

Wilson College

*“Fides, Spes, Caritas
Vishwas, Asha, Prem
Faith, Hope, Love”*

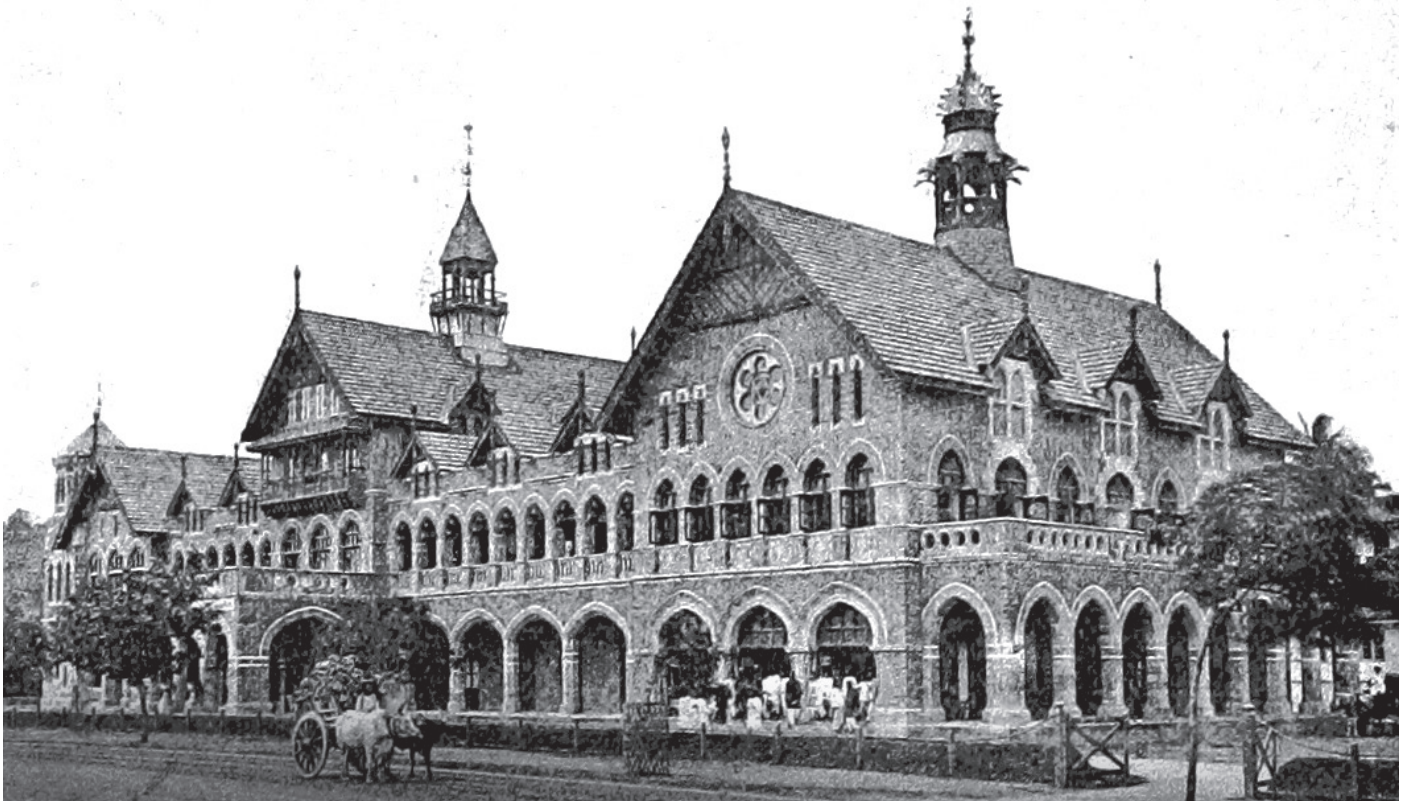
Mumbai Legacy Project
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These words have been the foundation stones of one of Mumbai’s oldest educational institutions, the Wilson College. Overlooking the Girgaon Chowpatty, this 192-year-old college was initiated in 1832 by a Scottish missionary, Reverend John Wilson, D.D., M.R.A.S., who came to Bombay with his wife Margaret on 14th February 1829 to help the Indian natives in developing themselves and curb social evils. Wilson and Margaret studied languages like Marathi, Gujarati, Hindustani, and Persian. Margaret started a Marathi medium school for girls, the Ambroli English School, in their residence at Ambroli House in Girgaum, which later was shifted and had an English boarding school, the St. Columba School, attached to it in 1832. On 14th December 1861, the collegiate section of the School, known as the Free General Assembly’s Institution, became the first privately owned institution affiliated with the University of Bombay, established in 1857 (Holcomb 1901).

His immense contributions to the field of education in India resulted in the then Governor Mountstuart Elphinstone inviting Wilson to be a member of the University of Bombay’s Senate. He also became a Fellow in the Act of Incorporation of the University of Bombay (Nandgaonkar 2004). Rev. Dr. Dugald Mackichan, Wilson’s successor as the college Principal, also served as the Vice Chancellor of the University for a record four terms. He was a physicist who had worked previously with the British scientist Lord Kelvin and established the college’s physics lab.

