

True Tales OF BIRMINGHAM

Pioneer Educator



John Herbert Phillips (1853-1921)

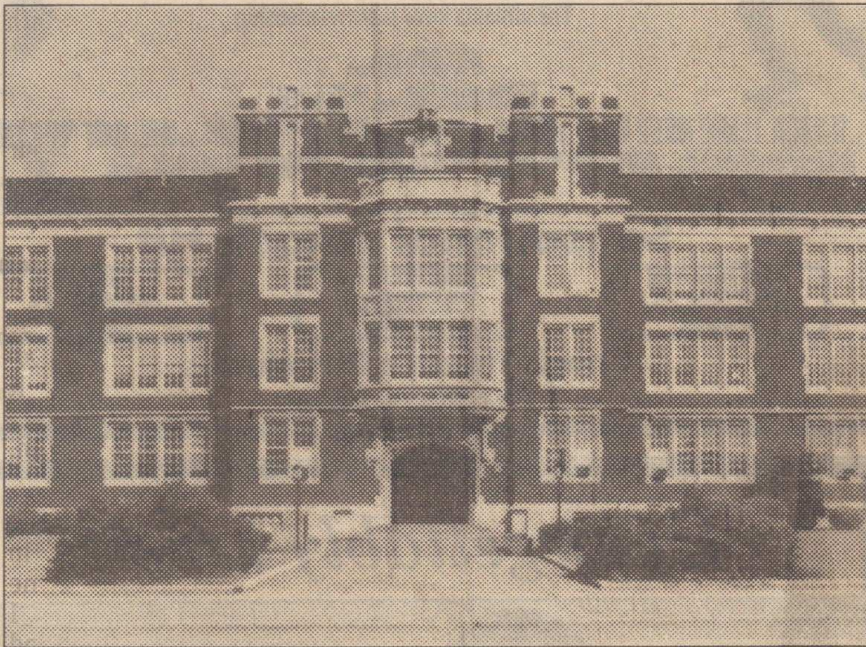
One rainy night in 1883, Mayor A. O. Lane and seven of Birmingham's eight Aldermen met in a room charged with emotion. Lane and three of the Aldermen present wanted the 30 year old Ohio native, John Herbert Phillips, to take charge of the city's school system. The other four Alderman were against Phillips. They feared he would "yankeeize" the schools and make education available to all Birmingham's children, a controversial issue in the late-19th century South.

At this time Birmingham's 2,000 residents had neither paved streets nor street lights, so when the missing Alderman finally arrived, he held a

lantern in his hand. Lane quickly called the vote and broke the four-to-four tie. Thus, Birmingham elected Phillips Superintendent of Schools.

For the next 38 years, J.H. Phillips worked tirelessly to develop and expand every branch of the city's educational institutions. Not content to provide schools for the city's young of all races and religions, Phillips also founded the Birmingham Public Library and the Booker T. Washington branch for blacks.

Largely because of Phillips' ability to overcome obstacles and financial handicaps, *The Journal of Education*, a national publication, praised the Birmingham school system, saying it "had attained a place of distinction in the educational world." The editor of the journal credited Phillips' educational vision, which considered the individual child and his needs as the hub of the wheel of which teachers, curriculum and facilities form the spokes. But for the arrival of a single Alderman, lantern in hand, one of Birmingham's most enlightening citizens might have been lost to the city and our history set on a darker course.



Phillips High School, constructed in 1923 and named for Phillips, Superintendent of Schools, 1883-1921.