

FOUNDING THE PARK SCHOOL THE STORY IN BRIEF

The Park School was founded at a time when the public school system in Baltimore was at the center of political turmoil. In June of 1911, Mayor James Preston dismissed School Superintendent James H. Van Sickle, whose 10-year efforts to remove education from the spoils system by refusing to allow teachers' appointments to be controlled by the political patronage system, to bring a halt to the practice of favoritism in ordering textbooks, to raise the standards of teaching by requiring examinations for promotion, and to introduce some of the leavening ideas of progressive education into the curriculum, had aroused strong political opposition. The struggle between Superintendent Van Sickle and Mayor Preston, who sought to regain political control over a patronage system that had once reached into every aspect of the educational system, was a cause célèbre in the daily papers.¹

In order to bring about Van Sickle's dismissal, Preston removed from the Board of Commissioners three of Van Sickle's proponents: Eli Frank (later Judge), Dr. John M.T. Finney, and Dr. J.M.H. Rowland. Many citizens considered this action a high-handed, corrupt use of political power, and *The Baltimore News* of June 29, 1911, announced:

In answer to Mayor Preston's statement that his removal of School Commissioners Finney, Rowland, and Frank is in response to public sentiment, *The News* invites the people of Baltimore to use its columns to let the mayor know what the real sentiment of Baltimore is in regard to the integrity of the School Board and freedom of the schools from political or other influence calculated to interfere with their efficiency.

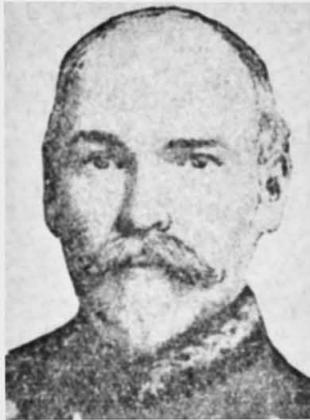
1. Accounts of the crisis appear daily from June 13 to June 29, 1911 in *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Evening Sun*, *The Baltimore American*, and *The Baltimore Star*, and were donated to Park School by Sydney Cone, Jr. '21 and Isabel Frank Cone '22, a daughter of Eli Frank, one of the founders of the school.



Judge Eli Frank, Board member from 1912 to 1931 (photo from *The Sun*, June 17, 1911)



Professor Hans Froelicher



General Lawrason Riggs (photo from *The Sun*, June 17, 1911)



Eli Oppenheim, Board treasurer from 1913 to 1919

In protest to the Mayor's actions, Goucher professor Hans Froelicher, Sr. and General Lawrason Riggs resigned from the Board. Within months these men combined with Eli Frank, Eli Oppenheim, Louis H. Levin, Siegmund B. Sonneborn, and were soon joined by Jonas Hamburger, Dr. Louis P. Hamburger, Dr. Guy S. Hunner, Sigmund Kann, George C. Morrison, Francis E. Pegram, Karl Singewald, Isaac A. Oppenheim, and Eli Strouse. Their united purpose was to establish a school that would follow the ideals of the Constitution of the United States and of progressive education, would be independent of political influences, and would be non-sectarian and democratic—i.e., open to all qualified students without regard to religious background, including families needing financial assistance.

Prominent in Baltimore as civic leaders, successful in their professional and business careers, these Park School founders and the first families who enrolled their children were both idealistic and socially liberal. Motivated primarily by the desire to found a school that (unlike most private schools of that era) would admit all qualified Jews, they rose above the narrow-minded parochialism that characterized existing private schools and chose to be both non-exclusive and non-sectarian, determined to establish a school that would be open to Jews and non-Jews alike.

It was the intention of the founders that Park School be pedagogically different from traditional private schools, as well as freed from the political control that impeded the much-needed functional reforms in the public schools. Active proponents of public school education, these men were committed to the spirit of Thomas Jefferson's ideal republic and sought foremost to educate children for productive citizenship in a democracy where respect for the rights of the individual citizen included respect for the right to religious choice.

In direct opposition to the injustices of the European class structure, the ideal of American meritocracy measures men and women by their individual choices and achievements and the experiences of their own lives. As believers in the ideals of the Constitution of the United States, Park School's founders were looking beyond private school education merely as a means of admission to prestigious colleges, the ranks of social privilege, or specific religious identification. They were committed to the ideals of citizenship in an open society and determined to incorporate into their new school the psychological insights and social goals of educational leaders William James, Horace Mann, and John Dewey, who saw education as a means to improving social conditions for all citizens.

For them, the advantage of an independent school over a public school was that administrative decisions would be based solely on considerations of the educational program, and integrity would prevail over political influence. Such a school could take advantage of the best thinking of educational reformers throughout the country, and while drawing upon the wisdom of the past, would be unfettered by hoary habits of classical traditionalism.

The result of their plan is The Park School, now 75 years old, with more than 2,200 graduates, and 675 current students from pre-school four-year-olds through 12th graders, 18 percent of whom receive some form of tuition aid.