

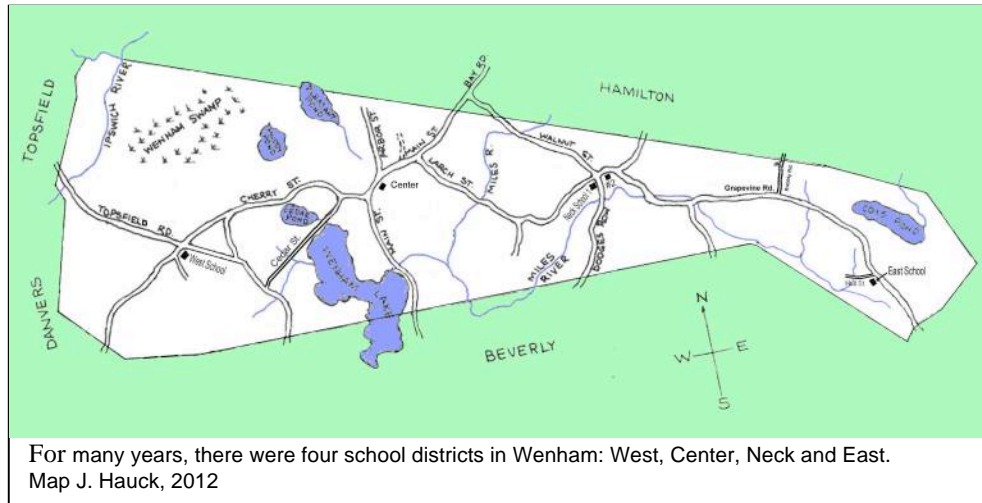
A History of
Wenham Schools
From 1701 to 1983

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Jack E. Hauck



A History of Schools

From 1701 to 1983

From the very beginning, the people of Wenham have considered education of their children to be important. The original settlers, in addition to building their homes, planting their crops and making their clothing, taught their children to read and count, understand their religion, and know the laws.

A 1642 Massachusetts Law required parents and masters of children apprenticed to them to be responsible for their basic education. All children and servants, as well, were to be able to read and write.

Parents did this not only because it was Massachusetts law, but more importantly, so that their children would stay out of servitude. State law said that children were to be educated in a trade or useful occupation. Parents, who did not educate their children, could have them apprenticed to others.¹⁰

For most families, there was not a schoolhouse, to which their children might go, so education was handled at home.

A source of outside help, for some, was the local pastor. In Wenham, for schooling, many children went to the home of Rev. Joseph Gerrish (*now the Claffin-Richards house*), which was alongside the town common, on the Ipswich-Salem Highway (*now Main Street*).

It was not long before the Massachusetts State legislature, prodded by the clergy, enacted a law calling for towns to have a teacher. The 1647 law stated: "*it being one chief project of the old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, and that learning may not be buried in the graves of our forefathers, in the church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors; it is, therefore, ordered that every township, in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased it to the number of fifty Householders, shall then, forthwith, appoint one, within their town, to teach all such children as shall resort to them, to write and read.*"¹¹

Initially, the colony's penalty for disobeying the 1647 act was £5; it was raised to £10 in 1671; in 1683, to £20, and in 1718, to £30. It might be that some towns believed it cheaper to pay the fine than to pay for a teacher. This act set the foundation of the Massachusetts common school system, in the 1840s.⁷³

