

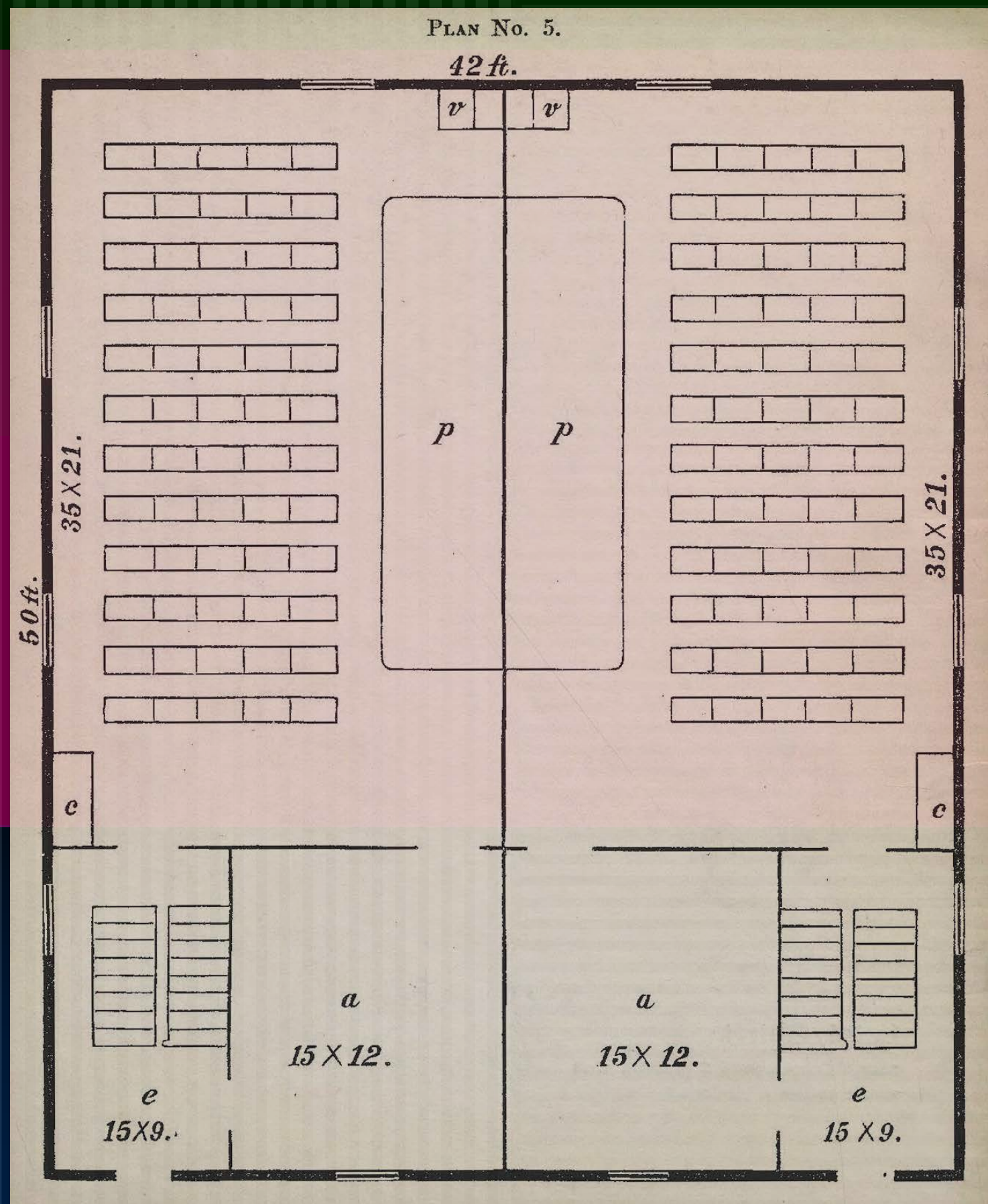
Higbee Street School

The building before you played a brief but important role as Trenton’s first school built specifically for the free public education of African American children. The Trenton School Board commissioned the construction of the Higbee Street School in 1856. Its Greek Revival design embodied the innovative ideas of education reformer Henry Barnard who believed in the importance of the classroom environment in improving student learning.

