



Horace Staples

Businessman, Banker, Philanthropist, Founder of Staples High School
Courtesy of Dan Woog, author of *Staples High School: 120 Years of A+ Education*

Staples High School was founded and built in 1884 by Horace Staples, a wealthy merchant and banker, who believed that Westport should be a progressive town and have its own high school.

Horace Staples was born on January 31, 1802. Among his descendants were Thomas Staples, one of the original settlers of Fairfield, and Mary Staples, accused but acquitted of witchcraft in 1692. Only attending school for a few years, he worked from a young age, was a teacher, and started a lumber and hardware business in Saugatuck at age 27.

He operated a store which sold grain, groceries, household furnishings, and medicines. He bought sailing vessels, a silk factory, an axe factory, and owned a pier on the west bank of the Saugatuck River. In addition to everything else, he ran a farm and rented out some of his land to tenants. In 1852, he started the First National Bank, housed in the building known as National Hall, which still stands at the corner of the Post Road and Route 33. By the Civil War, Horace Staples was the wealthiest resident of the town.

For almost twenty years, Mr. Staples had offered to give the town some property on which to build a high school of its own, instead of having its young people go out of town to be educated. Finally, in 1884, he decided to build and fund the school himself. The original red brick building was on Riverside Avenue, not far from his home. The cornerstone was laid on April 22, 1884, and the first class of students started on October 31. The school day lasted from 9 AM to 4 PM, and students studied a variety of subjects, including English, algebra, geometry, geography, botany, chemistry, French, German, ancient history, and the U.S. Constitution. Four other courses not generally offered at other high schools were Latin, Greek, physiology, and genealogy. The latter was a particular favorite of Mr. Staples. It is “not enough to know where you’re going,” he said. You “also have to know where you’re coming from.” The inclusion of those four courses is noteworthy. From its inception, Staples High School has done things other schools do not do. In some ways, of course, the Staples High School of 1884 was very different. The first graduating class in 1887 consisted of just six students. And all were girls.

Staples always took a keen interest in his school. By 1887 there were 950 volumes in the library, and the chemistry lab, according to the annual report, was so well outfitted that no other school in the state could rival it. He visited the school every Friday, and every January 31 on his birthday he was the guest of honor at a Founder’s Day celebration. He viewed with pride his students’ presentations and orations.

Well into his nineties, Staples was still active, and just six days before his death on March 9, 1897 from pneumonia, he was working at the bank of which he was president for 45 years. The funeral took place three days later at the Congregational Church. The building was filled, as all the businesses in town had closed. His coffin was carried up the aisle on the shoulders of eight students of Staples High School. After the ceremony his remains were laid to rest in the Staples family plot at the Colonial Cemetery in Greens Farms. Staples had outlived his wives Eliza Ann Hull (1804-1832) and Charrey Couch (1802-1881), daughter Mary E. (1829-1880), and son William C. (1832-1891).

In his will Staples endowed the high school that bore his name with his estate. He wrote, “It is my hope that said school always be so maintained and conducted as to be a blessing to the community and that such aid be furnished from time to time as it may be needed by the town of Westport or by individuals or other sources so that the school shall always afford the best opportunities and methods of instructions.”