

Editorial

History of Bermuda Technical Institute

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Preface

The following article outlines the history of Bermuda Technical Institute's beginnings in 1951 to its closing in 1969. The information is largely derived from newspaper accounts and government reports of the time.

1951-1958

On Monday, September 17, 1956, 86 boys, black and white, began classes in a £65,000 brand-new building, constructed by black Bermudian contractor Henry Talbot Sr. on a 16-acre site at Prospect, Devonshire, which Government had purchased in 1949. For all its significance, both socially and educationally, the Bermuda Technical Institute opened with surprisingly little fanfare.

That the school was integrated was noteworthy as only two years earlier, a parliamentary interracial committee had recommended that school segregation remain in place. Media reports, however, left no doubt that the school was a departure from the norm. The front-page sub-head of the February 12, 1956 Sunday edition of *The Royal Gazette* said: "It will Open to Boys Of Both Races—First of Its Kind in Colony" (p. 1), while the *Bermuda Recorder's* September 22, 1956 edition carried the headline, "Opening of Bermuda Technical School Most Significant Educational Venture" (p. 1).

The *Recorder's* (1956) article also told how headmaster Frank Dearnley took its reporter on a tour of the "newly constructed building on a site which commands a panoramic view of most of Bermuda from atop Prospect Hill." The school's workshops "had some of the finest equipment available," the *Recorder* continued, and the aim of the school "was to produce a stream of well qualified young men capable of obtaining and holding posts of importance in the industrial and commercial life of the community" (p. 1).

Headmaster Dearnley also stressed that "the wide training and academic standard of the school should not be confused with the work of a mere trade school." The school aspired to train boys "capable of filling future managerial and executive positions, and not just producing technically competent craftsmen" (*The Recorder, 1956, p. 1*).

The Technical Institute was established as a replacement for the apprenticeship school at the Dockyard, which had produced hundreds of highly skilled tradesmen, black and white. The closure of H.M. Dockyard in March 1951 after 200 years in Bermuda left a sizeable gap in trades training.

The Director of Education's report (1953) stated: "Since the closing a few years ago of H.M. Dockyard, where an excellent system of apprenticeship was in force, no facilities for technical education have been available. It is, however, proposed to provide a technical school for boys as soon as possible. A site for the school was purchased several years ago and plans for the first section of the building are in the course of preparation by the Public Works Department" (p. 19, Item 29). Architectural drawings for the school were approved by Parliament in May 1955 and construction began the same month. Contractor Talbot told *The Royal Gazette* (May 1955) that while he had been given a year to complete the project, if the weather were favourable, he expected it would be completed in eight months (p. 1). According to the drawings that were released to the public (*The Royal Gazette, May 1955*), the school building would be of two storeys and of traditional Bermudian architecture (p. 1).

Headmaster Dearnley, who was recruited from the United Kingdom, arrived in Bermuda in April 1955 to assist with matters relating to staffing, curriculum, and equipping the school. New Director of Education D.J. Williams, writing

in the Board of Education's report (1956), said that the first set of students were aged between 11 and 14. There were two streams (p. 8, Item 22). "It was decided," he wrote, "to restrict the full five years' course to the 22 who qualified through tests in intelligence and attainment and to include the remaining 64 applicants in a three years' trades course" (p. 6, Item 20).

Like the student body, the teaching staff was integrated. Assistant teachers were Sidney Rumbelow and Kenneth Clegg, both from the United Kingdom, Edward Smith from Jamaica, and Bermudians Arnold Usher, a master carpenter and boat builder, and Alma 'Champ' Hunt.

Tech experienced its first major setback the first year with the resignation of headmaster Dearnley because of ill health. He was replaced in August 1957 by Edward Crawford, also from the U.K., who would be headmaster for the next 13 years. Both Dearnley and Crawford had extensive experience in technical education.

The school's curriculum was a mix of academic subjects such as English, mathematics and science, along with technical and trades courses. The Director of Education's report (1957) said courses in general education were "supplemented by courses in woodwork and metalwork for pupils in their first two years, while it is intended that training offered in the subsequent years of the courses should be concentrated on building trades and light engineering." That year the school instituted a programme of evening extension classes "to fill a long-standing gap in our system" (p. 15).

Mr. Williams also wrote that proposed additions to the school were completed and when more parents [recognised] the value of education at the Institute, the school will assume an important place in the educational system. Students had the opportunity to sit United Kingdom administered exams, General Certificate of Education 'O' levels, and City and Guilds.

The Institute was a fee-paying school like all high schools during that era. Only primary schooling was free for students ages 7 to 13. The Institute's fees were £9 per term. As with other high schools, Government offered a number of annual scholarships. The Institute, however, was not without its teething pains. In the Director's 1958 report, the administration seemed to be struggling with attempts to match the curriculum with the needs of industry but, by the following year, the matter appeared to be resolved.

