

Early School Houses of Fredonia, 1807-1907
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

The earliest “school house” in Fredonia was probably the log cabin home of the Oliver **Woodcock** family. Mrs. Sophia **Harris**, daughter of Richard and Sophia **Williams**, wrote in *The Fredonia Censor* of 25 June 1873 an account of her family’s arrival here. They were accompanied by the Oliver **Woodcock** family and the James **Morgan** family. The **Williams** family, with their six children, left Sangerfield NY on 1 June 1807. The **Woodcocks** and **Morgans** had gone on ahead by a few days. The **Williams** family settled in a small cabin about two miles downstream from the spot where Richard **Williams** and Hezekiah **Barker** would build a saw mill and a grist mill.

Mrs. **Harris**’ cousin, Mrs. Ursula (**Woodcock**) **Ashley** had written her own account in the issue of 18 June 1873. She too described how the group left Sangerfield, where her father Oliver **Woodcock** had traded his cart and oxen for 700 acres that an unnamed man had in Pomfret. That would be two of the Holland Land Company’s lots which were about 360 acres each. Their home here “was built of logs; one door of plank, hewed out with a broad-axe; no window, low roof; stone fire-place, hemlock bark roof, and the floor of hemlock bark — the whole only 18 feet square. It was chinked on the outside with clay, and the family of eight considered themselves quite snug that winter.”

The neighbors requested Mrs. **Woodcock** to teach the children that winter, and she did so, according to these accounts. It was the first school in Pomfret, and had 16 children. Mrs. **Harris** dated the groups’ arrival here as 1807. Although Mrs. **Ashley** gave the date as 1806, that seems unlikely since we have a detailed account of what “Canadaway” looked like then. Elisha **Fay** wrote in the *Censor* of 19 July 1871 that he “came in June, 1806. . . . At that time there was no house where Fredonia is, and the nearest one east was owned by Mr. **Mann**, since known as the Jeremiah **Baldwin** farm [about at 430 East Main Street]. The owner of the land where your village is situated was Thomas **McClintock**, who kept a public house a little south of there. Coming on west, [that is, on the old Erie Road along Webster Street] I saw Philo **Orton** with his axe and provisions, going to cut logs to build a house on what is called the **Crocker** farm [about 509 West Main Street]. The first house west of Mr. **McClintock**’s was Captain James **Dunn**’s, a little west of what is now the center of Portland.”

The earliest *built* school house in Fredonia was made of logs and built in 1807 at the side of a trail running through the grove of trees on what we now call Barker Common. That may sound simply picturesque, but it has real significance for the history of the Village. In 1807 it is not a village; it is Hezekiah **Barker**’s 360-acre lot that he has “articled,” contracted to buy from the Holland Land Company, and it is almost entirely covered with trees. There are no streets and no buildings except for the small log cabin the **Barkers** live in, situated in a clearing on the flats east of today’s Water Street.

The cabin was built by the previous occupant, Thomas **McClintock**, where the ancient trail from Buffalo to Erie crossed Canadaway Creek at a shallow ford. The first settlers found two other old trails snaking down from the shore of Lake Erie through the forest, paralleling the contours of the Creek on the high ground west of it (Chestnut and Seymour streets) and east (Temple, Main, Eagle streets).

Why, then, was the first school house not built near the crossroads where **Barker**’s cabin was situated? For several reasons. This was **Barker**’s farm and the land was valuable. His

contract with the Holland Land Company stipulated that the occupant had to “improve” what he was intending to own by clearing it and raising crops on it.

The grove where the school house was located, on the other hand, was not valuable. For a ceremony naming the Common in his honor, his great-granddaughter, Mrs. Flora **Clothier**, wrote an account of its history, which was printed in the *Censor* of 5 June 1931. In it she wrote, “One would not belittle the generosity of an ancestor, but one must recall a certain family tradition that when Hezekiah spoke of dividing his lands among his children, several of them were known to inform him that they would under no circumstances accept that ‘pesky black walnut grove’.” [The black walnut tree roots give off a toxic substance that is harmful to many plants.]