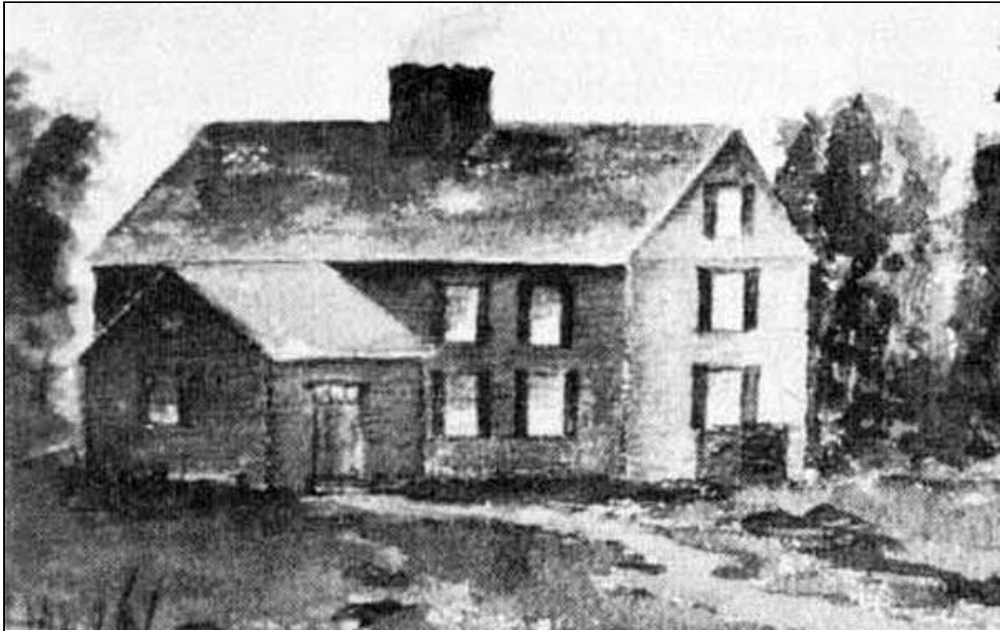
Horace Mann, of Franklin Massachusetts, helped create statewide common-school systems to increase opportunities for all children and create common bonds among an increasingly diverse population. Often called the "Father of American Education," he believed that education could preserve social stability and prevent crime and poverty.

Common-school advocates, including Mann and Henry Barnard, of Hartford Connecticut, worked to establish free, elementary, education accessible to everyone and financed by public funds. They advocated public schools should be accountable to local school boards and state governments. They also helped establish compulsory school attendance laws for elementary-age children. By 1918, such laws existed in all states.

The 1647 law to have teachers to teach children "to write and read" established the concept of primary schools, usually meaning grades from kindergarten to the sixth grade (*children five to ten years*), now called an elementary school.

The law of 1647 also required that towns of a hundred families hire a grammar schoolmaster, who could prepare children to attend Harvard College.¹¹ The term "grammar school" applied to children from ten to fourteen years of age.

The 1755 Samuel Johnson Dictionary defined a grammar school as a school where Greek and Latin were grammatically taught; however, by this time, there was little need for these languages. Most grammar schools of the 18th century mainly taught arithmetic and English.



Beginning in 1900, Capt. Thomas Fiske kept school in what is now known as the Claflin-Richards House. Picture courtesy Wenham Museum

It was a long time before the number of Wenham households reached the fifty-level, to bring the town within the provisions of the 1647 school law. Further, even when at the fifty household-level, tax-conscious Wenhamites ignored the law. There is no mention, in town records, of any school, until the end of the 17th century.

In 1700, a complaint was made to the Massachusetts Court against Wenham for not having a primary school. Wenham selectmen appointed representatives "to answer such presentment, on the town's behalf."²⁰

First School

On Mar. 11 1700/01, the town voted that the selectmen were to provide a primary school, for children to learn to read and write. (*First mention of a school in Wenham town records.*) The parents of the students were to pay for their education. If parents could not pay, the selectmen were to pay the schoolmaster an appropriate amount.²⁰

On Sep. 9, 1700, the selectmen appointed Capt. Thomas Fiske to keep a primary school, for the year ensuing, "for the learning of children and youth to read and write; and he be allowed, by the town, his proportion of rates to county and town, for the year ensuing, from this time, besides what he shall have of those that he shall so learn, to read and write."²⁰

School probably was held, at first, at his house, which is the present Claflin-Richards house²

In 1705, Wenham paid William Rogers 24 schillings for his keeping school.
²³ Rogers, as had his predecessor, held classes in his home, now 167 Main St.¹⁰

Each successive year, the selectmen voted to support a school in Wenham. However, on Mar. 3, 1729, they voted not to support a school.²⁷

Many parents were not paying the teacher. Thus, the town had to pay the schoolmaster. Eventually, this led to the selectmen not rehiring the schoolmaster. The Massachusetts Court brought action against Wenham, suing the town for violating the 1647 schooling law.

On Jul. 6, 1730, at a town meeting, voters chose William Fairfield to represent the town in responding, in Salem, to a petition against them for not having a school. Fairfield was authorized to use all legal means and ways necessary.²⁸

While town records do not have any information about the Salem trial, it would appear that the judgment was against Wenham. Two years later, on Jun. 2, 1732, the selectmen appointed William Rogers to keep school in Wenham, until October of that year.²⁹ Class was held at his home.

