

When Nutley's Little Schoolhouse Burned Down

FROM FRANK SPEER

JUST a century ago, Henry Stager, who came into possession of a vast amount of mid-town real estate by inheritance, gave a site on Church Street for a modern school. Later he was to give a strip of land on Franklin Avenue, exchanged against another field on a sloping hillside, as a site for Franklin Reformed Church. Today the two structures stand on opposite sides of Church Street, the little red schoolhouse and the stately white church. Stager lies buried in the graveyard behind the church.

The Stager gift of land "for school purposes" was made in 1851 but it was two years before the town got around to building there a frame school. At that time, a century ago, Nutley had but two schools, Avondale School, a clapboard two-story structure built in 1794 as a home and later converted into a school to serve the Eastern district and a small wooden building, near the present corner of Bloomfield Avenue and Centre Street, serving the Western district and built in 1825. The Third River was the dividing line between the two.

After years of service at the Bloomfield Avenue site, the west school was moved in 1844 to Franklin Avenue near what is now William Street, and then to New Street. That old one-room school was made over into a home which still stands with porch added, at 41 New Street, occupied by Patrick Piro, near the present High School.

The Avondale School, or at least its skeleton, survives, too. When it had outlived its usefulness, it was torn down and Frank Ritacco bought the old lumber. He hauled it down to Roma Street and built a new house of the wood which has, thus, been in continuous service 158 years. The father of the late G. R. B. Symonds was the last principal of that school before it was abandoned.

George L. Rusby and Richard Stager, both now dead, attended school in the one-room structure after it had been moved from Bloomfield Avenue to Franklin Avenue and set back behind a school yard, just south of Rusby's grocery store. Richard was the son of "Uncle Hank" Stager, who gave the ground, later on, for the Church Street School. In their school days, H. E. Harris was the principal and Carrie Watts the teacher.

When the building was originally built in Bloomfield Avenue in 1825, it was called Povershon School and was Nutley's first public school. Albert Chappell, its teacher, gave the land to have it built alongside his house. The oldest records speak of it as "the red schoolhouse." In 1825 it doubled as a Sunday School when the Dutch Reformed Church moved there from Joralemon's barn in Spring Gardens, now the extreme southern end of Franklin Avenue.

There exists a tattered and torn pencil drawing of the 1825 school, drawn by Warren Vreeland, who lived where the Bank of Nutley now stands at the

corner of Chestnut Street. Vreeland pictured a low frame building with a solid, low door on which was a huge latch. Several windows were pictured as boarded up, others with glass. The picture was once offered to the public schools as a historical document but was rejected, and is now destined to grace the Town Museum, to hang on the walls of the structure which succeeded it, second in succession.

A wholly new frame school was built in 1853 on the land which Henry Stager had donated. The building burned down in 1874, and the following year Nutley got its first modern school, the red brick two-story structure which still stands and has been leased by the Board of Education to the Nutley Historical Society as a town museum.

In the days before the Hill School was erected in Church Street, the thoroughfare was known as Stonehouse Plains Road because it led across the hills to Stonehouse Plains, now a part of Brookdale. Nutley's Dutch followed the road on foot to go to Sunday School in the Stonehouse Plains Reformed Church after it was built in 1802, a half-century before the Franklin Reformed Church rose here on Stager's land. The Stonehouse Plains Church still stands, a brownstone structure, at the northeast corner of Brookdale Park.

Nutley's schools reflect the kaleidoscopic history of the town's changed nomenclature and affinities. When Avondale School was built in 1794, Nutley and Belleville were both a part of Bloomfield, but by the time Povershon School was built in 1825, Belleville had broken away and this town was part of Belleville.

The town was a part of Belleville, although called Franklinville, when Povershon School was moved to Franklin Avenue in 1844 and when the new frame Hill School was built in 1856. The red brick Church Street School was built in 1875, the year Nutley seceded from Belleville and became the Township of Franklin. The school was still in use when, in 1902, the Township of Franklin became, legally, the Town of Nutley.

