

A Brief History of Nichols High School

By Don Smith (Class of 1950) – Editor, NHS Digital Archives

Iowa Territory & State. The Territory of Iowa, established on July 4, 1838, encompassed the area between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and extended north from the Missouri state border to the Canadian border. In the 1840 US Census, Samuel Nichols of Ohio and his son, Benjamin Nichols, were living on farmland carved out of the prairie 14 miles northwesterly from the Mississippi River Town of Muscatine. In 1841 the Iowa Territorial Capital was moved from Burlington to a newly created town called Iowa City located about 21 miles northwesterly from the Nichols land holdings. On December 28, 1846, the present State of Iowa, carved from the south part of the Iowa Territory, was admitted as the 29th state of the Union. Pike Township, which included the extensive landholdings of Samuel Nichols, was organized as a political subdivision of Muscatine County, Iowa, in 1853. In 1857 the capital of Iowa was moved from Iowa City to Des Moines which could then be reached across the prairie only by walking or the use of oxen or horses.

Railway Revolution. Following the end of the US Civil War on May 9, 1865, there was a remarkable expansion of the national railway system fueled in part by federal land subsidies for right of way. In 1869, the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota Railway commenced construction on a railway line that crossed the extensive land holdings of Samuel Nichols in Pike Township of Muscatine County, Iowa, on its route from Burlington into Minnesota. Samuel Nichols supported the BCR&M by providing right of way and the railway company in turn agreed to build on Nichols farmland a railway station to handle passengers and freight and call it **Nichols Station**.

Log Cabin – Brick House. From 1840 to 1869, Samuel Nichols had lived in a log cabin on the west side of Wapsinonoc Creek located a mile east of the future Nichols Station. In 1869 Samuel Nichols moved to a new two-story red brick house just west of the log cabin. On August 9, 1870, Samuel Nichols died and was buried not far from his home in what is now the Nichols Cemetery.

The Boom Starts. After his father's death Benjamin Nichols, with his brother Townsend Nichols, provided the leadership for turning the unincorporated Nichols Station Village into a boom town based on its access to railway transportation. On October 14, 1870, a US Post Office was established in Nichols Station and Benjamin Nichols was its first Post Master. On June 22, 1871, Benjamin Nichols recorded at the Muscatine County Courthouse a surveyor's plat of town lots at Nichols Station that could be easily sold for residential and commercial uses. By 1872, commercial development in Nichols village and traffic from the railway station had progressed to a level that prompted Benjamin Nichols to build a three-story brick hotel within sight of the train station. This was the age of the classic travelling salesman who needed a hotel for overnight stays.

New Schoolhouse. In 1872 the Nichols Independent School District erected at the north end of the Nichols Station plat a new wood frame two-story schoolhouse that measured 40 feet square. This was a "Common" (Public) school for elementary education supported financially by government taxation. In the early founding years of the USA all education was obtained from private institutions and tutors and paid for privately. Well before the Civil War there had arisen a strong movement for providing free public education paid for by government taxation. And it only became stronger after the Civil War as a way to help heal the wounds from that conflict. See on the next page an 1879 photo of the Nichols Common School with 75 students and two faculty.



Nichols Public School
Erected 1872 - Photo ca 1879
Photo Source: 1984 Nichols
Centennial Book, page 65



Nichols Christian Church — Nichols Public School
Erected 1875 — Photo circa 1908 — Erected 1872
Photo Source: Keith Mills

A plat map of the Town of Nichols in the 1874 atlas of Muscatine County shows the Nichols Public School at exactly the same location in the north end of Nichols as the building shown in this picture. The following abstract of Nichols history is from page 581 of the 1879 History of Muscatine County, Iowa: "The present fine two-story ... schoolhouse was built in the summer of 1872. ... The present attendance averages seventy-four scholars. The present teachers are Franklin Gilbert and Mary E. Gilbert, the former's wife."

There are 77 persons in the picture above and two of them appear to be teachers. The woman at the right end of the back row may be Mary Ellen Gilbert (age 37) and the second man to her right (with a mustache) may be her husband, Franklin Gilbert (age 46). The single small tree in this 1879 picture and the multiple mature trees in the 1908 picture in the upper right corner are consistent with a 29-year time span. These circumstances are all consistent with an estimated date of 1879 for this picture.

