

History of Cambridge Schools – Part One

Ken Gottry, July-2005

I started this research project because I was curious about the “suspicious” fire that destroyed the Cambridge Union School in 1947. The fire occurred shortly after a hotly contested vote defeated the creation of a new centralized school district.

When you investigate the history of anything related to Cambridge, you must first understand how the towns and villages were formed, reformed, and finally consolidated. This is especially true when researching the history of the Cambridge schools.

In this segment of my report I describe how the East End and West End of the village maintained two school systems for 100 years. Next time I’ll get into “the fire” and the formation of one centralized school district.

Towns and Villages

The Cambridge Patent was granted in 1761. In 1772 Cambridge became a District and in 1788 a Town in the county of Albany. It was annexed to Washington County in 1791 and separated into the Towns of Cambridge, White Creek, and Jackson in 1816.

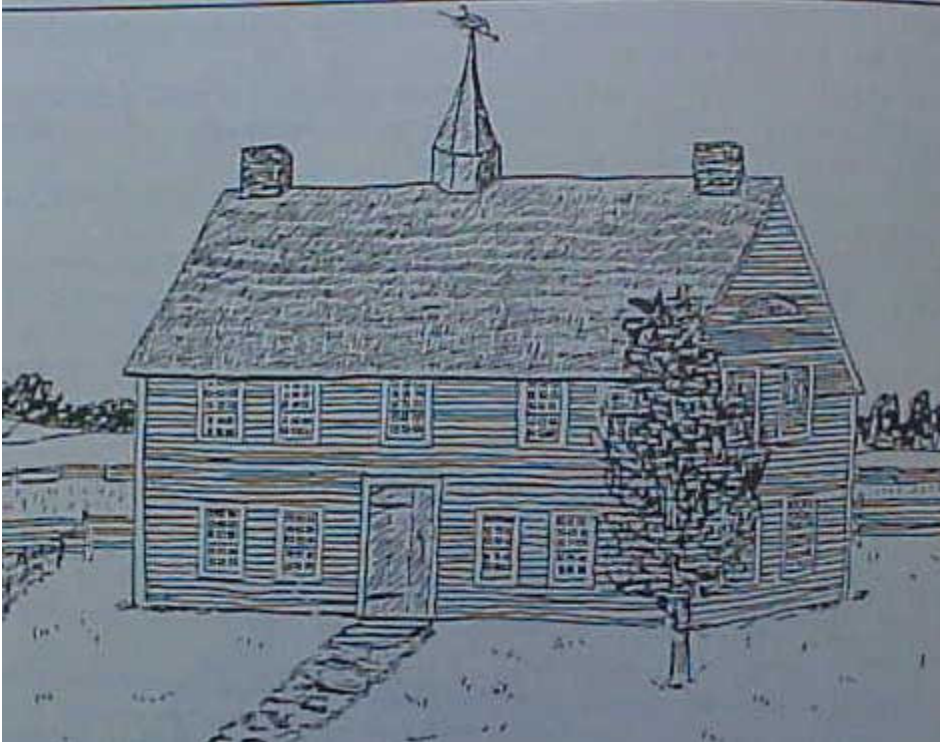
The East end of the present village was the village of North White Creek and the West end of the present village was the village of Cambridge, often called Cambridge Corners. These two villages were separated by $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of mostly swamp.

They Agree, sort of, to Build an Academy

In the late 1780’s NYS Legislature passed laws creating the Regents of the University and allowing for the formation of town school districts. Salem created the first academy in Washington County in 1791. Cambridge and North White Creek weren’t far behind, voting to form an academy in 1799.

Unfortunately, Cambridge and North White Creek often had trouble agreeing. After deciding to form an academy, a vote was held to determine its location. Cambridge voters dominated the turnout and they decided to build the Cambridge Washington Academy where Academy Street and Pleasant Street now intersect. This was the most distant location from North White Creek that could have been chosen.

Residents of North White Creek refused to help finance the academy. By 1810 they had raised enough money to start their own, the Union Academy of White Creek. I have a sketch of the building but I’ve yet to discover its location. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that it was near Dorr’s Corners, the intersection of East Main and Maple Ave, the most distant location from Cambridge.