To this she added another element in choosing the location. “The real reason for the donation [of the Common], however, must be sought in the New England origin of these people. To them a village had only one pattern and that pattern consisted of a central green about which to group the churches, the school, the town hall.” The “central green” that Hezekiah **Barker** had in mind was the black walnut grove at the center of his farm, and there he placed the school.

The school house itself was probably what Phin M. **Miller** described as typical in his *County Schools and Education: 1807-1902*. The building was made of logs, was 16 to 18 feet wide by 22 to 24 feet long, with the side walls 8 feet high. “At one end was built a stone or stick chimney, with a stone fire-place and projecting hearth-stone.” There were five windows, two on each side and one opposite the fire-place. Each had four lights, 7 x 9 inches. Desks were long planks on supports along three walls, and seats were made the same way.

Levi **Risley** wrote in a letter in the 22 March 1871 issue of the *Censor*, “I commenced my education by attending school with my older sister one half day at the old log school house, standing then on the common near where Temple street [in 1871] divides it, and about between the fountains [installed in the 1850s] which school was presided over by Miss Nabby **Brigham**, now my beloved and bereaved sister, [Mrs. Gen. **Risley** — Ed.]” Levi **Risley**’s older brother William attended that school and, in the *Censor* of 5 December 1877, repeated that “it was taught by Miss **Brigham**, afterwards the wife and now the widow of the late Gen. Elijah **Risley**.” That was in the summer of 1807 since he goes on to say, “The first winter school was taught by Samuel **Perry** [i.e. **Berry**].”

In 1808 a number of significant events occurred. The Erie Road was rerouted to where today’s Main Street runs, across Hezekiah **Barker**’s farm, past his common, and between the saw mill and grist mill by Canadaway Creek. Although a bridge was not put across the creek until 1809, in anticipation of the change, **Barker** built a log inn by the Erie Road facing the common, and Richard **Williams** did the same at today’s 189 West Main Street, the beginning of the competition between the east and west sides as to where the center of the community would be.

It was also in 1808 that **Barker** hired Israel **Lewis** to clear the common of trees. An article in the *Censor* of 27 January 1869, which noted that Israel **Lewis** was still alive, remarked that in 1808 “there were then only a few acres cleared in the vicinity and no roads but paths through the forest followed by marked trees.”

In his account of early school days in Fredonia in *The Fredonia Censor* of 25 June 1884, Levi **Risley** explained that in 1809 the original school district was divided. “The west side had no school-house, but a school was opened in an old dilapidated house or stable standing near the south line of the old common that was afterward laid out by Judge **Houghton**.” It seems a little odd that a building put up no earlier than late 1806, according to Elisha **Fay**’s account, would be “old” and “dilapidated” less than three years later. It may be that Levi **Risley**, who was five at

the time, was remembering what the building looked like some years later. There was no school held on the west side in 1810 and in 1811 the **Risleys** moved to Ohio, not returning until May 1814.

By the time the **Risleys** returned, much had changed. The War of 1812 had broken out and, in 1813, had taken the life of Abner **Williams** in the Battle of Lake Erie. Earlier, on 12 November 1812, Hezekiah **Barker** finally received the deed to his land from the Holland Land Company, permitting him to begin selling off house and business lots as he worked to develop the community around the common. At some point late in 1812 he built a new school house, this time of planks from his saw mill. With the common now free from trees, he located the building on the northern edge of the common next to today's Temple Street. It is referred to in a 25 January 1813 survey "of an amendment of a Road [Temple Street] from Canadaway Common to Mr. **Eastwood's**, beginning at a stake standing on the Common 50 links south of the new schoolhouse."

It was that "new schoolhouse" that Levi **Risley** seems to be describing in his article in the *Censor* of 25 June 1884, although he confuses it with the earlier log schoolhouse. "The school house was a frame building and made from some of the lumber sawed at **Barker's** new sawmill, which stood just above the west bridge on the Canadaway Creek. The school house was about twenty-five feet by thirty feet square."