The first center district schoolhouse was built in 1779, east of the militia training field, on an area that now would be on Friend Court.

Mar. 3, 1795, the town "*voted the proprietors of a school belonging in the Middle District of this Town a Peace of the Towns land on the Easterly side of the highway near the meeting house & to set a school house on.*"⁶⁶ The "Town's land" referred to what originally had been a militia training field given to Wenham in 1680 by Samuel Smith. The "proprietors" referred to the parents of children attending the school and who paid towards the teacher's salary and maintenance of the schoolhouse.

In 1840, the town closed the first 1795 schoolhouse and built a new schoolhouse, at the back edge of the common, next to Enon One fire wagon garage.² Jul. 29, 1840. "*The Center School District may have the liberty of setting their new school house on the commons, so called, and as near the brook or the run a it can be conveniently be done without crossing the same and have the privilege at all times of passing to and from said house. That the school house shall be placed four rods east of the vestry.*"⁶⁴

In 1855, the town had four school districts, designated District 1, 2, 3 and 4. In District 3, there was the primary and grammar schools.

In 1858, when the town moved the primary schoolhouse to the north side of the town hall.⁶⁷ About twenty years later, the town moved the primary schoolhouse to the south side of the town hall.

1872 Beers map shows two schools, side by side, on the north side of the town hall facing Elm (*Main*) Street. A schoolroom also was in town hall. There were 194 children attending school and the town school budget was \$1,600 and the State provided \$133.20.⁶⁹

The four districts, in 1869, were simply called the east, west, neck and center schools.

For the opening of the September 1904 school year, the Center Primary School had 54 students. However, the school house had only 46 seats and there was no room for more seats. Therefore, the 4th grade was transferred to the Center Grammar School, bringing the total number to just under 50 students in the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades.⁷¹



1858 schoolhouse on north side of the town hall.
Photo, courtesy of Wenham Museum.

The town hired an assistant teacher for the 4th and 5th grades, which sat in a small recitation room that had only settees. Thus the students had to use their laps rather than desks for doing their school work.⁷¹

In 1911, the vacant primary schoolhouse was leased for a dollar, for a term of five years, to be a YMCA run by the Congregational Church. Later, 1911, William Trowt bought the building, moved it to a site behind his grocery store and used it as a garage.⁸ also 1911 WATR

Grammar School

Small towns, such as Wenham, found it difficult to support higher schools than those teaching reading, writing and ciphering (*mathematics*), considered to be primary schools.

To help the small towns, the Massachusetts General Court made land grants to enable them to establish grammar schools. Money from the sale of the land went toward support of the grammar school.¹²

In 1770, Wenham voted that, "*a grammar-school be constantly kept, in this town, the year ensuing, and that provision be made for the support of the same.*" *It was also voted that "a committee be chosen to provide a school-master, and to apportion said school, according to the tax in this town."*²

In 1858, seventh and eighth grades (*Grammar School*) were in a room on the first floor of the town hall.⁶⁷ Primary grades were in a schoolhouse on north side.

During the mid to late 1800s, the vestry on the common also provided space for school classes; however, pupils did not have desks.



In 1858, seventh and eighth grades (*Grammar School*) were in a room on the first floor of the town hall. Photo courtesy Wenham Museum

In 1900, Wenham had five schools: grammar and primary, on the common near the town hall; and three schools serving the first to the eight grades, in the East, West and Neck districts.¹⁴ The town had 7 students attending high school in Salem, for which it paid \$350.¹⁹

Many circumstances led to the building of district schoolhouses, away from the town center. Parents wanted to control the selection of teachers. Winter and poor weather conditions limited traveling. For students in the western and eastern parts of the town, travel time to the center school was long.

West End School

Not long after the resumption of a school in the center of town, 1732, the town voted, in 1734, that Representative William Fairfield, "*be directed and empowered to present a petition to the General Court, for a grant of some land, belonging to the province, to enable the town better to support a school.*"³⁰ His petition was unsuccessful, because the town's population at this time was too small.¹² Wenham's population, at the time, was less than two hundred.

