

History of the East Norwalk School By Augustus C. Golding

From *Norwalk After Two Hundred and Fifty Years*,
South Norwalk, Connecticut C.A. Freeman, 1901

The first mention of a school in the town proceedings is dated May 29, 1678. The town voted and agreed to hire a school master to teach all of the children in the town to read, and write, and the Townsmen (selectmen) were instructed to hire Mr. Cornish on as reasonable terms as they can.

Feb. 20, 1679, James Olmsted was appointed school master to set copies for the children.

Nov. 17, 1679, it was voted to build a school house 20 ft. long 18 ft. wide, posts 7ft., and to be not less than 6 ft. from floor to ceiling. It was to stand between Samuel Keeler's corner and the water flood, which has been located near the barn of W. S. Hanford, directly in front of the upper school house.

Aug. 20, 1686, voted 30 pounds (about \$150) for a school master; also voted to have a house fitted for a school.

Feb. 21, 1692, Mr. Thomas Hanford, Jr., was chosen school master, to be paid 1 pound 10 shillings, (about \$7.50) per month. He was born in the town July 18, 1668, and lived where the Rev. Mr. Selleck lives, on the town street, now called East Avenue. He died in 1743, and is buried in the nearby cemetery.

Dec. 12, 1705, voted that the lots in rear of Mr. Buckingham's, called pasture lots, shall be sequestered for school use 4 acres to be and remain for the use of the schoolmaster. Rev. Mr. Buckingham's lot is now crossed by the N. Y., N. H. & H. R. R., the east bound station being on it. The pasture lots extended east and north to the Saugatuck river.

Feb. 3, 1703-4, voted that there should be a schoolmaster in the town if he could be found on reasonable terms.

Jan. 30, 1720-21, voted to have two schools attended, and kept for the year ensuing, one at ye south end of ye town, and the other at ye north end of ye town, at ye two respective school houses now in being, in ye winter time; and ye summer school at ye south end, and at ye school house on the west side of ye river; and ye country money shall be divided according to lyst by the military lyne.

From the above, it would appear that the school at the south end of the town was the largest school being open the whole of the year.

We will now come down to more modern times. The school house in use previous to 1826 stood on the street within the present fence at the northeast corner of the homestead of Rev. A. T. Beard, D.D., a new school house was erected in that year being the building now standing on the northwest corner of the homestead of Mr. O. W. Raymond.

When in use as a school house, it stood in the street between two trees, one of which is now standing. When this building was completed, the old building was sold, and the owner of the adjoining land moved his fence out to include the school site and afterward moved his barn partly on the street, and then built his fence outside of that making the street the narrow alley it now is. Down to the building of the school house which succeeded this last building all of the school houses had been fitted in the old way; a row of planking around the building or on two or three sides next the walls, furnished the desks, in front of this

another plank at the proper height, furnished the seat. There was no back to lean against, except that when the scholars turned out (so called) they could lean against the desk. Some time before this school house was abandoned, chairs with a back were substituted for the plank. These could be turned in any direction, (in my school days plank desks like these were well filled with holes and other knife marks,) the small scholars sat on benches in the middle of the room. Some benches had backs, and some had none, and the small children were kept in school the same number of hours as the older ones.

In 1868, the district acquired a portion of the site on which the upper school building stands and the front part of the building was erected, There was one large room on the second floor (since divided) and two rooms on the first floor. It was then supposed that the district was provided with school rooms enough for many years. When the building was finished the system of seating and desks now in use were introduced, to the great comfort of the pupils; but it is to be hoped that before many years the present old fashioned seats, and desks will give way to the single desk, and seat for each pupil, that can be adjusted to suit the scholar, be he or she, tall or short.

I will also say for your information so that you may avoid such a mistake when you grow up, that the district borrowed \$8,000 (eight thousand dollars) to pay the balance due on the building when completed, and that on this money they paid more than \$8,000 interest, making the cost to the district for that 4 room wooden building more than that of the new 8 room brick school house with 4 rooms finished.

When the town was divided into districts this was called the Down Town District, till about 18 years ago, when the name was changed to East Norwalk. The school continued to grow, and all of the rooms were filled. There was talk of finishing a room in the attic; but the better plan of building in the rear was adopted, and the two rooms in the rear of the center of the old building were put up with a recitation room at one end of the hall on the second story. With this addition there was room enough till 1890 when the two rooms on the southeast corner were erected; at the same time the recitation room was enlarged by extending it into the new part. These additions were paid for when built.

About 1895 the building again became crowded and more room was needed. A meeting was called and an effort made to build another addition. It resulted only in buying about 80 ft. additional land on the rear of the lot, and much improving the present site.

In 1896 the district voted to buy five lots on Gregory Boulevard and Second avenue, making 150 ft. on the first street and 250 ft. on the avenue. In the meantime rooms were hired in Randall's block, and two teachers were installed there with small children.

In 1897 the district voted to erect the present eight room brick building on the new site. Work was commenced the same year, and the outside completed. The next spring four rooms, the halls, and basement being completed. It was occupied at the commencement of the spring term; and the high school removed there from the upper building. The number of pupils still increases, and probably by next year additional rooms will have to be finished in the new building. This district is second in the town in the number of scholars attending school, and it may be safely said, better provided with room than any other large district.

The East Norwalk schools stand well in the estimation of those qualified to judge. As the name of the first teacher has been given it will not be amiss to say that the present principal is Mr. Edward H. Gumbart, and that he is assisted by thirteen lady teachers.

It will be seen by the preceding history of the first school that the town had been settled twenty-eight years before there was mention of a school or teacher. A generation had grown up in this time, and probably some of them had children old enough to attend school. We will not suppose that they had grown up in ignorance, for many of them were afterward prominent in the town and state.

Probably the long silence about the school may be explained by the fact that the Rev. Thomas Hanford had been a school teacher up to the time that he came to Norwalk, the first record of which is Roxbury, Mass., in the year 1651. October 20th the secretary of New Haven colony was desired to speak to Mr. Goodyear to see some means to bring the schoolmaster hither. November 14th he was in New Haven and an agreement was made with him as to his pay and diet and chamber which, being arranged, he taught till June, 1652, when one of the planters from Norwalk went to New Haven and saw the Governor and Mr. Hanford with a view to his coming to Norwalk to work in the ministry. It is probable that he taught the children in his own or some other house till his age incapacitated him for such hard work.