

# A Short History of The Early Schools in Chester

By Frank Durland

The following record of our early schools in Chester, New York, was copied from memoranda made during the many visits and conversations with our early townsman, Mr. George S. Banker, who was born in Chester (then Goshen township) in the year 1818. These visits and records were made during the years 1894-95. Mr. Banker died in 1900.

Perhaps one of the earliest settlements was made by John Yelverton - born in Chester, England in 1693 - who came to America and settled in New Windsor and Chester early in the year of 1700. His grandson Abijah, owner of the Yelverton Inn, established and was the librarian of our first library in 1799. Over 100 volumes of books were kept in town, with membership at \$5.00 per year.

No doubt the hamlet of old "Chester", N.Y. on the Kings Highway, and the settlement of West Chester on the Otterkill were made at about the same time. As in West Chester the use of the water power gave us the first saw mill and grist mill. This made West Chester the original business center in our earliest times.

Mr. Banker said, "my first recollection is of a small school building that was located on the Goshen road, a short distance from my birthplace, which was in a small house just south of the Otterkill Bridge over the Erie Railroad." This school house stood opposite the present entrance road to the Arcadia Farm just below the present "Derrydale" farm on this same road.

"A few years later," Mr. Banker said, "my family moved and lived in West Chester." The earliest school building built during that period was a large building 40 x 40 and still standing. It is at present owned and occupied by Mr. Joseph Verbert as his residence.

Mr. Banker further said he attended this school in the year 1828 - at the age of 10 years.

This school building on the Main Street in the old village of Chester is located a little south of the Yelverton Inn which was built as early as 1765. At this time the school was in charge of Mr. Coe Jennings as teacher. I might add that my father, Joseph Durland, the fourth generation of the Durland family in Chester, attended this same school in 1842 or at ten years of age, having had 1832 as his birth year. The most noteworthy occurrence during this year of 1842 was the dismissal of the entire school to witness the arrival of the first train over the Erie to reach Chester on that eventful day.

#### Chester Academy

This same year, 1842, saw the beginning of the building of our well known private school known as the Chester Academy.

The owner of the land at the time was the hatmaker, Aaron Cox. Mr. Cox sold the plot of land to Mr. Charles B. Durland, who in turn gave the land outright (for school purpose only) to the then organized Board of Trustees of Chester Academy. The building fund was raised by subscription and managed by a Board of Trustees and was supported by the tuition paid by the enrolled students.

The contract for this new building was awarded to Mr. George S. Banker for the sum of \$2800. He began work in April 1842 and completed the building in October the same year. The school was opened by Stephen Bross as Principal.

This new building had on the upper floor, a large auditorium 40 x 44 ft. called an "Exhibition Hall". I recall the seating consisted of a succession of long benches. This auditorium was the scene of many amateur plays and was used by the various traveling shows and entertainments for a number of years.

Stephen Bross, the first Principal, was followed by his brother, William Bross, who later was Editor of the Chicago Tribune and afterward Lieutenant Governor of Illinois. He in turn was followed by Rev. Phineas Robinson 1849-1857. The following year Mr. H. <sup>ORTON</sup> ~~Oston~~, who was later a Professor in the State University, Columbus, Ohio, became Principal. Professor Phinney was next in charge during the years 1865-1868. Then followed the organization by legal procedure of the successor to the Academy, known as "Chester Union Free School No. 1" which was a consolidation of three former districts including as at present, a small portion of the Town of Goshen. The first school meeting was held November 6, 1869. At this meeting Robert W. Colfax was chosen Chairman, and Lewis <sup>Masterson</sup> ~~Mastrom~~, Secretary. This was followed by the important meeting of November 12, 1869, which saw the enterprise fully accomplished, and the first Board of Education was chosen - David R. Feagles, John B. Tuthill, Joseph Durland, Cornelius B. Wood, and Dr. Charles P. Smith Sr. The first officers elected were David R. Feagles, President - Joseph Durland, Clerk - and William B. King, Treasurer. The former Treasurer of Chester Academy gave his services as custodian of the school money in the schools for over twenty years.

Mr. Banker related that "Among the number of schools that I saw built in Chester, first, was a small school building erected in 1843 located on a narrow, long lot a short distance above the Durland homestead in West Chester on the opposite side of the road. The lot ran from the Florida road east to the Otterkill Creek. Sarah Wells was the first teacher who was followed later by Sarah Berry who taught for many years, until the school was closed in the ?<sup>1870</sup>. This small school owned a library with <sup>e</sup> ~~Ebenzer~~ Foster as Librarian. It had only ten volumes at its beginning. Books were kept in his shoemaker shop in West Chester which was located opposite the present State Historical

marker. This building was the home of the first U. S. Post Office in Chester erected in 1795 with Jackson as Postmaster.

The next school building which followed in 1857 was the brick building built opposite the former William Rysdyk home on High Street. The following year, 1858, saw the building of the Brick school building in East Chester, now the property of Louis Van Rompaye.

Shortly after the burning of our old Academy, we saw the building in 1904 of the now vacated structure on Woods Hill. A new modern High School located in the geographical center of our town was built during the years 1934-35 and is now serving the children and adults of this and surrounding communities.