

Norwalk's Old Schoolhouse By Patten Beard

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The Colonial planting of the town of Norwalk was well on its way before town records tell of any school being started in the town. The inhabitants had been occupied with what seemed to be more urgent matters of work in clearing land, cultivating, and organizing town matters, to say nothing of erection of Meeting House and Minister's dwelling that were among the most urgent. Mill, smithy, pound, bridge came before a school. Homes had to be built and probably child labor came to help in many ways. It appears that prior to 1650 no legal enactment relating to schools had been made either in Connecticut or New Haven Colony. This was left to the discretion of the magistrates.

The first record we have is dated May 29th, 1678: "At a town meeting... voted and agreed to hier a scole master to teach all the children in ye town to lerne to Rede and write; and that Mr. Cornish shall be hierd for that service and the townsmen are to hier him upon as reasonable terms as they can." This first school was in neighborhood of the first commonage which is now known as The Old Burial Place, East Norwalk. It was in East Norwalk around this earliest green that the town was planted in 1650-1.

This school, from old description was "opposite Marvin-Lockwood house and old St. John House" not far from an inlet of the Sound that then came up that way. Presumably, this was near the present Roger Ludlow School in East Norwalk.

In 1672, we have record that town children were 58 in number.

In 1690 school in this place was held for 6 months long term. Meanwhile another master had been chosen in 1679, James Olmstead, "for to sett coppies for such as are sent to him who is to attend it the half yeere insuing and he is to have 25 shillings amount pay." This school was 20 by 16 feet.

In 1692 the minister's son, Thomas Hanford, Jr., was chosen and was allowed 10 shillings for each month he was employed.

In 1700 the Colony revised all previous legislation relating to education. Connecticut schools were placed on a better foundation than before.

"Every town having less than 70 householders shall yearly from year to year have a teacher for 6 months." And the following year John Copp was chosen school master, "in case he can be obtained."

John Copp figures largely as master and on January 3d, 1716 "a new school" is recorded, "on a Knole of ground on ye N. E. corner of James Stuart's house Lott... length 25 feet by 18 wide and 6 feet and a half in height."

This is the beginning of the North End School, commonly known later as “Down Town School” and relates suggestively to Norwalk’s present old school house situated, after moving from this probable location to the corner of East Avenue and Willow Road.

For many years I lived in a large house that was close to the placement of this North End Schoolhouse, in fact, at the N. E. corner of our home yard at rear of the house, I used to wonder what masonry of foundation had been there. It was quite overgrown. I conclude that this was the site of the old N. End School in the beginning. In early 1800’s, it was moved further down in the lot and there still is evidence of masonry foundations there. About 1826, it was placed down further on Willow and East Avenue – at least a building that had been in the N. E. corner of the lot and was presumably the old school, our second school, was there.

However, during the Revolution, we have record that on July 10th – some say 11th – General Tryon of British forces, landed on Norwalk Calf Pasture Beach with his men and early of the morning started toward the town burning everything in his way that was not loyalist. Some 135 houses were burned, 2 guard houses, 2 churches, barns and schools. Presumably this old N. End School which was right in his path was one of these. So the building we now call the Old Norwalk School House could not be the original pre-revolutionary building.

It is interesting, nevertheless since it must have been rebuilt on the same lines as the original with old foundation. Hence, we are practically assured that as it stands today, it was similar to the early school built there.

An early record tells that this school had a door at south end and a chimney was built at the N. end after town meetings began to be held there after the town no longer used its meeting house and town and society parted company. In another record is given information that a glass window is set into the upper room of this building, used often for town meetings.

The interesting fact is that the present schoolhouse on East Avenue and Willow Road has just this little upper room and a glass window in a loft room over its doorway. In the old days, the building had a small belfry with bell over its door. It was a clapboarded building, never painted. In recent years it was used as a cottage and several families lived in it and it was given a coat of red paint which it never had before and some authorities, misinformed, have printed the fact that it is “Norwalk’s little red schoolhouse” which it never was, so painted.

Probably, this present little building was erected when, after the terrible year of Norwalk’s destruction by the British when everything was so destroyed that there was no way to rebuild for want of materials and tools, around the 1790 period things began to be a little more normal, they then thought of the schoolhouse and somewhere between this and 1800, this building was built.

It is one of the remaining few structures in Norwalk that are really old. The rear of Gov. Fitch’s house remains, I think, still the oldest house in Norwalk. That, too was fired in the Tryon raid but though the Governor was a Tory, he had died at earlier period and his wife, Madam Fitch, hearing that the soldiers were coming, escaped from her home and thus it was not known it was Tory property and was fired. Servants saved the rear end that still stands.

However, the present little N. End school, known in later days of School Societies as the “Down Town School,” is very ancient and interesting. Its interior, of course, is changed.

It would have been interesting to have seen it when the boys and girls sat on hewn logs with pegged legs and had to write on planks ranged along the wall with their backs to the teacher while the younger children sat on backless benches of the same sort under the eagle eye of John Copp. At that time youth was out to rouse the ire of the master and the master was out to raise the cane on the student. Learning came hard. And though the master had granted him finally a slightly higher pay, he had to work for it. There was before 1820 no atlas with geography found in any common school. Salaries ranged between nine and twelve dollars a month – a five day week of six hours long and a half day free on a Saturday. Our first school had only a Bible, a Latin grammar and a dictionary for its books. Ink was made of soot. Pens were, of course, goosequill make and cut dextrously by the master.

But in the little old school-house that stands on East Avenue now, things had begun to up when it was first erected. The town had advanced from its early Colonial planting at the south its northern boundary on Goodman Hoyt Hill, now generally known as Earl Hill, where soon a super highway will cross the old location on “James Stuart’s Lott.” We hope that the little schoolhouse will be spared for it is close to the path of destruction that will demolish Gov. Fitch’s old home nearby. It is a relic that Norwalk should cherish and honor for all that it has stood for in the past for the town and its educational system.