

The 1891 Architect of Boston's Charles C. Perkins School (145 St. Botolph Street, corner of Cumberland Street)

David Walden

May 28, 2013, revision

Harrison Henry Atwood (Boston City Architect, 1889–1891) designed the Charles C. Perkins school building. It was mostly constructed and was completed (summer 1892) while Edmund M. Wheelwright was City Architect (1891–1895). During its design and construction period and during the first year of its use, the school was known as the primary school in the Prince school district. In 1894 it was named after Charles C. Perkins, a Boston School Committee member from 1871–1884 and “art critic, author, organizer of cultural activities, and an influential friend of design and of music in Boston.”

The 1992 edition of the *A.I.A. Guide to Boston Architecture* [2nd edition, Susan and Michael Southworth, Globe Pequot Press, Old Saybrook, CT, 1992] lists Edmund Wheelwright as the architect of the Charles C. Perkins School. The first edition says the same thing, as presumably does the third edition. Michael Southworth, co-author of this architectural guide says [email of May 25, 2013] that he believes their information about the 1891 architect came from the architect of the 1981 building renovation, Graham Gund.

Wheelwright was a noted architect (see Douglass Shand Tucci's *Built in Boston—City & Suburb* [New York Graphic Society, Boston, 1978, pp. 195–197]. Wheelwright designed many well known Boston area edifices, among them the buildings for the Fire Department Headquarters (now Pine Street Inn), Massachusetts Historical Society, Horticultural Hall, New England Conservatory of Music and Jordan Hall, and the Longfellow Bridge and Lampoon Castle (home of the Harvard *Lampoon*).

It would be nice to think of our schoolhouse building as being one of Wheelwright's designs, especially since he was especially noted for his school buildings and wrote a book about their design [*School Architecture: A General Treatise for the Use of Architects and Others*, Rogers & Manson, Boston, 1901] and his school buildings are featured in the first volume of Francis Ward Chandler's book *Municipal Architecture in Boston, from Designs by Edmund M. Wheelwright, City Architect, 1891–1895* [Bates & Guild company, Boston, 1898]. However, the absence of any mention of the Charles C. Perkins school building in Wheelwright's own book or in Chandler's book cast doubt on the attribution of this school building to Wheelwright [both books are on the shelves at the Boston Athenaeum].

Visits in 2013 to the Boston City Archives [where Boston School Committee documents from the era in question are on file] and the Massachusetts Historical Society [where Wheelwright's own signed copies of his four annual reports as City Architect reside] revealed the following detailed history regarding the 1891 architect of the Charles C. Perkins primary school at the corner of St. Botolph and Cumberland Streets in Boston.

1. In the years around 1900, there were a number of school “divisions” in Boston, each containing “districts.” The Perkins schoolhouse was in the Prince District, one of four districts in the Fourth Division (Central City).

