

*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

## Annals from the Archives

# The Year Fitton High Almost Closed



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—During the early years of the Depression, many people experienced enormous upheaval in their lives. While life was often bleak, they kept their eye on the hope that a better future was coming. And for many, education was the key needed for that future. Catholics in East Boston were especially devoted to the Fitton School, holding onto the faith that a good education would provide better lives for their children.

The first rumblings of potential trouble for the Fitton School began in 1933. According to the Annalist for the East Boston Convent, the pastor of the Most Holy Redeemer Church, Fr. William B. Whalen, had commented several times to Sr. Imelda Walsh, the Superior of the convent, that he felt *“almost compelled”* to consider closing Fitton High School. Though he gave no specific reason at that time, the sisters assumed that the deepening Depression contributed to such a possibility. The sisters hoped and prayed it would not happen and that as the months went by, all would be well.

The next hint of trouble came on April 20, 1934. During a special meeting of the Fitton High School Alumnae Association, one not attended by Sr. Imelda or any of the East Boston sisters, Fr. Whalen *“spoke of changing the system of running the high school and [in response] the Alumnae pledged to support the High School for the next few years.”*

In fact, the Alumnae Association had been of enormous help with the sisters since the Association’s foundation in 1921. They had assisted with financing many repairs for the convent, including a new roof, as well as organizing ongoing fundraisers to support the school. Their pledge to provide the financing needed to keep the high school open was part of a long tradition of help they gave to the sisters and their mission.

None of that apparently mattered, because in May of 1934, Fr. Whalen told Sister Imelda, that, *“owing to financial difficulties, he would have to discontinue the High School.”* While this explanation might have been plausible, considering the country was then in its fourth year of the Depression, it came less than a month after the Alumnae Association’s promise to support the high school. It seemed there were other factors involved in the effort to shut down the high school. All the sisters were distraught at the possibility of the high school closing.

Because Sr. Imelda knew nothing of the promise from the Alumnae Association to support the High School, she *“went to the High School classes and told the pupils to file their registration at other High Schools for September. Evidences of their*

*surprise and grief was seen on all sides.*" As is to be expected, the students went home to inform their parents of this unfortunate development. Their parents were not only upset, but also began to spread the word among other parishioners, as well as former students of the pastor's decision. On "*hearing the unwelcome news [the alumnae] joined in widespread opposition.*" Though there is no mention of it in the Alumnae Association Minutes, certainly the women who had been present at the April 20th meeting must have been caught off guard.

The Notre Dame Alumnae were scheduled for a business meeting on Pentecost Sunday, May 20th. With a date to focus on, the former students began to plan. At the meeting was Fr. Whalen, Sr. Imelda, along with dozens of Alumni. Though Fr. Whalen gave finances as the cause for his decision, not only did he have the promise from the previous month of support from the Alumnae, but the convent financial accounts kept by the sisters at the East Boston Convent reveal that **they**, not the parish, paid the salaries of the lay teachers who taught in the high school. In 1932, the sisters paid the two teachers \$60 a month for their work. In 1934, there was only one lay teacher who was paid \$60 each month by the sisters. The records also show that for every year during the Depression, the sisters always met their expenses, by giving music lessons, teaching Catechism in Revere, and with the generous donations from many former students. In fact, while they certainly did not accumulate a vast savings, after paying for physicians, food, delivery services, books for their students, shoes, clothing and the monthly stipend they sent to the province government, they generally saved between \$100 to \$200 a month.

*"The [Alumni] members replied to the Pastor's statement of financial difficulties by assuring him [yet again] of their support by becoming responsible for the salaries of the High School teachers."* Fr. Whalen was not prepared for such a response. He refused to reconsider his decision, despite the fact that the Alumnae promised to provide whatever financial assistance the school needed to remain open. His reason? *"He put forth the fact that he had already secured the permission of His Eminence Cardinal William O'Connell to close the High School and would be embarrassed if he had to ask that his decision be revoked."*

Apparently, he had little experience in facing the combined anger of dozens of women, never mind Sister Superior Imelda of the East Boston Convent. After Fr. Whalen refused to consider the Alumnae Association's offer, Sister Imelda spoke calmly, *"explaining away all objections in the presence of continued insistence to the contrary by our Rev. Pastor showed that the Holy Ghost was visibly working. Sister Superior courageously insisted that the work of our High School is really a part of the work begun by the Holy Ghost on that first Pentecost Sunday, that it is a vital means of preserving the faith and the young generation and securing that faith to countless souls for the future and that to close the school would be only to destroy a well-established institution designed for the very propagation of that faith for which Priests, Sisters and missionaries and all successors of the Apostles in the past have given their all, and to which we, both Priests and Sisters, are devoting our lives at present."*

The Annalist then noted that even with the Alumnae's support and Sr. Imelda's pleas, it at last became apparent that *"the question of financial difficulty was not the fundamental reason for closing the school."* Unfortunately, the annals do not reveal the true reason for the pastor's decision. But, after a heated discussion with the Alumnae and the Superior, Fr. Whalen finally offered a half-hearted compromise. He *"agreed to yield to this combined and indomitable zeal on the part of Sister Superior and our devoted Alumnae by consenting to allow the school to continue for one year more."*

With that reprieve, the women of the Alumnae Association began their work. They formed a group entitled *The Julie Billiard Circle*. Though it functioned partly as a social circle, the women arranged themselves into groups of ten and everyone pledged membership dues of 25 cents each month. The fundraising drive and ongoing membership in the *Julie Billiard Circle* provided all the funds needed to keep Fitton High School open.

Not only did Fitton High continue past the one year trial, but the high school remained open until 1974 when it merged with the other parish schools of East Boston. The Parishes of Our Lady of the Assumption, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Holy Redeemer and Sacred Heart joined together to create the East Boston Central Catholic School, which continues to this day in the original Fitton High building.

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ East Boston Convent Annals, 1921-1951.
- ◆ Fitton High School Alumnae Association Minutes, 1921-1954.
- ◆ East Boston Convent Financial Reports, 1930-1961.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1871-2021.