

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OYSTER BAY SCHOOLS

by John E. Hammond

The earliest record of any school or teacher in the Oyster Bay village area was in 1677, 24 years after the purchase of the town spot. Thomas Webb was recorded in the Oyster Bay Town Records as schoolmaster when he was chosen as Town Clerk to supplement his wages of £10 per year as teacher. Schoolmasters in the early colonial period seldom had a school building within which they could conduct classes, however; usually they would make periodic visits to the homes of the residents who desired to have their children receive schooling. Schooling was very basic and was heavily slanted toward the development of reading skills to enable the child to read the Bible and study the catechism. Schoolmasters were frequently only paid in meals, lodging, or whatever services a family might be able to offer the schoolmaster in exchange for schooling of the children.

In the same year that a schoolmaster was named, 1677, a portion of land was set aside for a Town Common which was to be located on the north side of East Main Street, running from the present White Street to Florence Avenue. The Town Common contained a Town House which was to be set aside for all types of public meetings. There is no record that it was used as a school in the very early days, however, that was one of its intended uses. This was the building that later became the first one used by the early Christ Church.

In 1726 the Church of England hired Daniel Denton as a teacher in Oyster Bay; he was given a house to use as a school and in

1728 had 29 students. Although no record seems to remain as to which house Denton was given, this was perhaps Oyster Bay's first school building. A later schoolmaster in Oyster Bay was Thomas Kemble, who left in 1748 due to a mental breakdown; kids must have been difficult back then, too! There was no instruction following Kemble's departure until Samuel Seabury reopened the school in 1749. Some of the earliest formal education in the village was that offered by the Reverend Samuel Seabury, father of the first American Bishop. Rev. Seabury offered training in reading so that the congregation could learn their catechism and participate more fully in church services.

Zachariah Weekes served as the schoolmaster from 1758 until his death in 1772. Weekes kept a diary for those years and recorded how he instructed so many of the children of local families: the Townsends,

Underhills, Weekes, Youngs, McCouns, Lattens, and others. Zachariah Weekes took regular lodging in the Underhill house in the Cove, which stood between Cove Road and Tiffany Road. The early records of the Town of Oyster Bay contain a reference to a schoolhouse located on Cove Hill in 1793; this was the schoolhouse built and owned by Thomas Youngs (1717-1797). There is no closer identification other than, "Begining a Little to the Southard of Jotham Weeks Dwelling House, and Running Nearly Parallel with the other Highway up Cove hill, near the School House, the Monuments of the Bounder a Stake at each end." (OBTR Book I, page 132). Daniel Kelsey Youngs, in his history of the Youngs family, tells us that the school was moved to the east side of the Cove Road in 1802 and converted into tenements after the Oyster Bay Academy was opened. The old schoolhouse



The Oyster Bay Academy began in 1802 in the center building which is now the Christ Church Rectory. This photo was taken in 1912. (Author)

later became the Ryerson home and survived until the late 1940s, when it was demolished.

During the eighteenth century there also appears to have been an informal school run by some of the ladies of the village. The purpose of this effort was to enable the distaff side to gain some understanding of the written word; regular schooling was for the boys only. Girls were expected to stay at home and learn their letters and numbers while they also learned sewing by completing their samplers. It was within such an informal school that Mary Cooper, the local diarist, may have received her schooling. Her writing clearly shows much more command of language than would be learned through a sampler.

There was no school nor schoolmaster on Lloyd's Neck where America's first published black poet lived. Presumably he was taught to read and write at the Lloyd Manor. When New York State organized the system of school districts in 1814, Lloyd Neck was identified as District No. 1 in the Town of Oyster Bay but still had no school; later in the nineteenth century Lloyd's Neck became part of Suffolk County.

The need for more formalized schooling in the village of Oyster Bay was recognized by some concerned citizens led by James Farley. They enlisted the support of James Townsend, who had been on the Board of Regents of Columbia College in 1784-1787. In 1802 the group petitioned in Town Meeting to have a one and one half acre plot where the old Town House stood, set aside for

use as a "Seminary of Learning."

Elias Hicks made a survey of the site and on its certification he wrote, "where the old Episcopal Meeting house now stands." This was the second Town House on the spot and had been used both as a

Town meeting place and as a church by the Episcopal congregation. This was the building that had been ransacked by the occupying British forces during the Revolutionary War. The building was blown down in a windstorm in 1805 and the remains sold for \$67. The funds were then put in the hands of the Overseers of the Poor, which was the custom then for all incidental funds.