Non-graded School. The form of elementary teaching in the Nichols public school was “non-graded” as compared with “age-grading” by placing students ages 6 to 14 in grades 1 to 8. In the non-graded school, such as was the case with almost all one-room rural schoolhouses, the teacher would give instruction to whatever group of students were capable of learning each subject matter, without regard to their age. By the middle of the 20th century, urban, suburban, and rural schools were age-graded and the one-room schoolhouse had nearly disappeared. The Nichols school would convert to an age-graded system in 1883.

Town Incorporates. In 1884 the village of Nichols Station incorporated as the Town of Nichols, Iowa. The town was, of course, named after Samuel Nichols. Around 1900 the State of Iowa authorized the opening of the Nichols Savings Bank which would occupy a new bank building with a second story opera house. The opera house would provide a facility for school events such as class plays, musical events, basketball games and high school graduation programs.

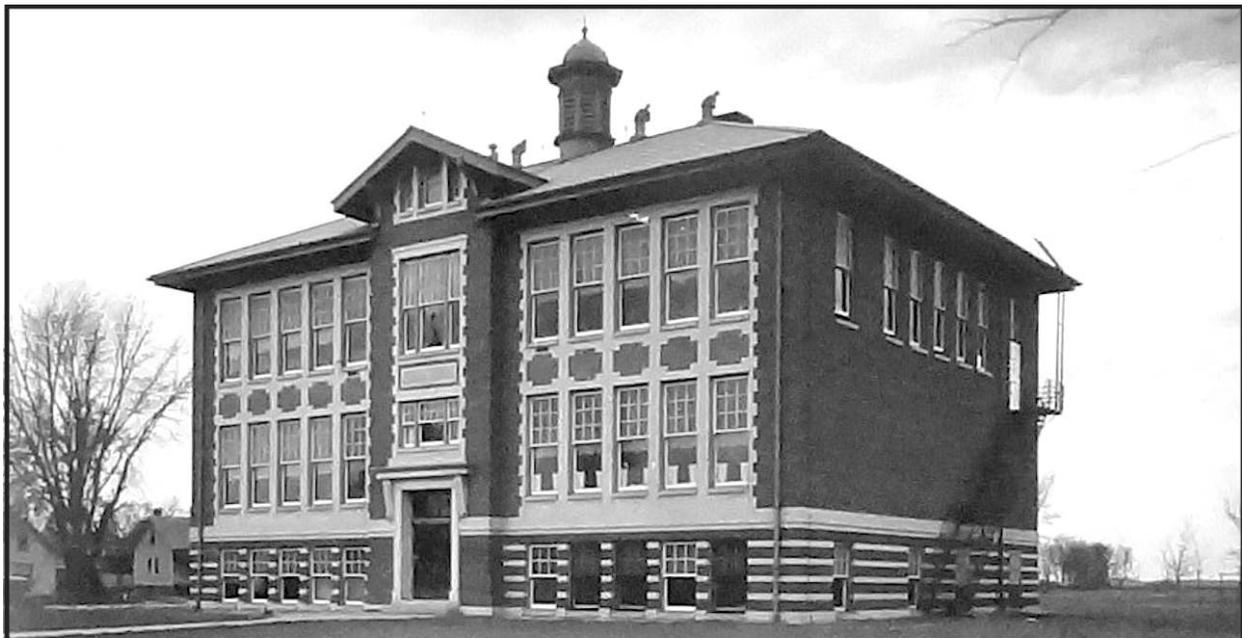
High School Curriculum. In September, 1900, the Nichols Public School added a three-year high school curriculum to its grade school. The Board of Education hired Thomas L. Eland, a brand new graduate of Iowa State Normal (later Iowa State Teachers College), to be the sole high school faculty and also serve as the “Principal Teacher” for the entire school. Professor Eland served for three years at Nichols High School and saw the first and only student to graduate in the 1903 class, Bessie Baker, daughter of the Nichols Savings Bank Cashier. The other two high school grades he taught would graduate seven in the 1904 class and five in the 1905 class.

Dr. Eland Marries Bessie Baker. Professor Eland enrolled in the Medical College at the State University of Iowa where he completed a four-year program in 1907 and at the same time maintained a social connection with his sole Nichols High School graduate. On June 11, 1907, Thomas L. Eland and Bessie M. Baker were married in the Town of Nichols. The newlyweds would make their home in the Town of Letts where Dr. Eland would practice medicine. In the year 2020 their sole grandchild lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the wife of a retired naval officer.