According to the Director's Report (1959), "The Technical Institute has now been in existence for four years. An evaluation of its place in the Colony's educational system confirms the opinion that it should reflect the needs of the community, functioning as a technical high school for the smaller stream of selected pupils and making available pre-vocational courses for the larger group from whom skilled craftsmen should be drawn" (p. 8, Item 24).

1961-1969

Williams (1961) expressed concern in his report about low student numbers in the technical stream. He wrote: "The number of applicants for admission for the 'technical' stream continued to be very small. No matter how comprehensive the provision of staff and facilities, no substantial progress will be made unless the calibre of the pupils can be sharply raised" (p. 12, Item 25).

The curriculum was reworked that year and greater emphasis was placed "on the necessity for closer liaison with local industry and conditions of employment." Williams also noted that the outlook for the 'trades' stream was made more realistic by the increase in time given to practical work and by the undertaking of site work in the form of a new building for the school's use (p. 12, Item 25).

By 1963, things were looking up. The Director's report for that year described how the school was fast "assuming a role specifically suited to the Colony's needs." It was a high school with a 'technical bias' for day students, a junior technical school for its day-release apprentices, and a technical college and an adult institute for evening students. Its operations were overseen by a governing body which was sensitive to the need for cooperation with local industry as well as the Board of Education. Significantly, Williams wrote that the school was not "beset with the problems of segregation as its students feel a strong common purpose in its curriculum of studies" (p. 24, Item 45).

As Tech's board, headmaster, and staff got to grips with its curriculum, Bermuda was being upended by political winds. The 1959 Theatre Boycott had dealt a fatal blow to segregation. Activists then turned their attention to the abolition of the property vote, with the result that the 1963 general election saw adults who were not property owners voting for the first time in Bermuda's history. In 1963 as well, Bermuda's first political party, the Progressive Labour Party, was formed. In 1962, Warwick Academy became the first of the traditionally all-white schools to change its segregationist policies (Warwick Academy Website, 2018, *Our History*).

Meanwhile Government commissioned an education report. The Houghton report (1963) recommended widespread changes to the education system, including desegregation and raising the school-leaving age. Significantly, Commissioner Harold Houghton excluded technical and vocational training from his review, because of his 'inadequate knowledge' of 'a highly specialised field.' However, he added: ". . .so far as I could observe, the Bermuda Technical Institute is already doing very good work and can reasonably be expected to develop on sound lines without any interference from me" (Houghton Report, 1963, Introduction). He also noted that both Tech and the Hotel School, which had opened in 1961, "have white and coloured students, with apparently no complications resulting from that integration" (Houghton Report, 1963, p. 2).

Changes adopted in the wake of the Houghton review included the raising of the school leaving age to 14 from 1965, to 16 from 1969, and the abolition of segregated schools. New schools were built to accommodate the increase in numbers of high school students. The school system was reorganised into three zones, with primary students required to choose a school in the zone closest to their place of residence (Education in Bermuda – The Board of Education's Report and Recommendations, 1964). The Institute for its part continued to tweak its curriculum, placing a greater emphasis on trades training along the lines of the Dockyard apprenticeship scheme.

In a *Bermuda Sun* (1967, Dec 2) column, based on an interview he had conducted with Edward Crawford, Victor Scott, the retired and highly respected headmaster of Central School, said that the number of students in the Institute's high school had risen to 228 since 1956. Crawford (1967) noted that the enrolment could have been much larger 'if the authorities had so desired' because out of 200 boys applying for admission for that September, there were places available for only 64 boys (Section 3, p. 9).

Of the 27 students who sat for 'O' level exams the previous year, there were 48 passes out of 89 papers submitted, with 15 earning distinction. There was also an 85 per cent pass rate in the industrial examinations, which were similar to the first year of City and Guilds. Upon leaving high school, Tech students had no difficulty finding employment. Crawford (1967) indicated that the ready reception given to the technical school boys by business firms testifies to the satisfactory nature of the training given at the school. "Despite this, there are people in the community who would like to see the programme of the technical school modified in one way or the other. For instance, there are those who would like to see the school concentrate on turning out tradesman, that is to say, carpenters, masons, etc., as they contend that Bermuda is not turning out the type of skilled tradesmen it once used to produce. On the other hand, there are those who would like to see one or two more academic subjects added to the curriculum, notably chemistry, which was dropped recently, and a foreign language" (*The Bermuda Sun*, Section 3, p. 9).