There are many living alumni of the red brick Church Street School which was the only school for the entire western half of the town from 1875 until the town bought the Duncan Essex Mill and converted the second floor into a school. The first unit of Park School was built in 1894. The old school was then shut down when classes were transferred to the new building.

When Nutley built Park School it was believed that there never would be any need for the Hill School again. Samuel Hopper, uncle of Republican Town Chairman Wilson Kierstead, who was famous for his fast horses and his ability to make money, held an \$8,000 mortgage on the school.

There were many in town circles who wanted Hopper to take the school and tear up the mortgage, but George Rusby, the grocer, saw the town's coming growth and objected to giving up school property. Hopper's mortgage was paid off and the school survived to house two overflow classes in 1895, only two

years after Park School was opened.

It was closed again in 1907 when the second unit of the Park School was built, but once again the mid-town school proved too small for the rapidly growing town, so Church Street School was again reopened in September 1910 for one year for a third-grade overflow class.

After one year of operation, it was again closed down until its conversion into a boys' pre-vocational school in 1914 and it was used for that purpose until the new Nutley High School was built in 1927, incorporating modern manual training and shop classrooms. Thereafter it stood empty and forlorn, its windows smashed regularly by stones, until the Board of Education, in November, 1946, leased it for \$1 a year to the Historical Society.

There are several teachers who began their teaching in the red brick schoolhouse. When Miss Ann Troy began teaching here 50 years ago she was assigned to teach an overflow third grade class (from Park School which was sent up the hill of Church Street). Miss Troy is today one of the guiding interests in the creation of the town museum in that same school.

There is an unsolved mystery to this day as to whatever became of the bells of the Avondale and Hill Schools. There is a suspicion that one of them hangs in the bell-tower of the Avondale firehouse and in behalf of the Historical Society Miss Troy and Frank Speer who graduated from the Hill School to Park School, climbed to the tower but could not confirm their suspicions.

During the time that the building housed the boys' pre-vocational school, Harry Bennett taught those classes assisted by Mrs. Grace Cantel now retired and operating a real estate business in Rutherford where she lives.

It was not unusual for the Board of Education to sit up nights and discuss the overflow predicament in those days when Nutley was expanding faster than it could afford to build new schools. When Church Street School could no longer accommodate all the overflow classes the Board had to rent two storerooms.

A storeroom used by a tailor, J. B. Doyle in the Stirratt building at Chestnut Street and Passaic Avenue, was rented in 1903 for 7th grade classes, while a 3rd grade was taken care of in a storeroom in a frame building across from the Town Hall where the Public Safety building now stands.

Church Street School could be famous, too, as the birthplace of school journalism. One of the first, and perhaps the first school newspaper "The Franklin Star" was established and published there in 1875, the year the school was opened. George Rusby, then a pupil but later to become an ardent single tax advocate and naturalist, was the editor.

The school records show that when the wooden school was opened on the Church Street site its principal was H. E. Harris, followed in 1871 by C. H. Fuller. After the fire and the building of the brick school, William Willert became principal upon the reopening in 1875, followed by W. S. Applegate in

1879 and Gertrude Broadbent in 1884.

School records are rather skimpy about the old wooden building that burned down in 1874, but there is a legend that school boys trying to keep warm were responsible. The school's one big room was heated by a pot-bellied stove which burned only cord wood.

In winter, every pupil attending the school was supposed to carry a split log to school along with his books and his lunch every morning. The logs were tossed on a pile outside the door and were fed into the big stove all day long. Legend has it that one of the boys who took turns at going out to bring in the wood to feed the stove stoked it too zealously one cold October night in 1874 and the roof caught fire.

Mrs. Virginia McFarland, one of the eye-witnesses of that fire, left an interesting report. She and her husband, John, lived in a white house at the end of a lane, back off Franklin Avenue, about where the south entrance of the Franklin School is located.

