

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OYSTER BAY SCHOOLS, PART II

by John E. Hammond

*The following is a continuation of Mr. Hammond's article which appeared in the Winter 2000 issue of The Freeholder. Please see that issue for Part I.*

The area served by the district experienced considerable growth and within ten years the new school on School Street was more than filled to capacity. It then became necessary to begin renting various buildings within the village to be used as additional classrooms. This continued until 1899 when the voters approved plans to construct a new building to house a high school (which the district did not have before) and the primary school. Although women did not yet have the right to vote in 1899, Miss Addie Hicks of Oyster Bay ran on the Democratic ticket to unseat Schools Commissioner Cooley. Miss Hicks received much local support and the endorsement of the local newspaper editor, but lost by 100 votes out of 2300 cast. Cooley had been appointed schools commissioner when Nassau County was formed in 1899.

The vote for the new school proposal was taken at a regular school board meeting on June 14, 1899, and was 50 to 34, by those residents in attendance at the meeting, in favor of appropriating \$25,000 for a new school. The approval by the voters was reluctant and only after the conditions at the frame schoolhouse became somewhat poor. The board then had to obtain the consent of the entire

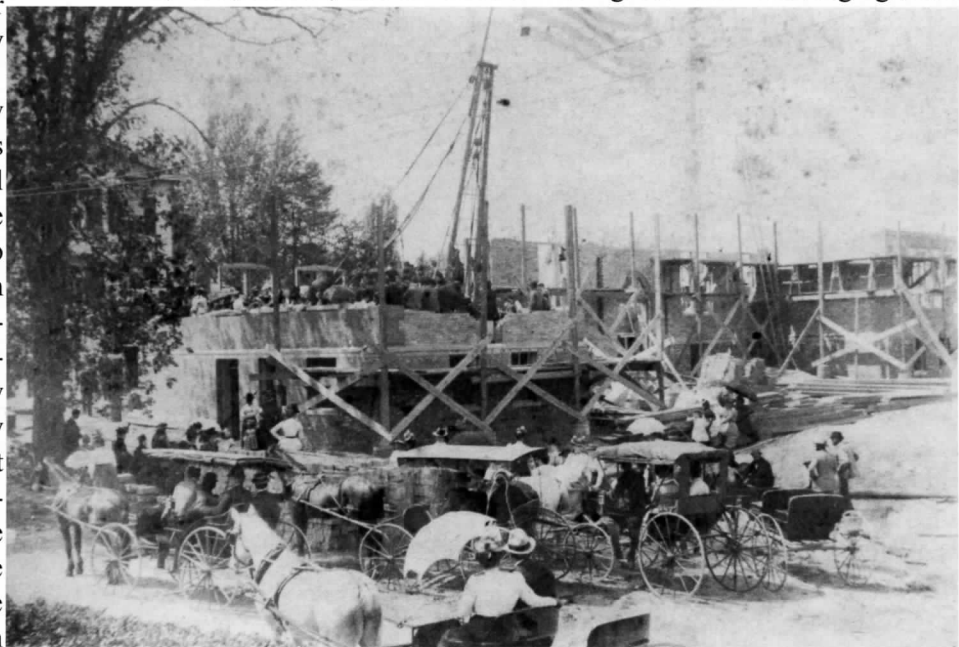
school district through a special vote which they scheduled for October 4, 1899. In the months between, much discussion was held within the community and at the school board meetings.

The question of the site for the new school became a very hot issue. Twenty seven years earlier the district decided to acquire the School Street lot because it was \$1500 less than the much larger lot on East Main Street. In 1899 a lot on the corner of Kellogg Street and Burtis Avenue was offered to the district for \$4000 at the same time that an offer was made to purchase the School Street lot for \$2500. The Kellogg Street lot measured 300 by 210 feet and was considered much more accessible.

The ventilation in the 1872 school building was extremely poor; many children were attending classes in the damp, cold basement. The Oyster Bay Guardian reported in its June 16, 1899, edition, that 82 children

were crowded into the basement, with 22 of them in one 16 by 18 foot room. The district acquired additional land adjoining the School Street location. The contract for the new high school on the corner of Weeks Avenue and Anstice Street was given to George H. Duryea for \$26,680; however, the cost rose to \$42,974 by the time of its completion. The cornerstone laying ceremony for the new high school was planned for Tuesday May 15, 1900; local organizers had wanted an earlier date but that was the earliest that Governor Theodore Roosevelt was available and they wanted him to participate in the ceremony. Roosevelt arrived in Oyster Bay by yacht from New York City and took up his summer residence at Sagamore Hill on the Saturday before the ceremony.

