovation project was officially recognized with an open house on November 20, 1986. However, the sparkle of that evening was replaced less than six months later with soot-covered walls and the choking smell of smoke. On April 4, 1987, a fire severely damaged the north wing of the building and caused extensive smoke damage to the entire school, including the newly renovated section. The two-story north wing was sealed off

for reconstruction. The rest of the building underwent a thorough cleaning. The 3-alarm fire occurred on the sixty-third anniversary of the school's grand opening.

Because the fire took place during the first night of spring break, the district had a week to clear debris to get the school in order before students returned. The entire art and business wing was destroyed. The second floor fell down into the first floor. Water damaged other parts of the north end of the building and smoke damaged the entire building. The contents of lockers including text books sustained smoke damage. Even papers in filing cabinets did not escape the gray film that covered everything. The whole inside of the building was gray and the smell was overpowering. School officials wondered if it would be possible to resume school after spring break. But, the Owensboro Public Schools' maintenance staff worked wonders and additional cleaning crews were brought in to strip all ceiling tiles and insulation out of the building. Walls were washed down and the mess contained as much as possible.

Many OHS students and teachers heard the news of the fire while on Spring Break in Panama City, FL, a favorite vacation spot for years for the "OHS community." They were anxious to see the school first hand. By Monday after spring break, the school was open and ready for business—though all classes in the north wing had to be relocated for the rest of the school year. Textbooks had to be put through the "Ozone Room," a chamber that helped remove the smoke odor from books. But, the acrid smell of smoke attached itself to everything in the building for weeks so that many students and teachers went home each day with the smell of smoke in their clothing. To say the least, it was a very difficult spring. Reconstruction began immediately and continued into the fall.

Owensboro High School displays many outstanding features. In 1966, the library had been called "one of the best equipped student libraries in the nation." The library, with two levels of shelves, contained 13,000 books along with a large periodical guide section. With the technology age, it became outdated and cramped for space. In 1996, \$6.2 million in building renovations added a 7,600 square foot state-of-the-art media center, television broadcast studio, remodeled guidance and front offices, telephones in classrooms, computer labs, and science rooms. The cafeteria was also modernized.

An unusual feature of the high school in its early years was that each classroom contained a telephone. Calls could be made from room to room through a switchboard in the principal's office. As years passed, so did the phones—only to return to the classrooms in the 1990s when phones were required in Kentucky classrooms for safety reasons.

In 1979, OHS was named a "Kentucky Landmark" by the Kentucky Heritage Commission. While the school continues to be attractive and well-maintained in 2008, work is underway to upgrade and update the high school facility to better serve students. An additional athletic field at Shifley Park has been added to the District's facilities.

The architectural firm of Sherman Carter Barnhart PSC has worked with the district and OHS faculty and staff to design additional fine arts and physical education facilities for the high school. On one of several occasions, architect Brian Lanham met with principal Anita Burnette, Maintenance Director Allen Howard and Superintendent Larry Vick to finalize plans.



On July 26, 2007, the School Board reviewed and approved schematic drawings for the OHS Project presented by Brian Lanham, architect with Sherman Carter Barnhart Architects PSC. The gymnasium and fine arts center addition and a remodeling project includes:

- Enclosing the courtyard for a multi-use room and scene shop for drama;
- Remodeling the auditorium with new seats, stage lighting, control booth, dressing rooms, storage, green room, etc.;
- Adding rooms for chorus and band/orchestra with storage rooms and offices;
- Remodeling physical education rooms next to present gym for ROTC;
- Building a 2-story gymnasium on the north side of the present cafeteria to include a connector lobby leading from gym lobby to a hallway in front of the cafeteria.
- Adding parking spaces for 502 cars with entrances from Griffith Avenue and McCreary Avenue as well as Frederica Street. This included the use of the Longfellow property for parking.

The construction project at the high school is expected to be finished in early 2010.

Today, a dedicated faculty and staff, some of whom are OHS alumni, are proud to be a part of the high school's history. On September 25, 2007, they gathered for the following photograph.