When the **Risleys** returned from Ohio in May 1814 they found "both sides of the creek much improved, and both claiming to be the center of gravity.... The west common had been cleared off and the stumps taken out and a school-house built near its center, and a Rev. Mr. **West** had taught school in it one winter."

Years later, when a dispute arose about a fence around the West Hill Common, the *Fredonia Advertiser* commented in an article that was reprinted in the *Censor* of 29 May 1867, "That Common was dedicated to the people in the year 1814 (as near as we can learn), by a public celebration, and was used as such for about thirty-six years. The address on that occasion [in 1814] was delivered by Dr. **Whaley**, son-in-law of Richard **Williams**, the donor of the Common, and one of the early settlers of that town, and who was, with others at the time, ambitious to have that locality [West Hill] considered the center of the town or village."

(John P. M. **Whaley** was a physician in Chautauqua County. He is recorded as being in Pomfret in the **Douglass-Houghton** Ledger on 12 March 1813; he was an ensign, later a Lieutenant in the State Militia, 169th Regiment in 1817 and 1818; and he was one of the founding members of the Chautauqua County Medical Society which was formed in June 1818.)

In his article, **Risley** adds that the school house on the West Hill Common burned down around 1816. A new one was built at the corner of Chestnut and Berry streets. Around 1820 that building also burned. A fancier one, one with a steeple, replaced it on the same lot. It was dubbed "Trinity School" by Jacob **Houghton**, perhaps because the Episcopalians worshipped there. The Rev. **Garland** in his *History* of Trinity Church adds that someone unnamed made a sign for "Trinity School" and put it over the entrance. "There is plenty of evidence of the resulting antagonisms," apparently on the part of local Presbyterians and Baptists.

While this was going on, other elements in the tug of war between the west and east sides were at work also, involving religious groups and the schools. Among the early congregations was one of twelve settlers who met in September 1810 at the home of Asa **French** on West Hill and entered into "a Christian Covenant." In 1811 they incorporated as the "Pomfret Religious Society" and in December 1819 reincorporated as the First Presbyterian Society of Pomfret. At that point the decision was made to put up a permanent meeting house, and on 8 February 1820 it

was decided “that the site for the meeting house be located on the hill.” The locations suggested were on the north side of West Main Street just east and just west of Chestnut Street. This would have been the first church building in the community and given real weight to the west side.

The reaction was immediate. A subscription list was circulated in 1821 to raise enough funds to put up an Academy building on land to be donated by Hezekiah **Barker** just north of the school house on his Common. The wording of the preamble to the list is telling. “We the subscribers, having it in contemplation to build a house, which shall answer the purposes of an academy and a [blank space] meeting house. . . .” A space was left where a later hand inserted “Presbyterian” indicating that any one of the local congregations, none of whom had a church building, would be welcome. In the end, it was the Presbyterians, although not those with land on West Hill, who signed on.

Actual work on the Academy building seems to have begun in 1822 with the massive frames going up on 9 July 1822. On 11 October 1823 the Presbyterians met on the second floor of the Academy building for the first time. The Academy itself took much longer to organize. While efforts were being made to have the Legislature grant a charter, a front room on the ground floor was leased to School District No. 8 and the plank school house was abandoned. However, once the Academy began to function, in October 1826, that room had to be vacated.

On 7 June 1827 a lot on Temple Street was purchased and a stone school building put up. (It was not so lovingly referred to as the “jail.”) In 1848 a new site was acquired at Center and Barker streets and a two-story wooden building constructed there. Early in June 1853 it burned and was replaced by a four-room brick building that served until 1901.

In order to have enough students for their practice department, as it was called, the District No. 2 school on West Hill was closed down and the students transferred to the Barker Street School and some to the Normal School. That West Hill school house was a red brick building located on the site of today’s 48 Houghton Street. The *Censor* of 22 January 1834 reported that it had lost its roof during a severe storm on 12 January. However, it was repaired and can be seen on the 1851, 1854 and 1867 maps. Addison **Cushing**, at the time President [Mayor] of Fredonia, referred to it in a speech at the *Censor’s* Semi-Centennial on 1 February 1871 as a “dilapidated brick structure.”