When the skies lit up, she picked up her child from a crib, wrapped it in a shawl and walked up the hill to the Dutch Reformed Church and stood there to watch the school burn to the ground. She left a story of the fire, remembering that she saw Cyrus Broadbent and James Calhoun, superintendents down at the Duncan Essex Mill, help Robert Cunningham and William Stirratt carry out the school books before the roof fell in. The books were carried to Stirratt's home, the white house just east of the present school.

Mrs. Laura Kingsland Ackerman, the last survivor of the class that attended the wooden school the night it was burned, remembered that the pupils did not even get one day's vacation. Classes took up with the salvaged books the next morning in a room of Old Military Hall.

Frank B. Speer of 307 Prospect Street, a descendant of the Speers who came here at the end of the Revolutionary War, attended the red brick school which, in those days, was called the "Hill School." An ardent amateur historian, possessed of most of the authentic records of old Nutley, he also has a vivid recollection of everything that happened here in the past half-century.

"The red brick school was built on the foundations of the 1853 frame school, but was two stories instead of one, with a single classroom on each floor," Speer recalls.

"The frame school had had separate entrances for boys and for girls, but the brick school had only one front door. The present addition on the back did not exist and outside the back window was a slanting cellar door and a little farther back a deep well with wonderfully cold water.

"In those days, one boy was told off to be the water boy. He filled a tin bucket from the well and it stood on a shelf in the corner of the ground-floor room. There was one tin cup on the shelf and that water supply served the whole

school. It may not have been sanitary by today's rules, but on hot days there always was a line waiting for a refreshing drink of well water.

"We boys had a game which the teacher seldom discovered. When we wanted a drink, we would slip out of our seats and crawl on hands and knees to a rear window. We would crawl out, drop on the cellar door, slide down and get a good cold drink at the well. We got back in the same way, but had to watch and wait for the teacher to turn her back.

"We had double desks, two pupils sitting at one. The teachers always reserved a few for bad pupils and if a boy was mischievous, the teacher made him sit at a desk alongside a girl. That was the worst punishment the teachers could devise. Our teachers were severe and smacked your hand with a ruler, but hickory sticks were unknown.

"I do recall, though, one occasion when Mr. Whitney, the principal, came up from Park Hall School to visit the Hill School. We had a demon those days named 'Peewee Weischedel' who was a dead-shot with spitballs. There was a stage at one end of the ground floor classroom and as Mr. Whitney stood there talking to us, 'Peewee' scored a number of stinging bulls'-eyes. "Mr. Whitney finally caught him at it and made him sit on the stage with his legs swinging over the front. Behind him was a grand piano. 'Peewee' undaunted, continued to fire his spitballs and one of them hit the principal. Without a word, Mr. Whitney swung around and kicked 'Peewee' backward into the piano. That stopped the spit-balls.

"In my time, Miss Gertrude Broadbent, whom we all called 'Git,' was our teacher and I still revere her memory as a most wonderful person and as a teacher. She taught here for 50 years or more and died a spinster at 83.

"She was severe, but she had some tough pupils to handle. I recall one of my own punishments. I had done something against the rules and she ordered me to write the word 'punishment' as many times as it would go on the blackboards. That was worse than it sounds because there were blackboards on all four walls, in between the windows and the stage too. I must have written the word 10,000 times, and all the time she sat there. It was nearly dark when I finished, and then she ordered me to erase all the blackboards and clean them up for the next day. I was a good boy for a long time after that.

" 'Git' lived just next door to the school. Her father was Cyrus Broadbent, a gentleman farmer and a general overseer down at the Duncan Mill where Town Hall is today. He lived in the white house which stands on Prospect Street next to today's Colonial Garden. In those days it was a showplace with a hard tennis court, apple trees, a barn, granary, pig-sty and plenty of well-cut grass. Woe betide any schoolboy who went over the line into Mr. Broadbent's acre."