Miss Mayme Foley. On August 31, 1904, Miss Mayme Foley arrived in the Town of Nichols by train from Columbus Junction to start her new employment as teacher of the intermediate grades. It happened that she would teach those intermediate grades for 48 consecutive school years, retiring in May of 1952 at age 79. A number of families in the Nichols community had three generations pass through her classroom. Miss Foley died on March 29, 1957, at age 84 in Muscatine, Iowa, and was buried in Ardon Cemetery, a rural cemetery west of Muscatine.

High School Accreditation. For the school year beginning in September, 1913, the Board of Education hired Anna Gurtner to be the first assistant Principal thereby doubling the high school faculty to two teachers. The following month the State Board of Education placed Nichols High School on the list of accredited three-year high schools. Any three-year graduate would now be able to enroll in any four-year high school for the senior year and earn a four-year diploma.

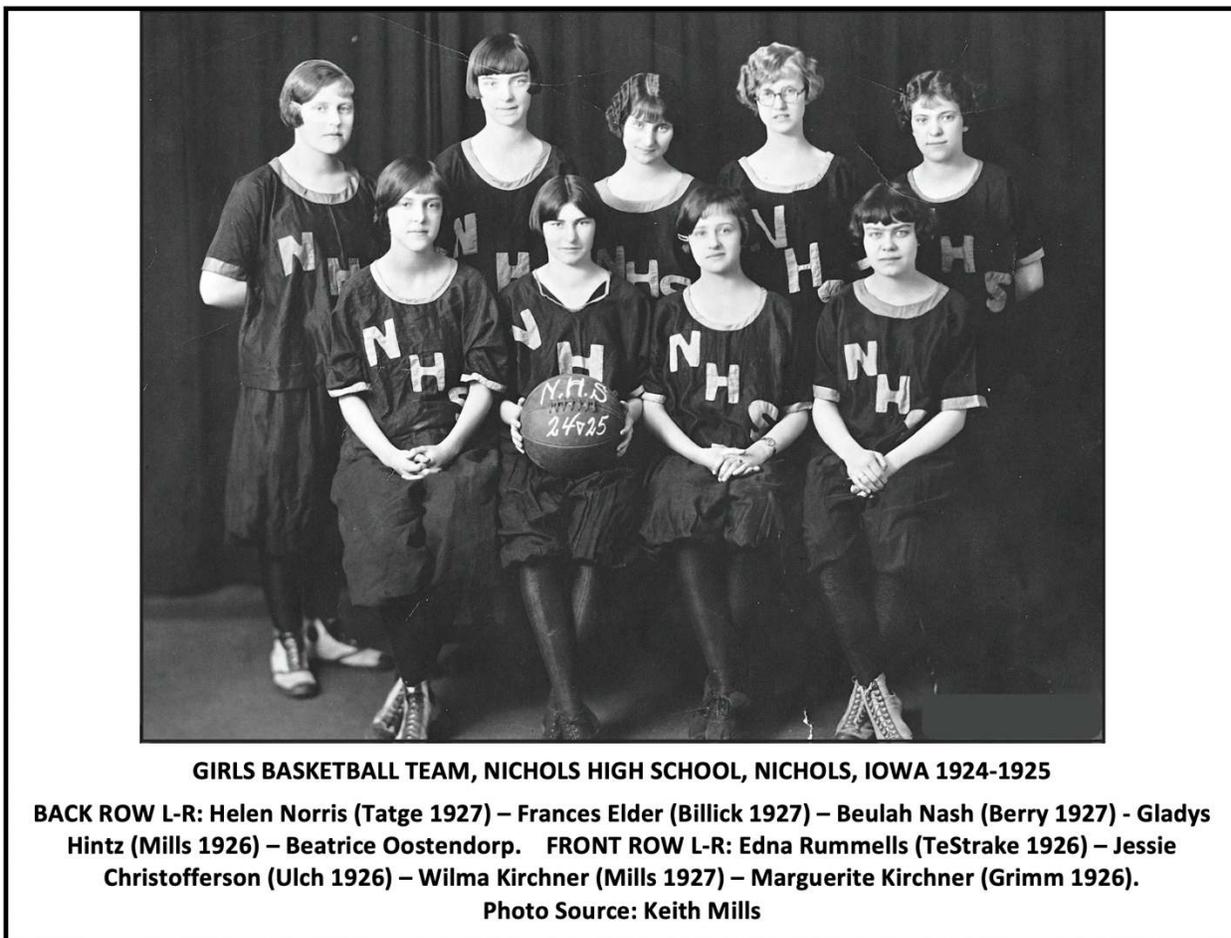
Old High School Burns. It was Wednesday, January 27, 1915, and the teachers at Nichols High School were having a meeting on the second floor after regular school hours when Miss Foley smelled smoke. As she stepped into the hallway to investigate she saw the trap door to the attic burst into flames. Some things were salvaged but the building was totally destroyed. To continue classes for the students, temporary class room space was secured at the opera house and the churches in Nichols.



