

The Harley School

This year the Harley School on Clover Street in Brighton celebrates its 100th anniversary. Founded by mothers interested in a Montessori experience for their four-year-olds, the school has grown to a student body of about 500 from pre-school through high school.

Harriet Benton Bentley was one of a group of ten young mothers who lived in the East Avenue neighborhood of Rochester. She had had a fine education, graduating from Vassar College in 1907, and had developed an interest in the progressive education model of Maria Montessori. The women hired a teacher from New York City who had studied under Dr. Montessori in Rome. The school, called "The Children's University School of Rochester," opened in the summer of 1917 in a house on Oxford Street. That first school space was furnished with curtains, carpets, chairs, and tables collected by the mothers who also transported the children and prepared lunch for the extended school days.

The school's reputation impelled a steady increase in the student body to the point where it was necessary to seek larger space and so it moved first to a former tailor shop on Park Avenue, then to a room at the University of Rochester, then to the basement of the Third Presbyterian Church. In 1924, when it was incorporated under the New York State education laws, it was given the name that honored its founder, The Harley School, using the first three letters of Harriet Bentley's first name and the last three letters of her last name. Sadly, Harriet Bentley was not present to receive the honor. She had succumbed to influenza in December of 1918, three days after giving birth to her fourth daughter and the day before her thirty-third birthday.

Growing out of rented space in houses, store fronts, and the church, in 1926 the school trustees purchased from Kate Gleason thirty-one acres on Clover Street in Brighton. James Arnold and Leon Stern designed the two-story frame building that was intended to hold one hundred students. The site's amenities included an orchard, a nearby trolley stop, and Allen's Creek.

Although the original school building has been supplanted by a more modern facility, Harriet Bentley's vision of a progressive school continues to this day on Clover Street.

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