

OVCS Historical Tour

How We Came to be Who We Are Continued... by Mitchell Gary (Guidance Counselor)

One Room School Houses

In the early 20th century, students attended the schools pictured below. During this time period, students showed strong school spirit and were held to high standards of scholarship. The schools had many activities, such as speaking contests, sports and frequent social and entertainment events.

Once upon a time there was a log school house (no, I didn't work for the school at that time). There must have been many one-room school houses located in the Georgetown and South Otselic areas and the surrounding communities. I think that some of these might have even been private schools. In any event, it was a pay as you go proposition even for school district residents. The schools were administered through a "town system," rather than a separate board of education. What follows below are fragments of the history that traces the origin of education in Georgetown and South Otselic, New York. At some point, the schools made application to become a member of the University of the State of New York and to obtain a charter. This is known as the process of accreditation. Framed accreditation certificates for the South Otselic schools can be viewed in the district office's conference room in South Otselic.

The Georgetown School History

In 1850, there is evidence that documents the construction of a new school house. Apparently, by 1878, residents of the community had prospered, and the increase in population called for the construction of yet another new house with two rooms. In Georgetown, it was decided in 1878 to form a "Union Free School." This entity provided a tuition free education for the residents of the school district. Non-residents were charged tuition. In 1897, it cost the outrageous sum of \$8.00 to send a child to Kindergarten, but you had to shell out the big bucks (\$15.00) to attend Georgetown's "academic department," apparently a term used to describe the upper grades. The time honored process of taxing residents provided the funds for the school's operation for its residents. In 1897, an early incarnation of the renovation project provided for the addition of a third room to the school.

It is amazing that the language used at Board of Education meetings has not changed very much over the years. Elizabeth H. Hay, a member of the Class of 1924, compiled a school history, and that document states that around 1898 it was decided to raise by tax at least \$420.00 or 5% on a hundred of assessed valuation of the District to pay teachers' wages and other expenses during the remainder of the school year." In 1898, the total school budget was about \$800.00.

Once Georgetown became a Union Free school, other area school districts entered into agreements or cross contracts with Georgetown to provide education. In September, 1898, the Georgetown Union School was completing its first merger agreement. By the way, teachers worked for \$8.00 per week, and if a parent could not afford to pay to have a child vaccinated, the school kicked in the twenty-five cent fee that was charged by Dr. Lamb. So much for managed health care. Like its counterpart in South Otselic, the Georgetown Union School and Academy published an annual "Catalogue" that was like our current

day "Student Handbook." Looking at the edition published for the 1911-1912 school year (no, I was not employed by the school at the time!), there did not seem to be the need for page after page related to discipline policies. Nevertheless, I would share with you a paragraph from the section related to attendance that was apparently taken from a provision of the compulsory education law:

"Anything more than two unexcused absences during any month constitutes irregular attendance. Three times tardy counts the same as one absence."

In June, 1900, almost 100 years ago, the Georgetown Union School held its first commencement. There were three graduates, two girls and one boy.

A water line was installed in November, 1908.

In June, 1915 another renovation project was undertaken, adding an upstairs section that included a laboratory an auditorium and two additional classrooms. The Georgetown Union School was now a High School.

In June, 1916, the school district in Brunder Hollow joined the Georgetown Union Free School District. In August, 1917, the school paid less than \$300.00 for four toilet bowls and a urinal.

In June, 1918, the Town System of school administration ended, and was replaced by a Board of Trustees.

In the summer of 1922, there was a consolidation of school districts. A number of surrounding school districts were merged with Georgetown Union Free School District. Transportation arrangements became more complex as students from former, outlying districts were drawn to the Union Free School District #1 in Georgetown. In the same summer, a motion was made to provide drinking and washing water inside the school. That fall, there was a proposition to install electric lights in the school house.

In the fall of 1924, due to the consolidation, empty school houses were sold to area residents whose names are somewhat familiar to us: Ira Wilcox paid \$77.00 for one of the houses, Lauritz Rasmussen bought another for \$45.50, and William Trass bought a school house for \$100.00.