Happily, much more is known of Henry Stager, the benefactor of church and school. He was a prolific family man, one of the five strapping sons of young

John Stager, forerunner of a clan which still persists, and who came out of "the great swamp" in the upper Passaic Valley.

John Stager, whose blood still flows in a goodly proportion of the town's Stager clan, came here looking for work. He applied for a job from Captain Abram Speer, returned hero of the Revolutionary War who had suddenly enriched himself by taking over the confiscated lands of the Tory Van Giesen who fled from Nutley to New York when the British were losing the war. Van Giesen owned most of the land north of Chestnut Street and west of the Third River, and Captain Speer took over the low brownstone building where the Woman's Club is now installed. His daughter, Nanta, married John Vreeland, and moved into the low rambling stone house.

Captain Speer gave young John Stager a job in his grist-mill which stood near the present bridge over the Third River in Vreeland Avenue. Young John was a willing and fast worker, and shortly married Captain Speer's handsome daughter. She bore him five sons: John Jr., Henry, Richard, Harmonious and Abraham. When Mrs. Stager died in giving birth to Abraham, Captain Speer and his wife, known familiarly as "Fady" and "Oty" raised the five boys.

When Captain Speer died in 1834 at the age of 90 he left his great holding of land to the five motherless boys. In time, Henry married and raised a big family, building his home near the intersection of High Street and Bloomfield Avenue. So many Stagers settled around him that the district was known as "Stagertown," extending as far as the present Allwood traffic circle. To all Nutley, he was known as "Hank" but even more popular was his niece "Aunt Betsy," last of the three daughters of Richard Stager, one of Henry's four brothers.

"Aunt Betsy," Rachael-Elizabeth Stager, inherited most of the land between Prospect Street and the Third River, on both sides of Harrison Street. She was nearly 90 when she died in 1898 and until her death she had kept her vast holding of land intact, including a vast wooded strip bordering Prospect Street from Centre to Chase Street, known as "Aunt Betsy's woods."

When she died, part of her land fell into the hands of "Uncle Dick" Booth, through the latter's mother, Aunt Betsy's sister, Mary Magdaline. Booth, who served the town on the Board of Education, gave part of the land to the town for what is now Booth Park.

Church Street School was once the setting of a political trick in a school election. Just before the polls closed at 8 p.m., a block of opposition voters appeared to upset what the regular school party believed would be a routine endorsement of a school question.

"Uncle Dick," who was a very powerful figure in school affairs, realized that time had to be won to allow runners to go out and round up enough of his supporters to defeat the insurgents.

This was accomplished by shoving off the election table an oil lantern, breaking the chimney. Booth announced that the only place to find a chimney at that hour of the night, to end the darkness and allow the meeting to proceed, was at Squire Sanford's little store on William Street.

While a member of the opposition hastened off to get the chimney, Booth sent a fast runner to Squire Sanford to delay the deal as long as possible. When the emissary arrived he was given a drink and stories were swapped while everyone, conveniently, forgot about the chimney until more emissaries arrived. "Uncle Dick," meantime, had rounded up his forces and won the day.

The Squire was quite a town character, known widely as "Chalkline." He got that sobriquet because of his boasting about a horse, a white mare, which, he said, was so fast that when he let it out it ran so fast down the middle of Franklin Avenue that it made a white streak that looked like a continuous chalkline.

Investigators for the Nutley Historical Society have unearthed programs of exhibitions held in the school which show names long identified with the town. Pupils of the school at an exhibition February 24, 1868, included Thomas McGirr, Laura Vreeland, Bertha Chappell, Ella Tuers, Alexander McGirr, Melvin Kiesler, William Rusby, Henry Rusby, I. J. Garrabrandt, Barbara Booth, Amelia Glass and Everett Vreeland.

Records of these exhibitions are in the possession of Frank Speer of Prospect Street, whose mother was Bertha Chappell, one of the pupils.

Tags

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