Coila Enters the Picture

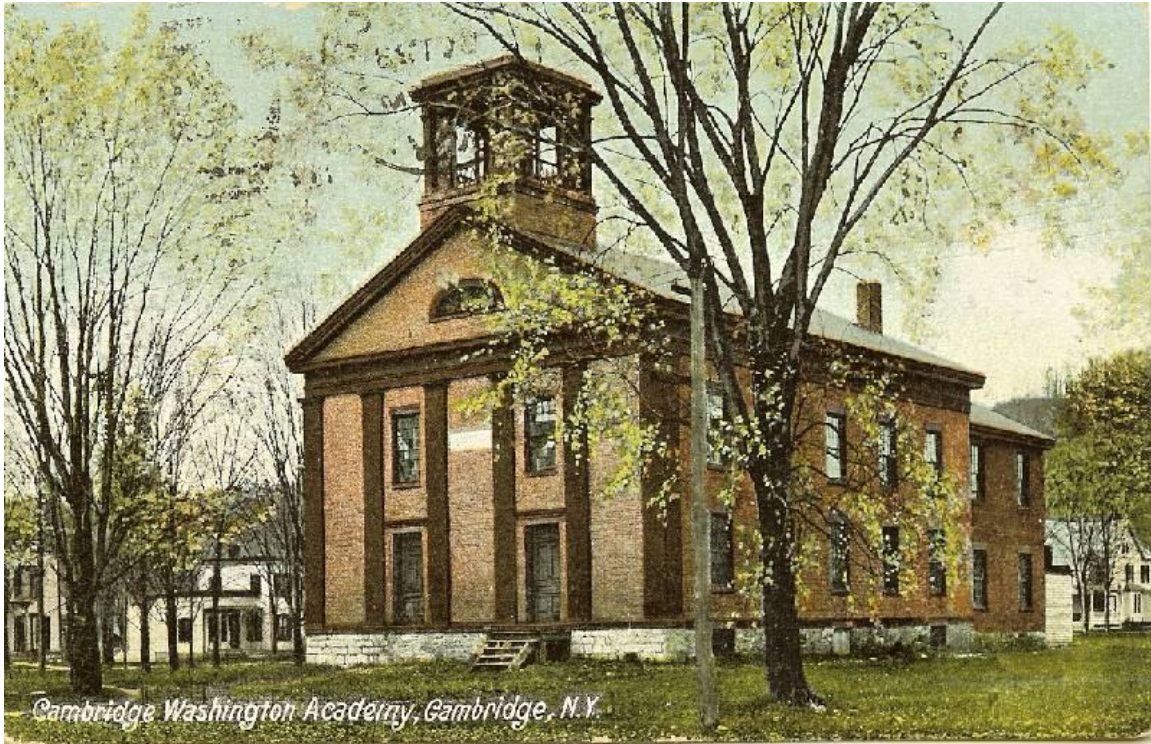
About 1800 William Stevenson moved westward and opened a store at Stevenson's Corners, now known as Coila. The congregation of the Coila Church became involved in the church-inspired and church-supervised Cambridge Washington Academy. The curriculum required attending church twice a week with the Principal.

But, before you think Cambridge and Coila cooperated any better than Cambridge and North White Creek, let me point out that in 1842 the "other" congregation at the Coila Church bought the Old Boarding House (now the Farrell home on West Main), which had been used by the academy. They opened the Missionary Institute in direct competition with the academy.

1799 to 1814

The original academy opened in 1799. In 1812 the NYS Legislature passed a law providing state funds for the formation of town school districts. In 1814 the highly controversial Rate Bill required residents to support the funding of the private, tuition-based academies.

In 1814 Cambridge petitioned the NYS Regents and on August 16, 1815 the newly incorporated Cambridge Washington Academy opened its doors. A new 40' x 60' building was constructed with 11' ceilings on the first story, 16.5' ceilings on the second story, and 10' ceilings in the attic. The cost of the structure was \$2,300.



1815 to 1850

The first year the academy had 51 scholars: 14 in the Classical department (college-prep) and 37 in the English department. The academy was open year-round with 4 terms of 12 weeks, each followed by a one-week vacation.

In the mid 1800's the Union Academy of White Creek closed. From 1824 to 1827 the Cambridge Washington Academy had financial troubles and was closed.