In 1938 the *Censor* ran a series of pictures and articles about the old days in Fredonia. In the issue of 4 February 1938, a local columnist asked “who knows anything about the old brick schoolhouse that stood on the lot at 48 Houghton Street? Mrs. Bessie **Blodgett** who now lives there in a home built by her father 50 years ago would be very much interested in finding someone who can tell her more about the old structure. She remembers hearing her father tell about inkwells, pens, and fragments of desks — articles undeniably connected with the schoolroom.” In the following issue appeared an answer. “Mrs. **Blodgett** received a letter from the former Miss ‘Dilly’ **Ranney**, now Mrs. Leslie **Kelley**, of Jamestown; parts of which follow:

‘I read in the *Censor* that you want to know about the little school house that stood on **Houghton** lands. That land belonged to Jacob **Eleck** and Mrs. **Bradish**. The school was the first one I went to; I must have been between five and six. I will try to tell you how it looked on the inside.

‘You went into a small entry where you hung your wraps — the boys on one side and girls on the other, dinner pails on the floor. The seats and desks were made of wide boards. If necessary three could sit in one of the seats; they were so very long. Originally they were painted a dark red.

‘I can still see the way the top of the inkwell came through the top of the desk. All the seats faced the back of the room. There were several benches around the room where we sat for our recitations and when the weather was very cold we drew the benches up near the stove to get warm. Our great joy was to pass the water out of a tin pail, giving each one a drink out of the old tin cup.

‘We had only two terms of school then — the older boys came in the winter and things were lively then! Paper wads decorated the room. My teacher, Mr. **Tate**, on snowy mornings would rap on the door and say, “Little girl, get your wraps on and I will carry you on my arm to school.” At night he brought me home.

‘Among the students were the **Ives** boys and a sister whom they called “Pickles,” John and Sarah **Pratt**, Norah **Barclay** and brother Leonard, a family by the name of **Moss**, Flora Wilbur and her brothers, my two brothers and many others whose names I can’t recall.

‘In the summer a Miss **Colvin** taught. How we all liked her! We were moved down town to the school back of the Normal and Mrs. **Carlisle** taught the room of older pupils while Mrs. **Merritt** had the smaller ones.

‘Many of the boys carved their initials in those desks. I never knew what became of the schoolhouse.

‘And so Time Marches On and only memories of the little old schoolhouse remains!’”

The date of Della **Ranne’s** attendance in the last days of West Hill school can be pretty well narrowed down to 1866-1867. Her teacher, Mr. **Tate**, was George **Tate**, who had attended the Fredonia Academy, volunteered in the Civil War, returned and was married and spent one year in the grocery business before beginning a long career as a teacher. He may have boarded at the **Ranne’s** home, which was directly opposite the school house on the north side of West Main Street.

Flora **Wilbur** was born about 1863, so she may have been five years old when she and Della were classmates. Apparently Della attended Mr. **Tate’s** winter term (when the older, trouble-making boys could attend school) and then Miss **Colvin’s** summer term, after which they all moved down to the Barker Street school around 1868.

That school building sufficed for a number of years. In 1894 the voters agreed to form a “Union Free School” district, combining the old Districts No. 2 and No. 8 and build a four-room addition on the front of the Barker Street School. It was finished in 1895 and served until 1901, when additional space had to be rented to take care of the increasing population. Not long after, it was necessary to buy 101 Eagle Street, the former **Stoddard** residence. But again, by 1905 three additional buildings were rented for classrooms. By 1907 a new arrangement was seen as inevitable and a new era in Fredonia’s educational system began.

Many, many changes had taken place in local education and in the school houses since 1807 when that little log school house first stood by the side of a trail running through the grove of pesky black walnut trees.