James Farley and his supporters each purchased shares (at \$72.50) in the new academy, some buying several shares. From this group, twenty five trustees were appointed, as well as an executive committee of three. The grounds were then fenced, trees planted, and the academy built. The academy building still survives, although somewhat altered, as the Christ Church rectory. Part of the original academy building was reserved for church services as there was



The 1872 schoolhouse from which School Street takes its name; it stood on the site where the St. Dominic Grade School is at present. (Author)

no Christ Church building at the time.

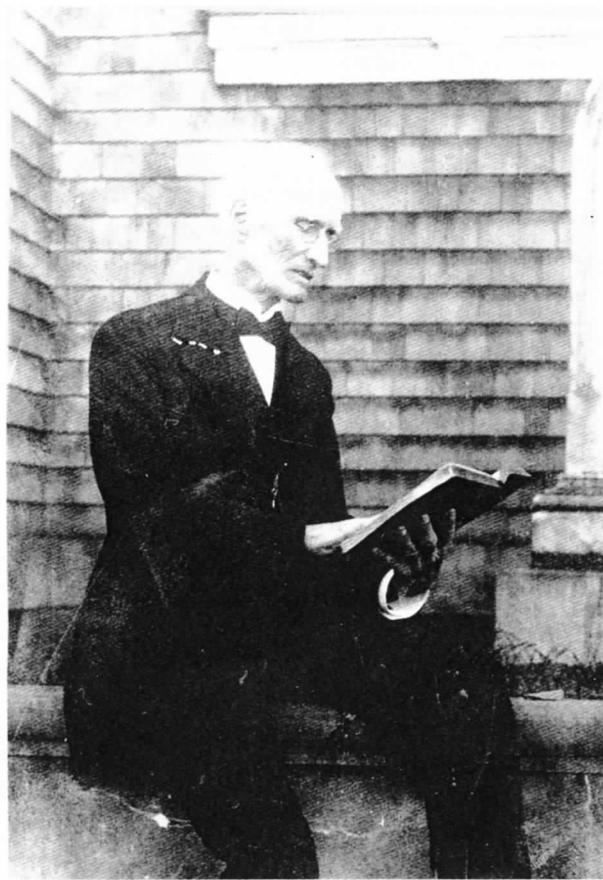
Shortly after the academy building was completed in April 1802, the trustees hired a Baptist pastor from Stamford, Connecticut, the Reverend Marmaduke Earle, as the first Principal for the academy. Rev. Earle was born in 1769 and graduated from Columbia College in 1790. Rev. Earle was assisted in his teaching duties by the Rev. Benjamin Coles, who had studied foreign languages under Samuel Seabury at Hempstead. Rev. Earle also took on the position of preacher at the Baptist Church on West Main Street with the elderly Rev. Coles continuing the pastoral duties. In 1803 the academy registered with, and began receiving financial support from, Columbia College (later Columbia University). The academy began receiving state aid in 1814, although it was still a private institution. With the formation of the New York State Public

School System and Oyster Bay School District No. 2 in 1823, the local voters passed a law allowing the trustees of the academy to continue in a similar capacity as public school trustees. Without the income from the academy the Episcopal congregation ceased activity.

Tuition rates at the private academy had been on a quarterly basis, by subject. Reading and writing were \$1.75 per quarter, English grammar \$2.25, mathematics \$3.50, and French, dead languages, moral philosophy or natural philosophy \$4.00 per quarter. These rates were rather high in comparison to other teachers in the area at the time. Lot Cornelius submitted a bill to Oliver Tilly of Matinecock for the tuition of his sons George and Charles; the total for all subjects for the two boys together was \$3.75 per quarter.

The Oyster Bay school district voters decided on June 21, 1849, to separate themselves completely from the academy. The district then elected its first School Board Trustees: Allen Hawxhurst, Samuel S. Summers, and Henry B. Wilson. John R. Kane served as clerk, John T. Hamilton as collector, and John Wood as librarian. The new trustees purchased a lot on South

Street from Thomas Cheshire for \$175 and contracted with Samuel Underhill for \$700 to construct a building 25 by 44 feet. This was to become Oyster Bay's first



Rev. Charles S. Wightman

public schoolhouse. The schoolhouse site was later owned by Mrs. Lena Cocks and subsequently was the site of Dr. Peter Y. Frye's home. The site is presently occupied by the State Bank of Long Island. In 1850 this school on South Street had 116 students, 103 of whom were reported as being able to read. The total school budget in 1850 was \$297.