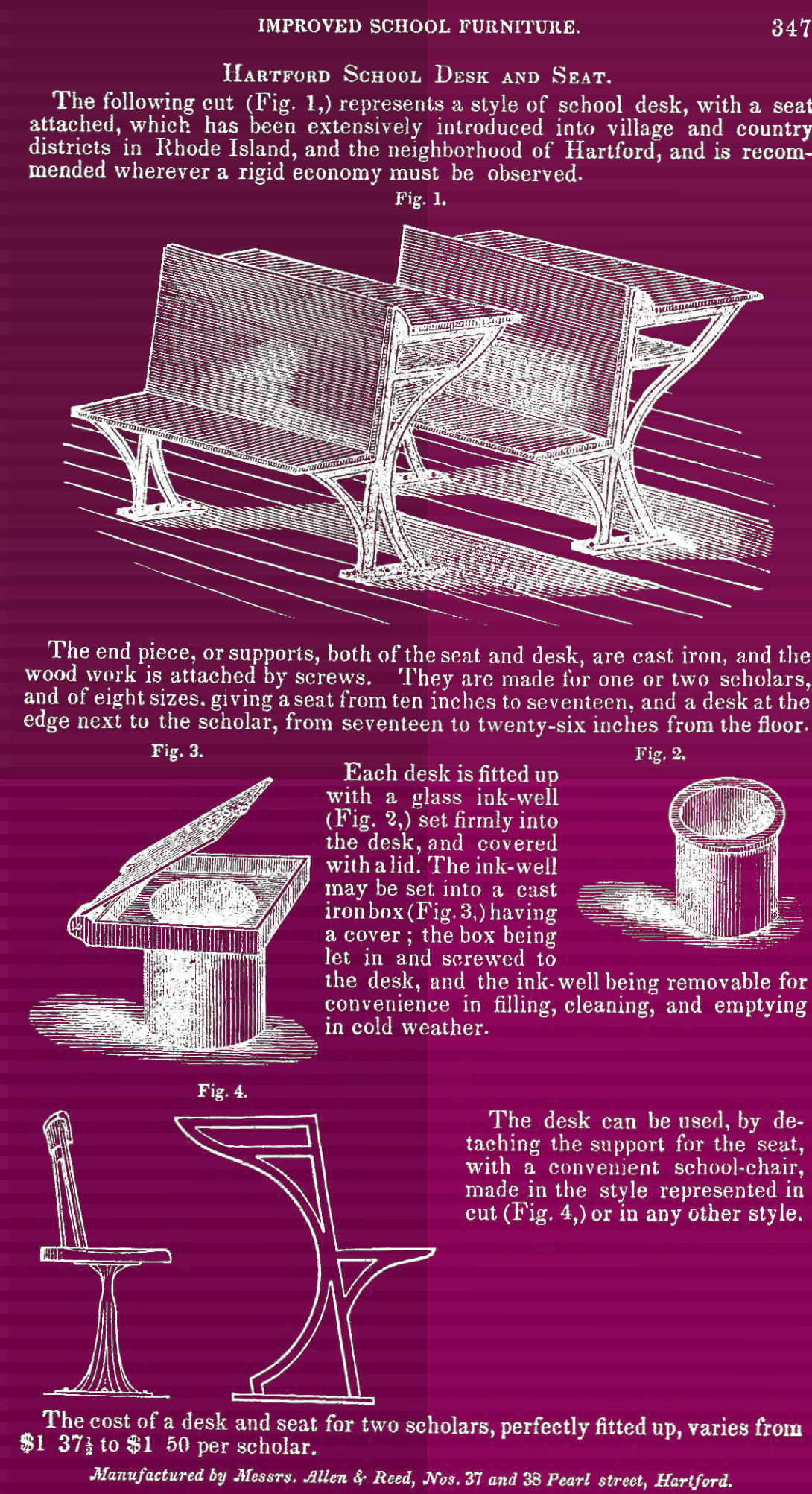
A Struggle for Progress

A contract was awarded for construction of Higbee Street School in 1856, but a partially-built structure collapsed twice before the building was satisfactorily finished and opened for classes in April 1861. The plan of the schoolhouse followed one of the standard designs of Henry Barnard – two large classrooms on each of the floors and separate male and female entrances and anterooms in the front on the ground floor. Light, ventilation and the arrangement of interior spaces were all important elements of Barnard’s design theories. At full capacity, Higbee Street School would have accommodated around 100 students.

Higbee Street School was located in one of Trenton’s most deeply rooted African American neighborhoods where most members of the community worked in low-wage, unskilled and domestic jobs. From 1861 until 1872, the school educated only African American students who were under the care of an ever-changing series of largely white principals and teachers. It was not until 1868, under community pressure, that Sarah A. Armstrong was appointed as the first African American principal. In March 1872, students were shifted to the smaller Ringold Street School and Higbee Street School was renovated and became a whites-only school.



Higbee Street School is modeled after one of many designs published by the education reformer Henry Barnard (1811-1900) [Henry Barnard, *School Architecture* (1854), p. 98].



Period school furniture suitable for the Higbee Street School [Henry Barnard, *School Architecture* (1854), p. 347].



A photograph of the Higbee Street School, circa 1920, when it was known as the Nixon School [Image credit: Trenton Public Library, Trentoniana Collection].

Schoolhouse Postscript

When Higbee Street was renamed Bellevue Avenue in 1878, the school followed suit. The Bellevue Avenue School became the John T. Nixon School in 1896, honoring a prominent New Jersey politician and judge. In 1916, the Nixon School shifted back to educating African American children in kindergarten through second grade until it was closed in 1923. The building was subsequently used for storage and as a carpentry and repair shop by the School District until it was shuttered in the 1980s. For its architectural significance and its importance in telling Trenton’s African American story, the building was designated a city landmark in 1977 and placed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 1995.

“Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

- Opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court, May 17, 1954

The separate education of African American and white children in Trenton’s public schools has a long and racially charged history extending over more than a century. The Higbee Street School is an important way station along that historical path. Trenton schools only finally became desegregated in 1944 following the New Jersey Supreme Court decision in the Hedgepeth-Williams case, a key precursor to the U.S. Supreme Court’s Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka ruling that prohibited racial segregation of school systems throughout the United States.



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