James M. McQueen was president of the Board of Education and he went down to the railroad station early on Tuesday morning to greet the arriving guests.



*The cornerstone-laying ceremony for the new high school building, May 15, 1900.*

Among the guests was Professor MacDonald who had been the very first principal when the 1872 school was dedicated. McQueen was joined by the entire school board as they met the 12:20 train and then escorted the guests by carriage to the old 1872 school building where a luncheon was served.

The cornerstone ceremony began at 1:00 p.m. when the Oyster Bay Band took up its position and Rev. Alexander G. Russell of the First Presbyterian Church at Oyster Bay pronounced the Invocation. Board member George B. Stoddard gave the opening address wherein he related how the new school building became a reality. He paid special tribute to the principal, Professor Woodard, who had reportedly declined an increase in salary for himself and urged the Board of Education to instead hire another teacher. Stoddard said that a proper epitaph for Woodard's gravestone would be: "Here lies a teacher and an honest man."

By the time several more speeches had been concluded, the afternoon sun had begun doing its work on the crowd. The conditions were reported as "torrid" by the time Governor Theodore Roosevelt was introduced; many of the scheduled dignitaries were nowhere to be found. In his usual exuberant manner Roosevelt addressed his remarks to the children telling them about the importance of having the courage to do the right thing and the very important need for strong character. After his speech Roosevelt was escorted to the northeast corner of the building where he took

the trowel in hand and performed the ceremony of laying the cornerstone.

Over the next few months the building architect, C.I. Carr, was on hand to help direct and speed along the completion of the project, but a ferocious storm in July 1900, did considerable damage. The Board of Education voted a special appropriation to reimburse contractor William S. Moore for the losses he had sustained due to the storm. More delays and rising prices forced the Board of Education to go back to the voters in October 1900 to get an additional \$7,700 approved so that the project could be finished. Upon its completion the new Oyster Bay High School was touted as among the very best and most modern facilities in the entire county!

On November 2, 1906, the school held its First Annual Field Day on the grassy area on the Anstice Street side of the building. Among the winners of the events were Elbert Griffin, first place in the Baseball Throw, and Clarence Gaskill, first place in the Shot Put.

The new school attracted many new students; many continued on to high school where previously they had stopped after the eighth grade. With continued growth of the community during the years of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, it soon became necessary to consider building an additional, separate primary school. This was done by first razing the old 1872 school building and constructing a new building for the primary school on the site. This new school was completed in 1910 by Richard Carman for the

contracted price of \$55,000 including the acquisition of some additional land. The two buildings were used during the World War II years as the Defense Training School where many local men and women were trained to work at the various defense plants, including Grumman and Republic. The 1910 primary building was also used for many years as the meeting place for local Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. The building was razed in 1961 for the construction of the new St. Dominic Church.

In 1916 Oyster Bay Cove was still its own school district (No. 10) but had no high school. A bitter battle took place between the residents of the village and the Cove about combining the two districts. The small Centre Island district was also part of the consolidation but there was no opposition from the Centre Island contingent. Former President Theodore Roosevelt advocated the merger of the districts and felt that the estate owners should share in the burden of costs of the villagers in supporting a high school. The estate owners looked on their little Cove school as a sort of private school even though their servant's children also attended; most of the children from the estate families went to private high schools. The heated arguments put the former President in some difficulty with many of his longtime estate friends and relatives. The merger was finally passed, which resulted in District No. 10 being combined with No. 9 and taxes going up in the Cove and down in the village.

The community continued its growth; in 1916 Professor Burtis Whittaker, the principal of the high school, reported that total enrollment was at an all time high of 837. By the end of World War I the district had to again rent buildings in the village to be used as additional classrooms.

School board meetings once again became very heated affairs. Board president John Bermingham led the board in the direction of buying a new parcel of land and building a completely new high school, the opposition favored buying the Thompson house property on Anstice Street and expanding the existing building. The issue was discussed at every board meeting for more than two years before it came to a head in 1920. Prior to the May 1920, board meeting, John Bermingham announced that he had obtained an option on the eight acre Minor property on East Main Street and that its purchase would be discussed and voted

upon at the May meeting.

