



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

December 2021



Angell Elementary School

James B. Angell School—100 Years Old

by Don Callihan

When I was 5 years old, I attended a puppet show in the Angell School gymnasium one Saturday morning. We did not yet have a television, so this was the first time that I had ever seen puppets, and I was excited to see the little figures talk and go through their antics on a miniature stage. I did not know it at the time, but next to the education of children, I was witnessing Angell School's most important function, a gathering place for almost anything and everything that happened in the Berkley community. However, before that could happen, the idea for a school in the area had to materialize and a school had to be built.

Angell School's Beginnings

The first schoolhouse began operating in what would become Berkley in 1840 and was succeeded by several other buildings until the electorate voted to change the district from a primary district to a graded district in 1918. Graded districts have teachers for each grade rather than one teacher teaching all grades.

Berkley School was built on the northwest corner of Catalpa and Berkley Avenue in 1919, but classrooms were also needed in the western end of the settlement. Representatives of two subdivisions, knowing that a school would attract more residents and also increase property values, offered the school board a school site in their subdivisions on February 3, 1921, but the board rejected their offer. However, the seed had been planted and three months later, the school board acted and bought an entire city block bordered by Bacon and Cummings avenues and Beverly and Wiltshire streets in the west end of the future village. On June 1, 1921, the construction of a four-room permanent building was authorized by the electorate as was a temporary three-room building to allow classes to begin in the fall of that year. The school was to be named after prominent educator James B. Angell, the longest serving president of the University of Michigan (1871-1909).

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Have you seen our Berkley Historical Museum yet? There you can learn the city's history, re-search the history of a Berkley school or hear about famous Berkley citizens. We even have histories and other information about some of Berkley's unique homes. Whatever your interest, a friendly volunteer is there to help you.

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James B. Angell Four-Room School, opened in late 1921



Minnie Gow Green
The Daily Tribune Jan 6, 1940

Minnie Gow Green was the first principal of the James B. Angell School and apparently one of its most beloved as she is the only one having her own bronze plaque in a prominent corridor location commemorating her 20 years in the "Schools of this Community."

Minerva Gow was born in Winchester, England on January 20, 1878. Sometime after 1910, she married Richard James Green. In 1915, the couple, along with their daughter, Josephine, emigrated to Shoshone County, Idaho where Richard was a miner. The family moved to Berkley in 1919 where Mrs. Green was a substitute teacher in the Detroit Schools until she became a teacher in Berkley in 1921.

There is some confusion as to when Mrs. Green became principal at Angell School. An article in the Royal Oak Tribune dated July 25, 1924 states that "Mrs. Minnie Green, who has taught in the Berkley School for several years, will have charge of the Angell School under the supervision of Supt. Roode." While the original four-room Angell School had been open since 1921, it probably had a lead teacher rather than a principal in charge. But when the school expanded to 12 rooms, stronger leadership was needed and Mrs. Green filled the bill.

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The temporary structure opened in the fall of 1921 and the permanent four-room school was completed in November. Classrooms filled up at a steady pace and it was soon apparent that more classrooms would be needed. Two years after the school opened, the school board acted as reported in the Berkley Tribune, October 19, 1923, and called a special election for October 25, "for the purpose of voting on a \$105,000 bond issue to build an eight-room addition to school No. 2, known as James B. Angell School."

More Rooms Are Needed

The bond issue passed and a photo appeared in the Berkley Tribune on November 16, 1923, with a caption reading: "This architect's drawing shows how the James B. Angell School will look when completed according to plans approved by the school board. The section to the left of the corner in the foreground is the part now standing. To this will be added the one-story sections and the larger auditorium, seen over the roof of the one-story wings. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls of Detroit are the architects who have developed this school splendidly in keeping with the atmosphere of a residential city suburb." However, the wrong picture and caption were published and instead of the one-story sections and the auditorium, an eight-room two-story structure and gymnasium would constitute the addition. Construction began in the spring of 1924.

At the start of school in September of 1924, occupation of the new rooms and gymnasium were still weeks away. It wasn't until late October and early November that rooms were occupied as they were finished. The first recorded event in the new gymnasium was reported in the Clawson Tribune on October 30, 1924. "On last Friday, the children of the James B. Angell School, Berkley, had a harvest festival. The children brought food which is to be distributed among the needy in Berkley. The spacious gymnasium of the new school was beautifully decorated with autumn leaves, the gifts of food were stacked in the front of the auditorium and the stage was banked with potted plants."

