



## Who Was John P. Stevens Jr, & Why is The High School Named For Him?

*By Walter Stochel Jr. Secretary Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, John P. Stevens High School Class of 1977, and John P. Stevens High School Hall of Honor 2006.*

John P. Stevens High School on Grove Ave. in Edison was opened in September 1964, and since then, if you asked a teenager in a John P. Stevens High School jacket, “who was J.P. Stevens, they most likely will shrug their shoulders and say, “I don’t know”. Or they will repeat the legend that, “ he donated the land for the school.”

I have heard this story/legend from parents, students, and teachers when I attended the school in the 1970’s, and more recently when I visited the school in 2006 as part of the Hall of Honor ceremonies. So I decided to do some historical research and have come to the conclusion, that this story/legend is not true.

Finding out whether John P. Stevens Jr. “donated the land for the school” or not, should be an easy task, since there would be a deed on file with the Middlesex County Clerk. However a review of the Middlesex County land records from the 1940’s to 1965 shows that there are no deeds that record John P. Stevens Jr. transferring any properties to the Edison Board of Education, or Edison Township. There are many deeds on file with his name on them, but none of them are for the property where the school was built.

Research of old Board of Education records comes up with a resolution from October 9, 1961, authorizing the construction of a new Senior High School on Grove Ave. This required the acquisition of 80 parcels of privately owned land, at an estimated cost of \$40,000. Later the rear portion of the high school property behind the football field was purchased by the Board of Education from the Metuchen Rod & Gun Club in the 1960’s. So, the Board of Education did acquire land for the school, but not from John P. Stevens Jr.

At the Board of Education meeting on January 14, 1964, the Board received a letter from the contractor building the new high school on Grove Ave. asking what the name of the school will be, so a sign could be made for the building. Board member, Mr. Schoder, made a motion to name the high school, “John P. Stevens High School”. The motion was seconded by Mr. Anderson. A member of the public said that the Board was deviating from naming schools after U.S. Presidents, and that the school should be named for the recently assassinated President Kennedy. The Board responded that the new Iselin High

School would be named for Kennedy and having 2 high schools with the same name so close would be confusing. The Board then passed the resolution unanimously.

A newspaper article in the MEHS Frankel Collection from the January 25, 1964, Perth Amboy Evening News, announces that the Board of Education will name the new high school after John P. Stevens. An article in the 1964 John P. Stevens High School newspaper Hawkeye, tells of John P. Stevens being at the dedication of the school.

The Metuchen Recorder of February 13, 1964, has an article that quotes John P. Stevens III, son of John P. Stevens Jr. and a Metuchen resident as saying, "We all feel that naming a school for my father is a great honor."

When he died in 1977, none of the obituaries for John P. Stevens Jr. stated that he donated the land for the school.

If the story/ legend that John P. Stevens Jr. "donated the land for the school" were true, then there would be a deed on file, the family would have mentioned it, the Board of Education would have memorialize it, and the newspapers would have reported it when the school named, dedicated, and when he died. But there is nothing.

So, if he did not "donate the land for the school", why did the Edison Board of Education name the new high school after him, when previous schools were named after their respective neighborhoods such as Piscatawaytown, or American Presidents such as Lincoln? Because John P. Stevens Jr. unique individual who gave of his time to the community in which he lived, and to various businesses and charities.

John P. Stevens Jr. was a member of the Raritan Township/Edison Township Board of Education from 1940 to 1959, and was President of the Board from 1943 to 1958. Under his leadership, the Board responded to the challenges of a rapidly expanding student population by adding onto existing schools and building Washington, Lincoln, and Madison elementary schools, Jefferson, and Adams Junior High Schools and Edison High School. His son, John P. Stevens III, was quoted as saying: "My father spent many a long night at school board meetings, especially during the postwar housing boom, trying to find money for new schools. He was completely devoted to his work."

When he retired from the Board of Education in January 1959, the Board passed a Resolution of Appreciation, which among other things said:

**Whereas: John P. Stevens Jr. was completely willing to serve his community as a member of the Board of Education because of his earnest conviction that every citizen must contribute to the progress and improvement of the community."**

It was also during this time period that John P. Stevens Jr. was President of John P. Stevens & Co. the largest textile manufacturer in the US, and one of the oldest companies in America. (Today in 2010 you would say he was head of a "Fortune 500" company.) He was also on the board of major corporations, and large charities.

## **Who Was John P. Stevens Jr?**

Born in Fanwood, John P. Stevens Jr. lived in Plainfield, and went to school at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where he graduated in 1915. He then went to college at Yale, but World War I interrupted his college years. John P. Stevens joined the Army, and became a second Lieutenant in the field artillery. After the war he received a law degree from Harvard and then joined the board of the John P. Stevens & Co. In 1942 he became President of the company. He was also on the Boards of Directors of the New York Life Insurance Company, Manufacturers Hanover Trust Co., Associated Dry Goods Corp., and Lord & Taylor.

During World War II he was the general chairman of the 1944 Greater New York appeal of the Red Cross, which raised millions of dollars for that organization.

He was a member of the Raritan Township/Edison Township Board of Education from 1940 to 1959, and was President of the Board from 1943 to 1958.

During his lifetime he served as a trustee to many organizations including, Muhlenberg Hospital, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, American Museum of Natural History, New York Public Library, National Audubon Society, Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, Phillips Academy, Wardlaw-Hartridge School, and he was a founding trustee of Outward Bound.

## **Where did he live in Edison?**

John P. Stevens Jr. lived on a large estate 1681 Woodland Ave., Edison, with his wife Edith, two daughters, Edith and Phoebe, and two sons John III, and Benjamin. Just down the hill on Woodland Ave. lived his brother, Robert T. Stevens, and to the north in Plainfield, lived his father, John P. Stevens Sr. At one point, John P. Stevens and his wife Edith bought and restored the Laing House otherwise known as the Quaker Hill farm on Woodland Ave. Later owners of the house and barn had it placed on the National Register of historic places.

John P. Stevens Jr. died on November 14, 1977, thirteen years after the Edison Board of Education decided to honor him by naming the high school after him. *Recognizing the fact that he was a civic leader not only in Edison, but also in the United States.*

In closing, it is interesting to note, that all his life he was known as John P. Stevens Jr., but the School is named John P. Stevens High School. The Jr. was dropped so people would not think it was a Junior High School.

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