



# SCHOOL'S OUT

*The century-old William Penn High has long sat vacant. Will it ever turn the page?*

BY MADDIE CONLEY



*Capital Rebirth team at the William Penn High School*



**M**ae Sobczak was a relatively quiet student back in her high school days at William Penn High School. She had lots of friends and participated in the orchestra, her high school's sorority and intramural sports after school. But she wouldn't have labeled herself "Miss School Spirit."

Sixty-four years later, however, things are different.

After graduation, Sobczak started organizing class reunions. Every five years, William Penn alumni get together, and, each six months, the class of '56 catches up. On top of that, Sobczak and a group of women meet for lunch every Friday to reminisce on the old days and chat about the new.

In 2006, the class celebrated its 50th reunion. Sobczak, along with a committee, organized the event, which included a tour of the old William Penn building. The group went there excited to relive old memories, but left feeling like the building they toured was nothing like their beloved alma mater.

"When we came out to get on our bus, we were saying how it was so sad," Sobczak said.

Over a decade later, it's even sadder, as William Penn has sat, deteriorating, since. The classrooms, once full of students, are full of old rubble and garbage, and the halls display crude graffiti. Do a quick Google search of the old school, and you'll find videos posted by thrill seekers, trespassers on the hunt for ghosts or just curious residents.

Over the years, many fires have been set in the building, requiring the Harrisburg Bureau of Fire's attention.

"Structurally, that building is in phenomenal shape," Fire Chief Brian Enterline said. "It's more that the contents inside are burning, not the building itself. The problem is it's a large, vacant school building. It's very difficult to secure."

All the while, William Penn has sat in the hands of the Harrisburg school district—too damaged to hold on to, too big and costly to give up easily.

People have wondered what will come of the grand old campus overlooking Italian Lake, the school that was once Harrisburg's pride.

#### IN THE DAY

It's the early 1920s in Harrisburg. The city isn't just growing; it's thriving. Suburbanization hasn't led to flight out of the city yet. There's even a trolley car system. But one of the hottest topics in the city is education. People are looking for modern, quality schools.

David Morrison, president of Historic Harrisburg Association, paints the picture.

People were ready to send their kids to school in the city, but the city wasn't ready for them, he said. Many city schools were built in the post-Civil War years—the 1870s and 1880s. Once the 1920s came roaring around, the school district needed to play catch up.

"By the '20s, the educational infrastructure of Harrisburg was pretty obsolete," Morrison said.

In the early 1900s, Harrisburg Technical High School, located in the building now known as Old City Hall, was built on Walnut Street and served students for many years. But with people hungry for top-notch education, Harrisburg Tech became

a government center and a new, larger high school was proposed.

"In those days, the public school systems were so advanced," Morrison said. "In some cases, people who lived in the suburbs paid to have their children attend Harrisburg schools."

Urban architect Charles Howard Lloyd, who would later claim fame for the Zembo Shrine, was busy designing schools. Harrisburg Tech and Simon Cameron School (1896) were formed in his signature gothic style. It was only fitting that the district called upon him for the new school they would call Hoffman's Woods School (later William Penn), Morrison explained.

But Allison Hill families wanted a school of their own that their kids could walk to. So, the district decided on two separate schools—John Harris and William Penn.

William Penn building plans were scaled back to save funds for the second school on the Hill, but the new blueprints were hardly modest.

"They had huge halls," local historian and William Penn alum Calobe Jackson recalled. "We would start track right after Christmas, and we would run through the halls for practice."

Jackson graduated from the class of 1948. He remembers an indoor courtyard and a grandiose auditorium with a balcony. It was beautiful and well designed, he said.

In addition, there was a kitchen, cafeteria, housekeeping suite, science and lab rooms and shop spaces for tech courses, amongst other classrooms, according to "Building Harrisburg," a book by historian Ken Frew.

"Years ago, they used to say William Penn was the largest high school campus in the U.S.," Jackson said. "It was really a beautiful school."

Jackson's class had a little over 300 students, while the full school had about 1,200. Back then, high school lasted three years instead of four.

When William Penn was constructed in 1926, high school enrollment was swelling. Between 1900 and 1920, student enrollment in the United States quadrupled and then nearly quadrupled again by 1940, according to the public policy magazine, *City Journal*. But it was in that same decade that the school movement ended. *City Journal* ties that to segregation and racial discrimination, which had Blacks enrolling at lower numbers than whites.

By the mid-1950s, enrollment at William Penn had only declined slightly. Sobczak remembers that her class of '56 had about 264 students. Pride for their school was still strong among students, she recalls.

"We were proud to be city school graduates," she said.

But the 1950s represented the high mark for William Penn. That decade, the city's industrial companies began closing, and people started leaving Harrisburg for the suburbs. In 1972, John Harris absorbed William Penn students, the building morphing into a technical school before closing entirely.

#### MOVING FORWARD

For most William Penn graduates, it's been a long time since they danced at a sock hop or scored a goal in intramural sports. Most are parents, grandparents

and even great-grandparents. Many have passed away. Sobczak's alumni mailing list gets shorter by the year.

Just like many of the students that once walked its halls, William Penn is old. But that doesn't mean it's any less grand. The interior may be decrepit, but the building is still the columned mammoth that it was in the 1920s.

For some, that's enough to see it ripe with potential.

Superintendent Chris Celmer said the school district is currently taking letters of interest and offers for the William Penn building.

"We want them to have local interest in the community, and they're going to have to have experience," he said. "It has to come with the ability to finance."

Local nonprofit Capital Rebirth put in a \$2.5 million bid in March and garnered over 7,500 signatures from the community on a petition of support for the plan they're calling "The Rebirth Project." The group wants to create a community center, including space for education, entertainment and wellness, explained founder Mikell Simpson.

"William Penn has always been a historic landmark," he said. "We know what the needs of the community are and how everyone can benefit."

Included in the building would be an indoor stadium, classrooms, an enclosed track and offices. Simpson estimates that the work would take three to four years and cost up to \$175 million.

But others envision the building as something else entirely.

Jackson could see it as a retirement home with outdoor space for rehabilitation services. Morrison thought turning it into condos or apartments would be nice or even having it join forces with Zembo Shrine across the street for a national organization.

"It has the possibility to really enhance that whole part of Uptown Harrisburg if it's done right, and that's why we care," he said.

There have been other successful school building conversion projects in the city, such as the old Simon Cameron School in Olde Uptown and the former Boas Street School at Green and Forster streets, which both are now apartment buildings.

At the beginning of the year, the redevelopment group, The Bridge, started renting the old Bishop McDevitt school with plans to build an eco-friendly community center. It also has put in a bid for William Penn, according to the developers.

So, builders have big plans for other big school properties in the city.

But William Penn isn't just big—it's enormous—including a 222,000-square-foot building and 25 surrounding acres of land.

As Superintendent Celmer said, taking on a project like this requires not only a heart for the community, but strong resources backing it.

The district, he said, continues to weigh all viable offers. **B**

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*The William Penn building is located on the 2000-block of N. 4th St., Harrisburg.*

*For more information on The Rebirth Project, visit their Facebook page. To learn more about The Bridge, visit [www.thebridgeecovillage.com](http://www.thebridgeecovillage.com).*