The Angell School Gymnasium/Auditorium

However, it wasn't until January 10, 1925, that the public was invited to tour the new school. The evening's entertainment was given jointly by the board of education and the Angell Parent Teacher Association. The principal speaker was Rev. Jerome E. Webber, pastor of the Royal Oak Presbyterian Church and a member of the Royal Oak board of education. A key point of his talk was "the use of the public school as the only logical community center where all persons might meet on common ground to build up a wholesome community life."

The Angell School gymnasium became that community center from the onset and was occupied many evenings and weekends. For more formal events, it was referred to as the Angell School auditorium. It was the scene of school

Mrs Minnie Gow Green

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Mrs. Green was moved back to the Berkley School as seen from this Royal Oak Tribune article dated September 13, 1928: "The principals of the schools were then presented . . . Mrs. Minnie Green, grades in high school; Mrs. Helen Stanley Cunningham, Angell School" Less than a year later, an announcement by new superintendent, Robert B. French, in the April 15, 1929, issue of The Royal Oak Tribune reads "Mrs. Minnie Green will be a supervising principal for all elementary grades at a salary of \$2500."

In addition to her duties as an educator, Mrs. Green was an accomplished story-teller who was featured at school functions, PTA functions, women's club meetings and other venues. As a member of the Royal Oak branch of the National Story League, she was animated, engaging, emotional, highly entertaining and in high demand.

Mrs. Green died from cancer January 6, 1940 after being ill for six weeks. She worked up until two weeks of her death. Her death certificate reveals that she had been battling cancer for two years and had had undergone two major surgeries.



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board meetings, Berkley High School basketball games, high school dances, high school plays, band and orchestra concerts, high school commencements, numerous PTA meetings, Sunday church services and women's club meetings.

The Athletic Field and Pay Phones

The Angell School athletic field was also important to the community and hosted Berkley Days and many Berkley High School sporting events including track meets in which I participated. The track was comprised of crushed cinders that imbedded themselves in the knees of fallen runners. There were also adult amateur baseball games that drew an audience and served as free entertainment for the community as there was no little league or anything similar until the 1950s.

A sometimes overlooked benefit of the school was 24-hour access to a pay phone as attested to by a November 1923 newspaper report noting that "Lights burn all night in vestibules and the schools are never locked."

The Depression Years

After having proven itself a solid educational establishment in the 1920s, the school struggled through the Depression years. Pattengill and Burton schools had both opened in 1925, but had to close in 1931 for lack of operating funds and Angell School and Berkley School had to take up the slack. Classroom populations exploded, and students went on half-days. This situation continued until Burton reopened in 1941 and Pattengill in 1943. However, the respite was brief as Berkley's population was on the brink of a post-war eruption. To meet the demand, Berkley built new schools and added rooms to existing schools.

The Post-War Years

Angell School opened its first new wing south of the gymnasium in March of 1952. A second addition along Bacon and south of the original four-room school opened in September of 1955. Lastly, a new media center facing Beverly opened in 1996, and, except for future renovations, the school was essentially in its present day configuration.

The Second Century

Berkley's school population peaked in 1967, and some of the district's schools were torn down or repurposed. However, Angell Elementary School continues to be the educational anchor it has been since the beginning, and, as it enters its second century of educating Berkley's kids, the old gymnasium has been renovated, but the low hanging trusses still limit full court "Hail Mary" basketball shots. And if all is quiet and you listen carefully, you may be able to hear George Kaye's Smoothies playing for the Hi-Y Boys of Berkley High School Yule Dance on Thursday, December, 22 1938 or perhaps the laughter of a five-year-old boy at his first puppet show.

The Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and more.

New Christmas Ornament for 2021

Now in addition to our best-selling Berkley coffee mugs, with the Berkley Theatre mug being our most popular, we also have a new Christmas ornament featuring the Berkley Theatre. This new ornament, together with the Berkley Santa ornament from last year, is a great addition to any Berkley Christmas tree and both are nostalgic gifts for those with a Berkley Connection. Stop in and pick yours up and be sure to check out the museum while you are here.. Mugs and ornaments are \$10 each.



Christmas ornaments available at the Museum Gift Shop

Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum
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248-658-3335
museum@berkleymich.net

Hours:
Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM
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