On the eve of the Civil War, Hopkins was located at the corner of Wall and High Streets (where today’s Yale Law School is located). A one-story, square, white, stucco building with a natural stone basement was surrounded by two-dozen elm trees. A cupola on the building contained a bell rescued by an alumnus from a fire at a monastery in Florida in 1840. The bell tolled students to class (and continues to toll atop the current library on campus). Admission requirements at that time were that “Candidates shall be well grounded in the common English branches,” meaning Latin and Greek, and its goal was “preparation of youth for College,” a curriculum largely unchanged since 1660.

As a result of the influence of a series of short-term headmasters and young, poorly trained teachers, student enrollment declined—only six students were enrolled in 1854. The Trustees realized that things needed to change. They hired a new head of school, James Whiton, who had graduated from Yale, Phi Beta Kappa, two years prior. Things were so bad when Whiton was hired that the Trustees had to vote funds from the School’s endowment to cover the salary advance that Whiton requested. When one of Whiton’s six students fell out of a tree and died, the student enrollment dropped to five. Whiton gathered the group in a quincunx (one student in each corner of the barren classroom and one in the center) and continued to teach. The room was not much larger than our theater in Lovell. Whiton persuaded the boys to help him maintain and clean the building.

Whiton was a good teacher, popular for enlivening assignments by encouraging such projects as building models of Roman bridges and amphitheaters and playing creative games with lines that required memorization. The boys began presenting essays for discussion and criticism. Topics included “Ought Savage Nations to Have a Right to the Soil?” and “Was America’s Expansion in the 1840’s Helpful or Hurtful?” Enrollment grew and included two future giants in Hopkins history: Simeon Baldwin and J. Willard Gibbs. Whiton hired additional help from among Yale faculty. Each class met in the same room. While one student was subjected to oral examination,
reciting lessons in front of the teacher’s desk, the others might be at work translating or writing. There were public declamations every six weeks that were covered by the New Haven newspaper. Topics included in 1861: “The Standard of the Constitution,” “Indications of a Presidential Policy: Lincoln, 1858,” and “No Secession without Revolution.” There was a debating society, a literary society, and a secret fraternity that published a student newspaper. Tuition was $10 per quarter plus incidentals of $2 or $3. Whiton initiated assigning numerical grades to students’ assignments and began sending home monthly report to parents. He introduced prizes for industry and good conduct and for excellence in various studies. He also began annual final examinations that determined whether or not students would advance to the next year.

The work was hard. Between 1854 and 1857, 90 students entered Hopkins. By the end of that period, 38 were still enrolled, 8 graduated, 13 moved, 2 died, and 29 left on account of academic failure. When parents complained about how much homework was required and how strict Whiton was, he responded by lengthening the school day so that the students might get more work done at school without the distractions of home. Whiton kept a “Mark Book” in which he recorded every infraction of school rules,

continued...

1832 Great Reform Bill in Britain expands voting rights in Britain
1832 Indian Removal Act
1845–48 Mexican-American War
1848 Communist Manifesto published.

1833, 1835, 1838 Henry Waggaman Edwards, HGS 1793, elected governor of CT
1839–41 Amistad Incident.
1843 Jews in Connecticut receive equal right to form religious societies.
1848 Slavery abolished in Connecticut.

1838 Trustees purchase land for $2,500 at Wall and High Streets and build new schoolhouse. Elm trees are planted.
1839 HGS hires Hawley Olmstead as Head of School. “Ole Domine” will serve for 10 years and provide much needed stability.
1840 Orris Sanford Ferry (future congressman, senator, general) graduates.
1845 Augustus Brandegee (future congressman) and Nelson Taylor (future congressman, general) graduate.
1848 Polymnia Society founded (student fraternity devoted to literature).

1850 Compromise of 1850
1851 Great Exhibition in England
1859 John Brown killed at Harper’s Ferry.
1860 Lincoln elected president.
1861–65 American Civil War
1869 Transcontinental Railroad completed.

1850s Whaling industry peaks in Connecticut
Connecticut becomes insurance capital of the nation.
1851 New Haven to New York railroad completed.
1860 Lincoln campaigns in New Haven.
1861–65 55,000 Connecticut citizens serve in the Union Army.

1854 HGS hires James Whiton as Head of School. Under Whiton, enrollment grows from 6 to 65. Grades are mailed home for the first time. Final cumulative exams are held.
1854 J. Willard Gibbs (future Physical Chemistry scholar) graduates.
1857 Simeon Baldwin (future judge, governor, HGS trustee) graduates.
1861–65 HGS graduates enlist on both sides of Civil War conflict.
1866 Pi Sigma Tau founded, longest-lasting HGS fraternity (disbanded finally in 1947).
From the Archives...

including throwing “projectiles,” stuffing school door keyholes with gravel, and whittling on desks. Three warnings and twelve marks in one term were sufficient for dismissal. Corporal punishment was merited only by the most serious of infractions, such as “repeated misdemeanors and for escaping from the window of the anteroom while under sentence” and “for addressing a schoolmate with an obscene epithet.”

Whiton’s successors built upon his innovations, adding athletics and other student activities to the School’s offerings. A major renovation in 1873 expanded the size of the classroom building and enabled enrollment to grow. After peaking in the 1880s, however, enrollment began to decline once again. The stage was soon set for another innovator to come along in the early 1900s: George Lovell.

Quod felix faustumque sit,
Thom Peters, Archivist

1845 Edward Bouchet (future first African-American PhD holder) graduates valedictorian.
1873 Pi Sigma Tau begins publishing The Critic, Hopkins’ first regular newspaper.
1874 James Protus Pigott (future first Irish-American congressman) graduates.
1876 Walter Camp (future father of American football) begins experimenting with the rules for the game of football using the Hopkins squad.
1877 Edward House (future adviser to President Wilson) graduates.
1885 HGS Trustees reject proposal from New Haven Board of Education to merge.
1895 Marconi invents wireless telegraphy.
1901 President McKinley assassinated, and Theodore Roosevelt becomes president.

1890–1910

1870–71 Franco-Prussian War
1884 Mark Twain publishes Huckleberry Finn.
1885 Karl Benz begins selling motorcars in Germany.
1886 Statue of Liberty dedicated.
1892 Baseball Nine season ends with 4–2 record
1894 Charles Ives (future classical composer) graduates.
1897 First automobiles in Connecticut built in Hartford.
1899 Arthur Hadley, HGS 1872, becomes president of Yale.
1897 First telephone exchange in world opens in New Haven.
1900 Woolsey Hall built.
1908 New Haven Free Public Library built.
1901 President McKinley assassinated, and Theodore Roosevelt becomes president.
1904 George Lovell begins teaching at Hopkins while studying at Yale.
1907 Kate Glendinning opens school in her home, later to be known as The Day School.