The new schoolhouse that would be home to Nichols High School from the 1st day of class on November 29, 1915, until the last class graduated on May 17, 1961.

Construction of New Schoolhouse. The Board of Education, in May of 1915, awarded a contract to a Cedar Rapids builder to erect a new brick and stone schoolhouse. The site for the new handsome modern schoolhouse was located on the east side of the Town of Nichols on the north side of Ijem Avenue which would soon become Iowa State Highway 22.

Occupying New Schoolhouse. Thursday, November 25, 1915, was Thanksgiving Day. On Friday the faculty of Nichols High School moved from their temporary quarters in the Opera House and churches into the new schoolhouse. Monday was the first day of school in the new schoolhouse. On May 28, 1916, the 1916 Class of four students was the first class to graduate from the new schoolhouse. The 1916 class included Benjamin Franklin Nichols, Great-Grandson of Samuel Nichols. Exactly 34 years later on May 28, 1950, this Benjamin Nichols, as President of the Board of Education, would present diplomas to the six boys constituting the 1950 Class. One member of the 1950 class would, 70 years later on May 28, 2020, have spent five years building the Nichols High School Digital Archives on the web site of the Musser Public Library in Muscatine.



Basketball Teams. The Town of Nichols had an independent basketball team as early as 1909 that played its home games with out-of-town teams in the Nichols Opera House. In 1917 Nichols High School organized its first boys basketball team. A Nichols High School girls basketball team must have followed soon after as evidenced by the 1925 photograph above.

A Four-Year High School. The 1925 school year at Nichols High School was one of multiple historic events. The major event was the expansion of the high school curriculum from three years to four years. This meant there would be no 1925 graduation class; 1924 was the last three year class and 1926 would be the first four year class.

Alumni Association Organized. On November 1, 1924, at a meeting at the high school building chaired by Professor Gerbrecht, the school's "Principal Teacher" for that year, the Nichols High School Alumni Association was organized. The records created and maintained by the Alumni Association listing the names of graduates and their years of graduation from 1901 to 1961 proved to be the single most valuable resource for that information in building the Nichols High School Digital Archives. Willard Salemkink (Class of 1951) is to be thanked for preserving those Alumni Association records.

Nicholite Student Newspaper. The 1925 school year saw the first publications of the Nicholite student newspaper. The first Editor of the Nicholite was Robert Fox. His parents were Harry and Lenore Fox and four of their five children would graduate from Nichols High School: Harry Jr. (1924), Robert (1926), Lillian (1929) and Charles (1931). The father was the station agent for the Rock Island Railroad in Nichols from 1915 to 1939. The sad part of the Fox family story is that Robert would die of tuberculosis on July 5, 1936, at the Oakdale Sanitorium at Iowa City, Iowa.

New Auditorium-Gymnasium. In the summer of 1934 a new auditorium-gymnasium addition to the schoolhouse was constructed at a cost of approximately \$12,000. On October 2, 1934, a car carrying six members of the NHS baseball team was returning from a game in Conesville when it crashed into a vehicle parked along the side of the road. Three players died from their injuries: Virgil Poole, Clarence Carney and Junior Nash. The other three players, Pershing Elder, Lloyd Hahn and Edwin Yedlik, had serious injuries but recovered. A triple funeral for the three deceased students would be the first event held in the new auditorium on October 5, 1934.