2. Document 56 in the bound set of “Documents of the City of Boston for the Year 1890” is titled “City of Boston Report of the City Architect in Relation to Plans for School Buildings,” is dated March 12, 1890, and is signed “Harrison H. Atwood, City Architect,” and says, “Plans for the following school buildings are in course of preparation and upon which no contracts have been awarded: . . . Primary School, Cumberland and St. Botolph streets . . .”
3. Harrison Atwood ceased to be City Architect on March 30, 1891. Edmund Wheelwright was the next City Architect.
4. City Architect reports from Edmund Wheelwright covering the years 1891–1894 never mention the Charles C. Perkins School, but they do mention the Prince Primary School which is distinct from the Prince Grammar School at the corner of Newbury and Exeter Streets [*Annual Report of the Architect Department for the Year 1891*, Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, Boston, 1892; *Annual Report of the Architect Department for the Year 1892*, Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, Boston, 1893; *Annual Report of the Architect Department for the Year 1893*, Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, Boston, 1894; *Annual Report of the Architect Department for the Year 1894*, Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, Boston, 1895]. (The Prince Grammar School was designed by a City Architect before either Atwood or Wheelwright).
5. In Wheelwright’s 1984 annual City Architect’s report [Appendix C continued, School Department], the Prince Primary School is listed as the fourth and last school design of Harrison Henry Atwood. A later chart in this volume [Appendix E, Financial Statement Concerning Brick School-Houses Built From 1880–1895] lists the construction dates from December 17, 1890, to April 15, 1892 (maybe construction didn’t really get going seriously until early 1891 accounting for the 1891 date given elsewhere for the building).
6. Books by Herndon and Bacon [*Men of Progress: One Thousand Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Leaders in Business and Professional Life in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, compiled under the supervision of Richard Herndon and edited by Edwin M. Bacon, pp. 706–707; and *Boston of Today: A Glance at Its History and Characteristics*, also by Herndon and Bacon, p. 130] describe Atwood’s Prince Primary School as being on St. Botolph Street at the corner of Cumberland Street. The May 4, 1989, nomination form by Leslie Larson and Kimberly Shilland for the Bowditch School, designed by Atwood, for the National Register of Historic Places notes that the Herndon-Bacon book(s) must mean the Charles C. Perkins school [<http://www.jphs.org/victorian/bowditch-school.html>].
7. School Document No. 21–1892: Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Boston, 1892 says [page 4], “These [schools] were completed during the summer and occupied soon after vacation . . . a new Primary on St. Botolph street in the Prince District . . .”
8. School Document No. 22–1893: Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Boston, 1893, as part of a chart of all of the schools in the city on page 187 lists for the Fourth District the “St. Botolph-Street School” with Clare E. Fairbanks as “3d Asst.”
9. School Document No. 19–1894: Annual Report of the School Committee of the City of Boston, 1894, in another chart of all of the schools in Boston lists on page 167 “Charles C. Perkins School” with Clare E. Fairbanks as “3d Asst.”
10. The book “Documents of the School Committee of Boston for the Year 1913” in Appendix E page 210, as part of a list of all the schools in the city and the provenance of their names, says “‘Charles C. Perkins’ (name of building), ‘Prince’ (district), ‘1891’ (year erected), and ‘Charles C. Perkins, member of the School Committee from 1871 to 1884’ (named for).”

11. From the above documents we can see that the design of the schoolhouse at the corner of St. Botolph and Cumberland Streets started before March of 1890, construction began in December of 1890, the building was completed in the summer of 1892, it was occupied that fall, and it apparently was named for Charles Perkins sometime in 1894.
12. The wikipedia entry for Charles C. Perkins reports him to have been notable interpreter of the arts (music, art, etc.) in addition to his involvement with the School Committee. He died in 1886, so naming a school after him in the early 1890s makes sense. The year 1894 would have been the 10th anniversary of his retirement from the School Committee.
13. There was some scandal involving Harrison Atwood. He was active in politics since college. He was given the post of City Architect at the age of 26. Atwood later won elective office to both the state House of Representatives and the House of Representatives in Washington, DC.). He was dismissed as City Architect only two years after being appointed to the post, at the time of a change of Boston Mayor when he was accused of avoiding competitive bidding processes to direct contract awards, thus costing Boston too much money to build its buildings. Wheelwright was chosen to follow Atwood, and one of Wheelwright's initial tasks was to evaluate how much extra Atwood's bidding practices had cost the city. After Atwood's dismissal, there was a libel action [<http://archive.org/stream/testimonyharris00atwogoo/testimonyharris00atwogoo.djvu.txt>, page 181 mentions the Prince primary school].
14. Like Edmund Wheelwright, Harrison Atwood did architectural work that is venerated today. The Bowditch School, Congress Street Fire Station, and Harvard Avenue Fire Station, which he designed, are all in the National Register of Historic Places. The Bowditch School has certain external similarities to the Charles C. Perkins School.

Acknowledgments. The investigation relating to who designed our schoolhouse was done at the Boston Athenaeum, Boston Public Library, Massachusetts Historical Society, and Boston City Archives, as well as via Google and the Internet. Liz Francis, Thomas Lester, Peter Drummey, and others helped at MHS, particularly Liz; Kim Tenney helped at the BPL; Marta Crilly helped at the Boston City archives; and the staff of the Athenaeum were helpful, as always, with directions to Pilgrim Lower Hall where the "extra large" volumes of Chandler's book reside. Michael Southworth took the time to answer my query about the source of the information in the *A.I.A. Guide to Boston Architecture* and passed my query on to architect Jason Kaldis, who has done extensive research on Wheelwright. Kaldis sent an email and excerpts from city documents that are consistent with what I found in various city documents. F. Washington Jarvis wrote an article about Wheelwright for the *Newsletter of the Roxbury Latin School* (April 2013, pp. 53–58) that didn't mention the Charles C. Perkins School and thus motivated my search for whether or not Wheelwright was the designer of this school building.