When Horace Mann delivered the dedication address at Bridgewater’s newly completed academic building in 1846 he said “Coiled up in this institution, as in a spring, there is a vigor whose uncoiling may wheel the spheres.” Even a visionary like Mann, however, would undoubtedly be astounded if he could view the multi-purpose university which Bridgewater has become including its College of Business and $100,000,000 Science and Math facility.

While Bridgewater has witnessed enormous change over its 175 years there have nonetheless been areas of strong continuity. One of these is remarkable stability in leadership; the school has had only 11 principals or presidents. The modern emphasis on science began in the 1850’s with Bridgewater’s second principal Marshall Conant who was a scientist and engineer. Bridgewater was also a very open campus welcoming women and graduating its first African-American Sarah Lewis in 1869. The career of Shuji Izawa, the father of the normal school movement in Japan and an 1867 graduate, demonstrates that the modern emphasis on international education also has deep roots.

While anniversaries tend to celebrate accomplishments Bridgewater’s journey from 1840 to 2014 has hardly been smooth. In the beginning the legislature did not directly fund the normal schools, salaries were low, and women were paid less than their male counterparts. Both men and women tended to leave the teaching profession; men to pursue more lucrative options and women were forced to leave if they married.

This paper will examine some areas of Bridgewater’s continuity but also highlight some of the obstacles standing in the way of educational reform.