However, a year later, 1735, Daniel Fiske sold to Wenham, about five square rods (*about a third of an acre*) of land, on Cherry Street, near the corner of Topsfield Road (*opposite to the present Richdale store*), provided that the town would erect a schoolhouse and maintain a school yearly.²

Four years later, 1739, the West End schoolhouse was built.¹² It held both primary and grammar classes.² The West School District included Bomer St. (*now Topsfield Rd.*) and Maple St., west to the Beverly town line.

About, 1850, another building replaced the first schoolhouse, which was used as a schoolhouse until 1923. For the final year, Mrs. Charles Connor was the teacher and there were 15 students.⁷⁴

In 1924, the town moved the West End schoolhouse to the rear of the town hall, and with an addition, it became a town garage, at a cost of \$1,700.⁸ It was torn down, 1975, when the Highway Department moved to the Iron Rail Property.

There are no descriptions of the West End schoolhouse; however, it likely was similar, in construction, to the East District schoolhouse.

East School

The East District schoolhouse, which also held both primary and grammar classes, was a one room building, with windows on three sides. The front door opened into a small vestibule, where there was a firewood closet, on the right. A pail of drinking water was kept, on a shelf, near the door. A large wood stove was at the center of the classroom. The teacher's desk faced several rows of seats and desks, which were in graduated sizes, to fit the pupils. As the students grew, they moved back to a larger desk size. The out-house was in the backyard, behind a trellis.⁸

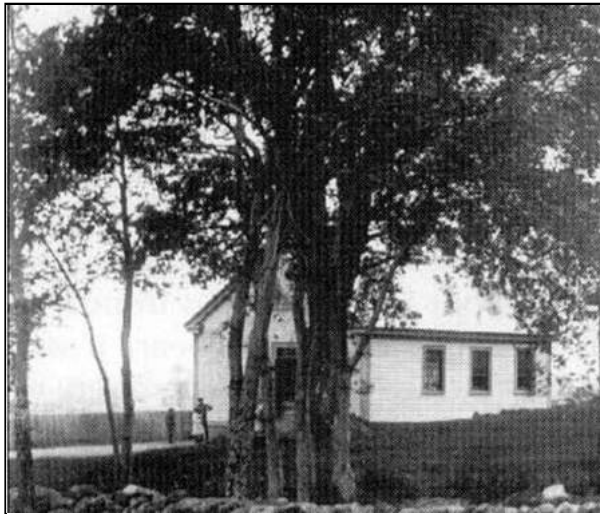
The East District School, sometimes referred to as "Dishwater Academy," began in 1777. The district ran from Dish Water Brook (*it passes across Grapevine Road, just before Essex Street*) east to the Beverly town line.⁸ Annually, the East District School had the fewest number of students.

The schoolhouse was on Grapevine Road, on the right hand side, right after Hull Street, going toward Beverly Farms.

Originally, the school was across the street, on a knoll; in 1910, Frederick H. Prince bought the property and had the schoolhouse moved. Prince had the hill flattened to provide fill for a polo field.⁸

In 1992, Hylma Butman Perkins, a former student at the first East School, wrote: "Every morning, we sang 'Good Morning Merry Sunshine' and Mrs. Hawkins (*teacher*) read the 23rd Psalm. I think the discipline must have been good, as I remember only peace and quiet. I remember Christmas parties, with Santa Claus. Best of all was the big hill next to the school, where we slid, in winter."⁸

In 1900, the East School had only girl students. Despite the few number of students Dishwater Academy persisted until 1921, when it closed. The last class had 3 boys and 6 girls. In 1925, the vacant building was sold to Mrs. Abby Prince, Frederick H. Prince's wife, for \$500.²



Neck schoolhouse next to Baptist church on Dodges Row, built in 1854.
Photo, courtesy of Wenham Museum.

Neck School

The Neck School District began at the bridge, on Miles River, and extended easterly, until it came to Dish Water Brook.²

The original Wenham Neck School, which had both primary and grammar classes, is believed to have been built in 1776. It either burned or being dilapidated, was taken down, around 1812.²

In 1813, William Dodge and his wife Joanna deeded² to Abraham Dodge and the other proprietors of the

school in the "*Eastward, land for a school building, to be occupied for a schoolhouse, forever, and for no other purpose.*" The land was 25-ft. 2-in. by 20-ft. 2-in., and was on the corner of the Lane (*now Walnut Road*) and Manchester Road. It was about 25 ft. from the Edward H. Osgood farmhouse. The area later became known as Four Corners.²

Issacher Lefavour, of Beverly, who taught at the school, during the winters of 1834 and 1835, said that the second Neck school building was about 9 ft. high, and 16 ft. wide by 25 ft. long.² The building's exterior was red brick.

