

History of Cambridge Schools – Part Two

Ken Gottry, July-2005

In Part One I talked about Cambridge schools from 1799 to 1927. I start this part with the Central School Act of 1927. I was going to move on to the “suspicious” fire that destroyed the Cambridge School in 1947, but once again I got sidetracked.

Instead I go back to the riotous 1873 debate about merging the East and West Districts into a single school district. I touched on this in Part One, but after reading Dave Thornton’s humorous details of that year I just had to include more.

I wrap up this part of my research with material about the 30-plus one-room schoolhouses in the 3 local towns.

1927 to 1937 – Central School Act

In 1927 the NYS Legislature passed the Central School Act, designed to form central rural school districts to provide rural children the same education as urban children. The law called for five men to be elected to a Board of Education to remove the operation of the schools from the political settings of the town government.

The act encouraged adoption by increasing state aid to cover one-fourth of building costs and one-half of transportation costs. The NYS Department of Education estimated the 276 schools in Washington County could be consolidated into 11 districts.

Yet by 1937, only Hartford had joined the program. Hartford consolidated 14 small school districts in 1929 and eight years later had to build another new school. Little wonder that Cambridge waited until February 1944 to merge surrounding rural districts with the Union School to form Cambridge Central School District No.10.

In the meantime village schools, like the Cambridge Union School, tried to attract rural high school students since state aid for a district resident was \$55 and \$136 for a non-resident. In 1937 there were 466 students at the Union School, and 45% of the 150 high school students were non-residents.

1873 - A Village (Still) Divided

According to the Village Charter, Cambridge was incorporated on April 16, 1866. But if you look closer, you’d still see an East District and a West District drawn along the same lines as their predecessors, North White Creek and Cambridge Corners, respectively.

This division was deeply evident in 1873 as Cambridge debated forming a single school district. When the Cambridge School Bill was drafted and sent to the NYS Assembly in February 1873, two large delegations from Cambridge went to Albany to be heard ... one group for the bill, the other against it.

By April the Bill had passed the Assembly and moved to the NYS Senate. Once again, two large delegations descended upon the state capital. When the Bill passed the Senate in May, it stipulated that a majority of the voters in Cambridge must approve the location of the building and the amount of expenditures.

In late May the newly elected Governor John Adams Dix signed the Cambridge School Bill after meeting with (you guessed it) two large delegations from the village. The final bill required a general village election, and this is where the local fun begins.

East End vs. West End – Once Again

On June 18, 1873 five men were elected to the first Board of Education. A general election was held and the Cambridge School Bill was defeated 195-128. But the West End (District No 1) and the East End (District No 10) weren't done there.

In July, they considered an alternative of building a Union Free School under the State Education Law of 1853. They met at the engine house, neutral ground between the East and the West. The East Enders, perhaps remembering how they had been outnumbered in the 1799 vote that decided the location of the Washington Academy, showed up in force. The West Enders, lacking a quorum, had to scurry around the neighborhood to locate more voters to form their quorum.

A vote on the resolution to build the Union Free School halfway between Washington Street and Blair's Brook (Owl Kill) was tabled until the next meeting. Two weeks later the West Enders came prepared, showing up with a petition signed by two-thirds of its voters. Unfortunately, the petition didn't support joining with the East to form a single school district, but rather joining the West End and Coila!

Finally a vote on the original resolution was held. It was soundly approved by the East End 34-7 and soundly defeated by the West End 98-8. After the meeting adjourned, the West Enders weren't done. They gathered at Ackley Hall, argued and complained about the East Enders, and finally voted 130-26 to go ahead without the East End.

The West End leased the old Washington Academy, making it the Union Free School of the West District. The East Enders retaliated by purchasing the J. P. Putnam estate, converting it into the Putnam Institute, and making it the Union Free School of the East District.

It would take 20 more years until the East and the West school districts merged, and in 1891 the Cambridge Union School was opened.

One-room Schoolhouses

In 1845 the Town of Cambridge had 14 schoolhouses. There were 514 children between the ages of 5 and 16 residing in the district, yet these schools must have used "new math" because they reported 615 students when applying for State Aid! Each school averaged 24 actual students. All teachers in the district received a total of \$945 on top of their board.

The Town of Jackson had 9 schoolhouses. There were 411 children in the district, yet they reported 548 as being "taught". Each school averaged 23 actual students. All teachers in the district received a total of \$835 on top of their board.

The Town of White Creek had 14 schoolhouses. There were 613 children in the district, yet they reported 815 as being "taught". Each school averaged 30 actual students. All teachers in the district received a total of \$1005 on top of their board.

State Aid paid for about 40% of the district's education expense. Many of the small districts "are in the habit of keeping their schools open but for a single term of four months, or just long enough to secure the public money". A few schools were vacant in the winter, presumably due to cold weather, and also in the summer, presumably due to farming.

In 1844, many town superintendents were notified of inconsistencies in counting monthly attendance. After continual hounding to correct and return the reports, the Town of Cambridge finally returned its report ... uncorrected!

Teacher Classification

Teachers were classified into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd class, with 1st class representing the best. By 1845 the number in the 1st class had fallen to 45%, and the number in the 3rd class had grown to 10%. Weaker districts “were employing cheap teachers” so as to not exceed its share of public funds.