The architecture of the Grade III heritage structure is a combination of Victorian Gothic and Indian styles. The college had strong associations with governors of the Bombay Presidency. During John Wilson’s time in Bombay, there had been eighteen Governors of Bombay. Due to these contacts, the college got prime land in the best location possible. The inauguration of the college and laying of the foundation stone were also done by Governors (Donald Mackay, 11th Lord Reay and Sir James Fergusson, 6th Baronet respectively; Kamat 2005).



Built by a joint task force supervised by John Adams and Muncherji Cowasji Murzban, the basalt stone building is three storeys high and is horizontally vast. The seawater would sometimes reach up to the gates during monsoon, and to avoid damage to the building, Murzban laid large timbers underground with stone foundations over them (Murzban 1915, 86). The ground floor and first floor have big classrooms with teak wood trusses and have Minton tiles as flooring on the verandah and red terracotta tiles on the first and second floors. The doors are wooden, and most of them are still the original ones in good condition. The corridors have deep arched verandahs with sandstone arches covered by a Mangalore tiled roof.

John Adams's expertise was visible in the wooden staircase with multi-foil circular panel design in the handrails near the entrance lobby, where a marble bust of John Wilson stands. The assembly hall has a two-level balcony, which could hold an entire orchestra for special occasions. A stained glass window of the college crest overlooks the space (Aalambayan 2012). The college chapel is located in the northwest corner of the building and has lamp fittings in each bay of the nave and the side aisles. The white marble fountain in the garden area is a design by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, an Italian sculptor and architect practising the Baroque style of architecture. The fountain has sea and river nymphs in the pillar with fish motifs in their hands.



Wilson College was one of the earliest educational institutions to have its library since its inception in 1832, making it one of the oldest libraries in Mumbai. The library on the first floor has a teakwood mezzanine floor and houses a vast collection of around 73,000 books. It also has a rare books section, which has works like Commentary of Newton's Principia, an 1872 English-Persian dictionary, an 1829 English-Italian dictionary, a 1610 edition of the Holy Bible, the silver salver gifted to John Wilson as a recognition of his contributions to the people of Bombay in 1869, and many other books and artefacts.

The college has three hostels for student accommodation: the St. Andrew's House and Mackichan Hall for boys and the Pandita Ramabai Hostel for girls. The college used to have students from all areas around British India, like Sind, Berar, Khadesh, and Konkan, when it opened, and hence, the hostel service was used to its complete capacity by these students. The Old Hostel, a wooden building with single red brick walls for two students in one room, was built around the establishment of the college itself but dismantled after sixty years to create the basketball court to the right side of the building.

The Gymkhana was initiated by Dr Dugald Mackichan, the former Principal of the college, on 17th March 1910 and inaugurated by Sir John Muir-Mckenzie. It had two tennis courts and a cricket pitch. The pavilion building was built with money from donations, for which Sir Shapurji Bharucha donated 10,000 rupees for construction. Lord Willingdon inaugurated the Gymkhana on 20th December 1916. Along with popular sports like athletics, football, cricket, rugby, hockey, badminton, weight lifting, boxing, gymnastics, table tennis, carrom, and chess, games like rugby, water polo, and yachting are also taught to the students. The former Governor of Mumbai, Kona Prabhakara Rao, spoke about the Gymkhana on 7th November 1985 and said, "In a city like Bombay, provision of sports facilities side by side with education is something which very few colleges can boast of. In this respect, Wilson College, one of the oldest colleges in the city, has been singularly fortunate. They have a Gymkhana which provides excellent sports facilities to their students."

This magnificent institution has been made famous because of its illustrious alumni. Dr. David Livingstone, a Scottish physician, explorer, and friend of John Wilson, brought two young African kids from his travels to study in the college, who later returned to their homeland and furthered the cause of education there (Kamat 2005). One of the best examples of what this college has given the world is that of Alice Maude Sorabji Pennell, the first woman in India to gain a Bachelor of Science degree from this college, who went on to make huge advancements in women's medicine and higher education, for which she was awarded the Kaiser-E-Hind Medal in 1917 (Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper 1896, Chicago Tribune 1896).

According to Dr Sudhakar Solomonraj, ex-HOD of the Political Science department of Wilson College, other alumni include Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. P.V. Kane, who also taught Sanskrit at the college before being nominated to the Rajya Sabha for his immense contributions to the language; Rao Bahadur Shripad Subrao Talmaki, the Father of India's cooperative housing movement; Morarji Desai, the fourth Prime Minister of India; B.G. Kher, the Prime Minister of Bombay and the first Chief Minister of Bombay state; Shripad Amrit Dange, founding member of the Communist Party of India and a trade union leader; Dr. Usha Mehta, a staunch Gandhian who organised the underground Congress Radio; B.K. Karanjia, a film journalist and editor of Filmfare magazine and Dilip Sardesai, whose cricketing talent was noted for the first time by the college's cricket coach, Manya Naik. The students wrote about their experiences at the college and how it influenced their lives in a book titled 'Wilson College in my Time' edited by M.D. David with a foreword by B.G. Kher, who had unfurled the Indian flag at the college on 15th August 1947 after the first ceremony at the Bombay Civil Secretariat (Koppikar 2017). The Wilsonian, the college magazine, states the following about the connection between the institution and its students:

"Be thou the bond to bind in love and peace

Wilsonians all that are

And were, and are to be"



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