More than three hundred residents attended the May 1920 Annual School Meeting in the 1901 high school building. Bermingham presented his proposal to the residents to exercise the option for \$50,000 but he also warned them that the option to buy the property would expire if it was not exercised at this time. After much discussion a vote was taken and surprisingly there were only 69 votes against the proposal.

The Minor property contained eight acres of land, mostly on a large sloping tract. There were two houses on the property, the Minor house which was moved to 78 Harbor Road, and the White house which was moved to the rear of a lot on Anstice Street. After taking title to the property, the school district set up the property as athletic fields while the board of education continued to put forth various proposals for the construction of a new high

school building; each proposal was voted down. The district continued to rent numerous buildings throughout the village where additional classes were held as enrollment continued to grow; in 1926 there were eleven such annexes. Reception classes, or Kindergarten, as we now call them, as well as one of the third grades, were held in the Oddfellow's Hall on South Street, which is the present Oyster Bay Fire Co. No. 1's firehouse. Miss Anna Sammis had her first grade class in the Giordano building on Anstice Street, and Miss Mildred Sammis had her second grade in the Rothmann's building, previously the Fisher property, on East Main Street.

The issue of a new school building finally came to a head in January 1927, when four classrooms were condemned as unsafe for use by an official of the State Education Department. The 1927 fight for the new school was led by the Oyster Bay Civic Association and its candidates, Dr. Myron Jackson and Daniel Kraft. The Oyster Bay Taxpayers Association opposed the new school and had as its candidates John Devine and Edward Waters. The vote for both the candidates and the school proposal was held on May 3, 1927, and the attendance was so great that the five policemen called in by the board of education had all they could do to keep things orderly. Because of the crowded conditions and all the pushing and shoving, Assemblyman Leonard Hall made a proposal that the women be allowed to line up and cast

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*Oyster Bay schoolchildren photographed outside one of several additional classrooms rented in the village due to increased enrollment.*

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their ballots first. His proposal was shouted down and was not even voted upon. In the end, the Oyster Bay Civic Association's candidates won as the school proposal was approved by a vote of 696 to 345.

The plan called for an expenditure of \$650,000 but had to be voted on again in June 1927, because of "voting irregularities"; the district had no voter registration

requirements and anyone who showed up at the meeting was allowed to vote. The new vote was scheduled with registration done according to Section 210 of the Education Law, which required that a voter be a citizen of the United States, twenty one years of age, and a resident of the county and district for at least thirty days immediately preceding the election. The proposal was passed at the second election.

Within a month of the passage of the proposal an artist's rendering of the project was shown to the community and bids were immediately requested. Bids were received in October 1927, and the groundbreaking was held on November 21, 1927. By the Spring of 1928, the steel girders which formed the frame of the structure were being put in place as the bricklayers began closing in the structure. On April 21, 1928, a cornerstone laying ceremony was held. Mrs.



*The 1929 High School building on East Main Street at the time of its opening.*

Theodore Roosevelt loaned the trowel with which President Theodore Roosevelt had laid the cornerstone of many other notable buildings, including the Nassau County Courthouse, for the occasion. In July 1928, the Minor house was loaded onto skids and moved along East Main Street to its present location on Harbor Road. In August local contractor Frank Faraco began grading the lots behind the school into two levels as the interior work on the building rapidly progressed. By the early Fall it became apparent that the building would be ready for use before the 1928-1929 school year was finished.

On February 15, 1929, the superintendent, Leon Deming, made an announcement at 2:30 that all students were to carry their books and papers down to the new building at the end of that day's classes. The principal, Glenn Halladay, supervised the

removal of material from the old school while Superintendent Deming placed himself at the new school to direct the students as they arrived. The new high school building was immediately the envy of every district in the county; enrollments immediately increased and within two years the closed-up 1910 grade school had to be re-opened to hold additional classes. Other nearby districts soon began improving their school facilities and the overcrowding eased up.

The seventy year old Oyster Bay High School building has served the district and several generations of students very well, as the building and its design has demonstrated its adaptability to changing needs. In the 1950s the Donald N. Luckenbill Music Wing was added and, as we begin the new millennium, a major addition in the form of the long-awaited Howard E. Imhof gymnasium has been completed.