An 1845 report concludes “Ought not these facts to arouse the dormant energies of the public, and lead them to a speedy correction of these crying evils”. Evidently not, as an 1867 report states that certification had worsened. In that year 15% of the teacher applicants were rejected, only 12% received 1st class certificates, and 40% of the applicants were only suitable for 3rd class certification.

The 1867 report declares, “only good teachers can make good schools”, stating that the Rate Bill of 1814 induces the employment of inefficient teachers. The report believed a general system of taxation of all district residents would result in better teachers and more consistent textbooks.

Next Steps

I’ve only scratched the surface. I still haven’t gotten to the to 1947 “suspicious” fire that destroyed the Cambridge School shortly after a hotly contested vote to create a new centralized school. Also, I haven’t touched the 55 years of the current CCS’s existence.

I’m going to continue my research. Perhaps later this year or early next I’ll have assembled enough material for the next installment. Last week I read that when one rural schoolhouse voted not to join the central district, CCS hired its only teacher, which caused the schoolhouse to close. Good ole Cambridge. Stories like that make me want to keep on digging.

Acknowledgements

Isaac Newton once stated, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”. Likewise, one’s research of Cambridge’s past can only be accomplished by relying on the work of the giant historians who came before. While many collected and reported facts about Cambridge’s past, it was Dave Thornton who assembled personal views of our community and its people. Dave’s portraits of our past help me see the past centuries as if I am there. Thanks, Dave.

Corrections

In Part One I stated the Cambridge Washington Academy “graduated” two governors, one senator, and dozens of judges. Governor Hiland Hall (VT) and Governor George N Briggs (MA) “attended” the academy but I have yet to verify they “graduated” from the academy.

Location of Schoolhouses - 1866

The Washington County Historical Society has an 1866 atlas of all towns. The accompanying tables show the schoolhouses that I was able to locate on the maps for Cambridge, Jackson, and White Creek

Town of Cambridge - 1866	
District	Location
1	School Street - between South Union and Academy Street
2	Coila (NY372) - just west of Virtue's Trailers
3	Greenwich Road (NY372) Schoolhouse Hill
4	Greenwich Road (NY372) and North Cambridge Road (CR60)
5	South Cambridge CR74 and CR59A
6	
7	Brownell Road - Vly Summit
8	Stump Church Road and North Cambridge Road (CR60)
9	
10	Kenyon Road and Gillis Road
11	
12	Center Cambridge Road (CR59) and English Road
13	South Cambridge
14	King Road and Belle Road
15	
16	King Road and Green Road

Town of White Creek - 1866	
District	Location
1	
2	
3	Turnpike Road - Grandma Moses Schoolhouse
4	
5	White Creek Road (CR68) and Lincoln Hill Road
6	Shaker Hollow Road
7	Center Road - Rod & Gun Club
8	Chestnut Hill Road and McKie Hollow Road
9	Ash Grove Road and Chestnut Hill Road
10	North Park Street
11	Ash Grove Road and Black Hole Hollow Road
12	
13	
14	Turnpike Road and Duell Hollow Road (Gospel Lighthouse Church)
??	Meeting House Road
??	White Creek Road (CR68) and North Hoosick Road

Town of Jackson - 1866	
District	Location
1	
2	Dunbar Road and Rouse Road
3	
4	
5	Keys Road
6	NY22 north of Fish Hatchery Road (current Town Hall)
7	NY313 and Plains Road
8	NY313 just south of Eagleville Road
9	Lake Lauderdale (Schoolhouse Pond)
??	Dunbar Road
??	Sutherland Road and Dobbin Road

Jackson District No 9 - Lauderdale

Go north from Cambridge on Route 22 to the Burger Den restaurant. Sit at the table by the front window and look eastward across Schoolhouse Pond. You can just make out the one-room schoolhouse that served Jackson's district 9 for almost 100 years starting in 1847.

I interviewed Charlie Ackley, the top student in the Eighth Grade Class of 1932 (oh wait, he was the only student). He moved to the Cambridge High School for grades 9-12 and graduated in 1936 along with my mother.

This photo was taken around 1918 and shows the entire student body.

Back row (left to right): Blanch Qua, Ralph Qua, Gertrude McGeoch, Elizabeth Safford (teacher), William Hill, Ella Beaty (Richards)

Middle Row (left to right): James Stanton, Mark Kenyon, Winifred Stanton, Marie Moon (Cary, Atkins), Marjorie Moon (Hunter), Florence Qua, Arno Wilson, Fayette Qua

Front Row (left to right): Ernest Austin, Warrant Beaty



Rice's Seed Box Houses

After it closed, the Washington 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. One is on the East side of Grove Street just North of Avenue A. The other is the yellow house on the West side of North Union Street just South of Spring Street.

Hitchcock Farm

My great grandfather, William L Hitchcock, owned the pictured farmhouse. It was situated where the bandstand is today just north of the CCS Science Wing. The Cambridge Central School District bought the farm from the Hitchcock's in 1946, demolished the farmhouse, and in 1950 opened the new school.