Mirror Yearbook. The 1944 school year saw the publication of the 1st of 18 volumes (1944-1961) of the new Mirror yearbook. Here finally was an organized method for preserving annually a record of students, faculty, facilities, activities and events at Nichols High School. The content and the publication of the first six volumes (1944-1949) was all totally the work of the student staff right down to gluing black and white glossy pictures onto blank spaces left on the typed pages. The last twelve volumes were produced by a commercial publisher using content provided by the student staff that was printed on paper that was not photo quality. The irony is that the glossy prints in the six volumes totally produced by students could be scanned at a high resolution level and added to the Nichols High School Digital Archives as a remarkable collection of old but high quality pictures. That was not the case with the last twelve volumes produced by a commercial publisher using non-photo quality paper.

Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com is the premier online resource for genealogical research. Its database system includes digitized copies of many of the yearbooks published by high schools and universities in this country. Included are yearbooks from the University of Iowa and Muscatine High School. The 1907 University of Iowa yearbook has a picture of Dr. Eland in his last year in the College of Medicine. The 1909 University of Iowa yearbook has a picture of Dr. Muench in his next to last year in the College of Medicine. On April 10, 2020, the "Ancestry Yearbook Submission" office in Lehi, Utah, received from the Editor of the Nichols High School Digital Archives via UPS a complete 18-volume set of the Nichols High School Mirror yearbooks. It will probably

be a matter of a few months before the Mirror collection reaches the scanning process at Lehi. But once they have been digitized and added to Ancestry's database system anyone in the world with an internet connection and searching for genealogical records on a Nichols High School graduate between 1944 and 1961 will see references to volumes of the Mirror. And as long as there is an internet and Mormons in Utah the scanned volumes of the Mirror on Ancestry's database system will be secure. The Mormons, with their massive collection of genealogical records, were ready for the digital world when it arrived and the Mirror yearbooks could not be in better hands.

Dr. Virgil O. Muench, a graduate of the College of Medicine at the State University of Iowa, established a medical practice in the Town of Nichols in 1910. Over the 38 years that he was the doctor to go to he became an institution in the Nichols community. He probably delivered a substantial majority of the babies that would graduate from Nichols High School in the class years 1928 to 1961. That would include the Editor of the Nichols High School Digital Archives whom he delivered on December 16, 1931, at Mercy Hospital in Iowa City where he periodically served as Chief of Staff. Dr. Muench was notorious for his high speed driving at a time when the only speed limit in Iowa was a speed that was reasonable and prudent under the circumstances. Following a sudden death at his office on January 3, 1948, funeral services were conducted at the Nichols High School auditorium by the Rev. Noble Bolinger of the Christian Church and the Rev. Carlin Curtis of the Methodist Church with burial in the Nichols Cemetery. He never married but the entire community of Nichols was family for Dr. Muench.

Classroom Addition. On April 24, 1955, a newly constructed five-room elementary addition to the Nichols schoolhouse was dedicated. The student population was growing.

State Notification. In January, 1960, the Nichols Independent School Board received notice from the Iowa Department of Public Instruction that it would withdraw accreditation for the secondary school following graduation of the 1961 class and urged the board to engage in a voluntary reorganization by June 30, 1961. After that date secondary students would have to attend an accredited high school for the elementary school to continue to be approved.

Merger With West Liberty. A stalemate then ensued for the next nine years over the issue of merging with the West Liberty district or the Lone Tree district. During that time Nichols secondary students attended high schools on a tuition basis in West Liberty, Lone Tree and Columbus Junction. In August of 1968 the school boards of Nichols and West Liberty finally reached agreement on a merger. The Nichols School District ceased to exist on August 26, 1968. In 1987 the West Liberty School Board closed the Nichols schoolhouse and moved all elementary classes to West Liberty. It was a sad ending to the story of public education in the Town of Nichols. The causes were obvious: the automobile, the long haul truck, Interstate highways, airlines, school buses and state officials implementing a school consolidation policy based on bigger is better.

We Were Here. At the annual alumni association dinner on June 13, 2015, the members made a decision: Before we are all confined to the dust bin of history let us do something that says "We were here." That something became the **Nichols High School Digital Archives** now on the web site of the Musser Public Library in Muscatine, Iowa, and containing a rich historical record of the Nichols public school system from 1872 and the 493 alumni who graduated from the high school in the years 1903-1961. As of May 15, 2020, the number of living alumni was down to 103.