In December, 1927 there was a unanimous vote to become a centralized school district, and the Georgetown Union Free School District became the Central School District #1 of the Towns of Georgetown, Eaton and Nelson in Madison County, New York.

Less than a year later, on November 5, 1928, Gerald Evans was on his way to the bathroom and discovered smoke. The school burned to the ground. I don't know if Gerald ever made it to the bathroom. We do know that he survived the fire. Temporary classroom space was secured wherever possible until construction was completed on the new Georgetown High School.

The South Otselic School History

There were about a dozen schools in and around South Otselic. As was the case in Georgetown, there was a process of growth and consolidation that resulted in the formation of a Union Free school district and eventually a centralized school. There were school districts on Tallett Hill, "The Flats" in Otselic, Otselic Center, the Mann turnpike, Sugar Hollow, Levissee (or Calkins), Rhode Island, Beaver Meadow, Ridge Road, Seventh Day Hollow, Nagus and Warner. Perhaps some of our residents reading this page can provide us with information about these early one-room school houses. The Cortland Democrat at some point published an article about the South Otselic schools. The date of the article is not

available. The article states that "the history of the school dates back to the year 1896 when the district was changed from a common school district to a Union Free school district.

The school building was at that time a two-story affair standing near the site of the present structure." The site mentioned in this article refers to an area in what is now the town park in South Otselic. The article continues: "Being inadequate for the needs of the district, it was urged by the board of education and several progressive citizens that additional grounds be purchased and that a new up-to-date building be erected. Accordingly in 1898 plans were made and work begun in the fall and winter of that year on the new building, and during the early part of the ensuing year the faculty and pupils began their duties in their new environments." The article also mentioned that the school was raised to the grade of a senior school in 1908. It is not clear from the documentation when the Union Free school in South Otselic became the South Otselic Central School, or if the school remained in the town park until the construction of the present building on Maple Avenue. A 1936 newspaper clipping describes opening day in South Otselic. It describes the building that to this day forms the core of our present school district.

The new central school building at South Otselic opened Monday morning. It was expected that the building would be ready November 15 but delays made it impossible. The so-called annex, near the new building, has been torn down. The conduct of classes has been highly inconvenient in the two buildings used, a distance apart. The new building was begun last May with D. Kenneth Sargent of Syracuse and Watertown as the contractor. It will serve the towns of Pitcher, Smyrna and Lincklaen, Chenango County.

On the first floor are four grade rooms, a shop, cafeteria, lockers, offices, auditorium, gymnasium and physical instructor's offices. On the second floor are a science library, home making room, five classrooms, a study room, library and teacher's and health room combined. The exterior is Indiana limestone and buff brick. The corridors have composition tile floors and classrooms have wood finish floors over concrete slabs. The building is fireproof throughout. The building is on Maple Avenue on a level site which affords ample playground. The athletic field will include a baseball diamond, field and tennis courts. The faculty of the school includes: J. Arden Woodall, principal; Miss Lillian Thompson, English; Miss Minnie McNickle, Latin and French; Mrs. Harmon Dutton, Mathematics and Science; Mrs. Charles Halfort, history and library; Mrs. Albert Dietz, home making; Mrs. Clayton Baumann, school nurse; Preston Kellogg, agriculture; Paul Coolidge and Olive Coolidge, music; Mrs. Roy Davis, grades 7 & 8; Mrs. Arnold Miller, grade 6; Mrs. Duane Brown, grade 5; Mrs. Jessie Wynn, grades 3 & 4; Mrs. Lynn Angell, grades 1 & 2; Mrs. Glenn Davis, North Pitcher; Mrs. William Brown, North Pitcher; Miss Sylvia Higgins, Mariposa and Mrs. Joseph Muise, Stanbro.

No doubt reflecting growing communities, the schools responded to their population by expansion and the combining of resources. This was a process that began before the turn of the century and as we know, continues to the present day.