

# History of the Kelley Grammar School in Newburyport MA

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Speaking in 1873 at the dedication of the school that bears his name, Mayor Elbridge G. Kelley, who was mayor from 1871 to 1872, laid out a pragmatic case for the need for quality public education.

“In all educational matters, there is a great responsibility resting somewhere,” Kelley said. “If the mind is like a blank sheet of paper, how important that the first lessons should be inscribed as correctly as they are indelibly.”

after its construction in 1872, for 135 years, the Kelley School bore that great responsibility of educating the city’s youngest. For generation after generation, the little eight-room school was an integral part of the community’s fabric. Only one elementary school in the country has been in continuous operation for longer.



Sadly, it was determined to close the school and have the students absorbed into the larger elementary education system. Much sentimental outpouring from former students and with much grieving; on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007; came the final school day.



From that point on, it would be in the hands of the citizens of Newburyport as to the final fate of the building.

Because a noted Newburyport architect Rufus Sargent had designed the building, Kelley School being one of his notable public school designs; the City determined that an adaptive reuse of this very historic structure should be made and designated the property to be slated for historic preservation.

Merrill H. Diamond's team, Parentdiamond.com, in partnership with architect Stephen E. Tise, was appointed to lead the project. The redevelopment transformed the historic school into a residential building while preserving its architectural heritage.

This combination of original architectural design and later adaptive reuse ensures the Kelley School remains a significant part of Newburyport's educational and architectural history.

### **The Kelley School named after Dr. Elbridge Gerry Kelley (1812-1881)**

Elbridge Kelley was born in 1812 in Newport, New Hampshire. Later, he studied medicine at Dartmouth, New Hampshire, and afterward at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. His physical frailties became evident, and he felt that a full medical profession would be too demanding, so he switched out majors and studied at the same college as a dentist.

He first visited Newburyport in 1837 and instantly fell in love. Though living at the time in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; he soon moved to the town and set up his practice. He

then married Hannah Pettingel, the youngest daughter of the Honorable Edward S. Rand in 1840.

His practice so prospered that he was able to buy the former Lord Timothy Dexter mansion on High Street in 1852. It had become terribly shabby, and one of his important efforts was to bring its grandness back to life. It wasn't long before it became a showplace for city events. He even with considerable expense improved the grounds making it a bright scene in the newly established city.

He served as alderman in 1868 and was Mayor of the city in 1871 and 1872. (At that time, Mayors only served one year.) Community-spirited, he worked diligently to build the City Railroad lines into the South End and also worked to get the Newburyport and Amesbury Horse Railroad established.

Because of his many community efforts, the city decided to name the new grammar school being built to the west of Bartlet Mall after him.

Well acknowledged, Dr. Kelly ran for Massachusetts General Court and was elected in 1874. Always eager to promote Newburyport and the region, he also worked and invested in the newly established Newbury Chapman Silver Mine.

Regrettably, never strong in health from his youth, the stress of all his engagements began to take a heavy toll on him especially in his throat and lungs. In January of 1875, he disengaged from his many activities, retired from his practice and moved to England. He found great health benefit living in the Penzance, Cornwall part of England with its almost Mediterranean weather in that part of the British Isles. He would travel back and forth from London, but the weather in that great city began to affect his health.

Regrettably heart disease began to develop and in September 1881; he passed away.

### **The Designer of the Kelley School: Rufus Sargent (1812-1886)**

A carpenter turned architect and engineer; Rufus Sargent was the seventh generation descended from original settler William Sargent. Born in Amesbury, he eventually made Newburyport his home and designed a number of houses and civic buildings there, as well as in the neighboring towns of Peabody, North Andover, Salem, and Methuen. His first work was the Unitarian Universalist church in Newburyport (near Fair Street-since demolished), and his career there lasted nearly half a century, through the town's pre-Civil War building boom and beyond. He designed the Peabody Library's Eben Dale Sutton reading rooms and the Peabody Town Hall, both of which are now Registered Historic Places, as well as St. Anna's Chapel and the State Street bank in Newburyport.

He designed the O'Brien Building for the Newburyport Five Cents Savings Bank and it was their main bank building until they moved across the street to their present location.

He is well-known for designing many buildings in Newburyport. He also worked in Peabody, Methuen, North Andover, and Salem, Massachusetts as well as in Exeter, New Hampshire. His work included residences, public buildings, and commercial structures.

In 1871, Sargent was responsible for the design of the Institution for Savings Bank at 93 State Street (MHC#364) and the following year designed the Kelley School (MHC#2862). Outside of Newburyport, Sargent's other known business block designs include the Merrill Block in Exeter, New Hampshire. Completed in 1874, the Merrill Block is Italianate in style although it shares certain similarities with the Five Cents Bank building including varied window treatments, a wide façade with a horizontal massing and granite trimmings.

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