Responding in the same column (*The Bermuda Sun*, 1967), Mr. Crawford said, "We consider that the subjects taught here are the essential ones for a school of this type. Purely cultural subjects, such as French, art and music, if desired, must be studied in the boys' spare time. As it is, students in the fifth form have to spend additional hours outside the official day in order to complete the work" (Section 3, p. 9). Headmaster Scott, who had taught at the Institute in 1963, pointed out the unique characteristics of the school and also noted that seven Tech graduates who had recently completed their training in England were now "fully qualified technicians." His conclusion indicated that the school was playing an important part in the educational system of the colony. As well, "In addition to the basic education and industrial introductions, the school also gives valuable training in citizenship and the development of character" (*The Bermuda Sun*, 1967, Section 3, p. 9).

Scott (1967) further noted in his column that organising a programme of work required to meet the needs of the differing categories and ages must certainly "tax the ingenuity and skill of the principal and members of his staff to the

fullest extent” (*The Bermuda Sun*, Section 3, p. 9). Giving a tally of student numbers, he said there were 228 full-time high school students, 140 day release students, who attend classes for one full day and one evening, and 480 in further education classes. Although not mentioned in V.F. Scott’s column, it should be indicated that physical education was part of the curriculum and students participated in and won prizes in the annual inter-school sports competition, featuring track and field. They also played football and at one point rugby. Their float entries in the annual Floral Pageant were prize winners two years in a row.

In an interview with Headmaster Crawford, *The Royal Gazette* (1968, February 3) reported that student numbers had risen to more than 1000, the highest ever. The largest numbers were enrolled in English and mathematics classes, which vary from elementary to GCE ‘A’ level. Subjects were added and dropped depending on demand. The latest demand for day refrigeration classes and a new building was being completed to accommodate that demand. Day classes would also be instituted for welders and radio technicians. He said the school had 16 full-time teachers and 27 part-time ones, taught 71 classes a week, and was open for 12 and a half hours from Monday to Friday (p. 4).

On September 3, the *Gazette* (1968) reported that the school was adding three classrooms to cope with increasing demand. Despite that expansion, changes were in the works, which elicited little public comment. The Director of Education’s Report (1967) noted that Tech’s proposed development as an essential part of a further education complex at Prospect-in conjunction with the Hotel College and the Sixth Form Centre-will necessitate the phasing out of boys of secondary school age from 1969. From 1969, the Institute’s enrolment would come from all secondary schools and its staff will be shared with its two fellow institutions (p. 2).

The Sixth Form Centre for ‘A’ Level studies had been established following desegregation to serve the Island’s academic high schools. It opened in 1967.

Headmaster Crawford (1969, February 27) spoke about the coming changes at the annual ceremony, where students received their certificates. Edward Crawford eschewed the word graduation. His comments, carried in the *Gazette* the following day, said that 500 boys had passed through the high school since 1956, and around 2,000 had gone through the evening schools. He revealed that the Institute’s programme would come to an end in July as technical education would shift from high school to the college level. The headmaster called it a ‘brave experiment’ with many imponderables and no doubt heartaches. Until the secondary school phases out in four years, more and more older students will be accepted for training and education according to their desires (p. 5). When he retired the following year, he left no doubt as to how he felt about the closure.

1970-1975

While not opposed to a technical college, Crawford (1970, May 30) told the *Bermuda Sun*: “My contention all along (and there are many others who feel this way) is that it is a pity that this school should be closed down. It is distressing that a school in going order, which it was, should be closed down. We supplied a need or the children wouldn’t have found jobs. It will be another two or three years before there will be a replacement for this school” (Section 2, p. 3).

There were no Director of Education reports published for the years 1968 through 1973. However, a report of the 1974-1975 year, produced by the newly-established Ministry of Education, noted the establishment of the Bermuda College, comprising the Academic Sixth Form Centre, the Hotel College, and Department of Commerce and Technology, which included tech education and secretarial courses, such as typing and shorthand.

The Ministry of Education Report (1974-1975) described changes to the Department of Commerce and Technology as “far reaching. New advanced courses were introduced – the standards of courses and prerequisites for entry to all courses were raised. The course contents of technical and trades courses changed to meet Bermuda’s requirements” (p. 20, Item 2).

The public record is silent on the reasons for the decision to switch tech education from high school to the college level. The Institute seemed to have been going at full speed and then suddenly, with no explanation, the plan to phase out the high school division was adopted. There was no documentation noted for the change.

Over the years, former students of the Bermuda Technical Institute have spoken about the contribution of the school and have made calls for it to be replicated. Whether that is a realistic option is debatable, but there is no doubt about the key role the Institute played in education during the 13 years it was in existence. In 1996, the Technical Institute and the Sixth Form Centre buildings were razed to make way for the new sports center, wiping out physical evidence of the school's existence (*The Royal Gazette*, 1996, pp. 1-3).

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