The district was changed to District No. 9 in 1864, and became the Union Free School District Number 9 on February 9,

1866. The Board of Education was then expanded to nine members: Solomon Townsend, Edwin Griffin, Dr. Peter Y. Frye, Charles L. Brown, Valentine Bayles, Samuel Y. Ludlam, Henry Bayles, Moses Anstice, and Charles H. Burtis. The newly reformed district purchased land from one of the trustees, Charles H. Burtis, for \$1500. This was on the corner of what is now Weeks Avenue and School Street and is currently the location of the St. Dominic Elementary School. On the site, a two-story school building was built by John D. Velsor for the contracted price of \$9,950. This costly project resulted in considerable heated discussion amongst the trustees, which prompted trustee Samuel Ludlam to propose a resolution that was unanimously adopted by the board that, "any member of

this board guilty of using profane language during the meetings shall be fined \$1." There had been a great deal of heated discussion regarding the site chosen and the size of the new building. The other site under consideration were the lots on East Main Street donated a few years later by the DeForrest family for the building of the new First Presbyterian Church in 1873. The lot on the corner of School Street and Weeks Avenue

was offered for \$1500 less than the East Main Street lot.

The new schoolhouse was dedicated on Wednesday, December 27, 1872. Almost 1000 people from the village turned out for the ceremonies. Rev. Charles Wightman pronounced the Invocation and gave a short address. The principle speaker was 86 year old Chancellor William McCoun who related how his education had begun in the old Oyster Bay Academy and how Rev. Wightman's father in law, Marmaduke Earle, had been his instructor. McCoun also stated in his remarks that Marmaduke Earle accepted no salary for his teaching services at the academy, his only income was from the fees he received performing marriages. William McCoun had gone on to study law and became head of the state court system. In 1852 Chancellor McCoun was chosen as the first chairman at the very first convention of the newly-formed Republican Party in New York State.

The new school principal, M. A. MacDonald, gave a rendering of the poem "Nothing To Wear" in what was reported as "Graphic Style" at the dedication ceremony. He was assisted by Miss Julia Thurston and Miss Laura Betts who had also prepared several students for special presentations. Some offered dramatic scenes, others read dialogues or sang songs. Julia Thurston later became the Preceptress of the Oyster Bay Schools and continued teaching until 1924 when she moved to Baltimore. At all graduations of Oyster Bay High School the

annual Julia Thurston Award is presented in her honor.

The new frame school building included a sizable belfry on the roof which held a large bronze bell cast in Philadelphia. The new school resulted in a tax rate of 72 cents per \$100 of assessment, but it quickly became a center of activity for the community. The first year the school combined with the community to hold regular "entertainments." These were led by the school staff, headed by Mr. M.A. MacDonald, principal; Miss Julia L. Thurston, first assistant principal; Miss Edna Dodd, second assistant principal; Miss Susie Downing, principal of the primary school; and Miss Laura Betts, assistant.

A later principal of the school, Sidney B. Covey, caused somewhat of a local flap in 1892 when he backed out of his intended marriage to Miss Anna E. Cheshire. Mr. Covey was born on November 9, 1853, in Parishville, New York. He came to Oyster Bay in 1888 and met Miss Cheshire at a festival at the old Methodist Church on Orchard Street. They began seeing each other regularly and in December 1891 announced their engagement, setting a wedding date of July 6, 1892. The intended bride's dress was made and invitations were sent out to relatives and friends. A week before the wedding Mr. Covey

sent a note to Mr. Cheshire saying that he could not marry Anna, giving no further explanation. Mr. Cheshire immediately informed his daughter who, naturally, was devastated by the news. She remained bedridden for over a week. The reaction in the community was one of condemnation. There was one group that swore that Covey would be "Tarred and Feathered" if he showed his face in the village. There was strong sentiment to force him out of his position as principal and to run him out of town. Mr. Cheshire sought out Mr. Covey and had a meeting with him, wherein Mr. Covey was reported to have stated that he had found that he simply was not in love with Anna. Mr. Cheshire did not pursue the matter any further, saying, "I want to let the matter drop; I am only too glad that my daughter was saved in time from marrying the man." Mr. Covey left Oyster Bay by the beginning of the next school term. He took the position of principal of Public School No. 19 in Utica, New York. Covey died on February 8, 1902, of typhoid fever.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE
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