In 1836 Greenwich opened its Union Village Academy. In 1841 the Cambridge academy had 128 scholars, of whom 55 were female. The student body came from all over the US, Cuba, and Spain. In 1844 a 24' x 48' brick addition was built at a cost of \$4,000.

1851 to 1873 – Union Schools

In 1853 the NYS Legislature passed the Union Free School act intended to provide affordable public education. However, the 1814 Rate Bill was still in effect and complicated things until its repeal in 1867.

On April 16, 1866 the Village of Cambridge was incorporated with the communities of North White Creek and Cambridge becoming the East and West Districts. Coila voted not to be included in the incorporation.

In 1869 the Greenwich Union Free School was formed. Following the depression of 1870, the Cambridge Washington Academy closed due to financial troubles. The newly formed Village of Cambridge decided to follow Greenwich's lead and create a single Union School, but they couldn't agree on the details.

So, in 1872 the old Cambridge Washington Academy became the Union Free School of the West District. The East-enders converted the former home of John Pope Putnam into the Putnam Institute, which became the Union Free School of the East District. This was located on South Park Street where Whipple City Pizza is today.

The Town of White Creek and the Town of Cambridge were separated at the Turnpike, but the East and West school districts were separated at Blair's Brook, now known as the Owl Kill.

During its 58 years of incorporation from 1814 to 1872, the Cambridge Washington Academy graduated two governors, one senator, and dozens of judges.

1890 to 1926

In May 1890 the two districts voted to form a single school district and in 1891 the Cambridge Union Free School opened. This is the building located on West Main next to the bank that many of us now called "the old school".

Notice that the Union Free School was conveniently built halfway between the East and West Districts. Perhaps this was a political compromise or perhaps it was because the area between the two ends of Cambridge was being built up. In 1852 the railroad was completed, in 1878 Hubbard Opera House was built, and by 1883 the Rice Seed Company had appeared.

Although the school districts combined, the East and West Districts survived until the Charter of the Village was changed in 1924. Until then each District had its own fire department and its own road district.

Since Coila hadn't incorporated with the Village of Cambridge, it also didn't join the Union School. Instead it stuck with its one-room schoolhouse for another 50 years. Perhaps Coila was unhappy that the new Union School was located far away rather than on the site of the Cambridge Washington Academy.



In June 1890 the last classes graduated from the Union Free Schools of the East and West districts.

In 1893 Rev John G Smart bought the academy grounds and buildings. He renovated Academy Place, the large white house on the southwest corner of the intersection of Academy and West Main. This building had been a boarding facility and a residence for the Principal of the academy.

In 1922 the Cambridge Washington Academy was demolished by Rev Robbins. He took the bricks to Schroon Lake where they were used to build vacation cottages. A model of the academy, approximately 3' x 4' x 5', was built and placed at the intersection of Academy and West Main to commemorate the school. Unfortunately, the model deteriorated and was later destroyed. The Cambridge Historical Society still has the marble nameplate that hung over the main entrance to the academy.

As for the Putnam Institute, my great-grandfather William L Hitchcock bought the building in 1894. In 1899, after having tried to restore the building, he tore it down. Instead he built the Hitchcock Building where Two-Top Styling is located today.

Next Time

As I said, I started this research project because I was curious about the “suspicious” fire that destroyed the Cambridge Union School in 1947. Here I am at the end of Part One and I’m only up to 1927.

Next time I’ll discuss the Central School Act of 1927 and explain why it took Cambridge until the late 1950’s to incorporate all the surrounding rural one-room schoolhouses into the Cambridge Central School.

I had hoped to also include a discussion of the numerous one-room schoolhouses in the towns of Cambridge, White Creek, and Jackson, but I think that may be a research project unto itself and so will have to wait.

The Truth

My dad was town and village historian for many years. He never wrote or quoted a historical fact until he had double and triple checked it. I'm more of a raconteur. I read, I research, and then I knit the facts into a story. But, as my wife says, I never let facts get in the way of a good story. So, please contact me if you question or disagree with anything I have reported.

Sidebar - The Rice's Seed Box Houses

While doing my research I discovered that after it closed, the Academy building was used by the Rice Seed Company and wooden crates were made there. During the Great Depression, the boards from these crates were used to build houses. Two "Seed Box" houses still exist in Cambridge today. Next time I'll tell you which ones.