The schoolroom had three rows of seats on one side for the boys to sit. On the other side of the room, there were three other rows, similarly arranged, for the girls: thus, the boys and girls faced each other. Each row was elevated one step toward the back. The floor space between these rows had a stove, at the end, and a box desk for the teacher. There was a plank against the back wall, for visitors to sit. Low benches, for four and five year old children, bordered the central aisle.²

The entrance was at the front of the building; at either side of the door were two pigeonhole windows. There were two windows, on each side of the building, giving the classroom plenty of light. Inside the entrance, there was a wall with coat hooks for the boys to hang their coats and hats; in the center, was a chimney. The original fireplace was replaced, some years later, by a box stove, at the rear end, with a smoke pipe going the length of the building, into the original chimney. Behind the building, there was a wood shed, and a room for the girls, to hang their coats and hats.⁶

In 1845, Andrew Dodge wanted the Neck School to be moved, since it was very close to his home. He deeded a piece of property, at Four Corners,

for the school to be moved. The schoolhouse was not moved: rather, a more modern, brick schoolhouse, the third for this area, was built with desks and blackboards.²

Unfortunately, the location of the school building was almost on the roadway some even saying that it projected out on the roadway. In 1854, the schoolhouse again was moved: this time, next to the Baptist Church, on Dodges Row. For the sum of \$800, the Wenham Neck School schoolhouse was built.²

An interesting side note is that, in 1826, Rebecca Goldsmith, who was teaching school, in the Wenham Neck district, persuaded several of the Wenham people to embrace the Baptist faith. In 1831, the Baptist Church was built at Four Corners.⁸

1872 school records show the Neck School had spring (23 *students*), fall (24 *students*) and winter (21 *students*) terms. Miss. Greene was the teacher, for which she was paid \$40/mon. The age of the students was from 5 to 17 years.¹⁸

The Neck schoolhouse was closed in 1916. During the last year, the school "could muster only six or seven pupils at the opening in September." The students were transferred to the Center School. The last teacher was Alice G. Riggs.⁷⁵

Initially, the town used a motor truck to bring the students to the Center School, but it was not large enough. Next, a horse-drawn, covered barge transported the 22 students from the Neck and East districts.⁷⁵

In 1931, the Neck schoolhouse was sold to the Baptist Society for \$1.00. They resold it to Arthur Leach, for \$20.00. He moved it to the adjoining land of Mrs. Charles Leach, where it was remodeled into a house.⁶⁵

Private School

Attempts to establish a private school began about 1810, when the town voted to grant to "*subscribers for an academy, the privilege of setting the same on the common, in said town, during their pleasure.*" The attempt, however, to establish this institution, did not succeed. Later, other attempts to have a private school, also failed.⁴⁹

Brief success came in 1854, when Charles L. Edwards, a graduate of the Westfield Normal School, became the instructor, at a classroom on the first floor of the new town hall. Edwards ran a private "select" school, which had 29 students. After remaining for a year, he moved to Kansas. Francis Macomber. Dodge, a graduate of Waterville College, succeeded Edwards. He continued as instructor, for two years. However, this effort failed like the previous tries. Next, the classroom was enlarged and became the third district grammar school.¹²

Around 1860, another attempt was made to establish a private school, in the vestry, but it too did not succeed.¹²

Still another attempt was made in 1946. Abby N. Prince requested a variance from the zoning law, to permit the erection of a private school on her estate, Princemere. The Appeal Board refused her request. ⁴⁶

Center School

At the start of the 20th, some interest began for building a central school building, to replace the district schoolhouses.

At the Feb. 20, 1903 Town Meeting, the Committee on Enlarged and Improved School and Library Accommodations recommended that the town build a four-room school building, at or near the center of the town, and that the present school room, in the town hall, become a public library. ¹⁷ \$5,000 was voted for a schoolhouse building fund. However, the motion for actually building the school was tabled. ⁴⁴

The desire for consolidating the school system had its opposition. Two months later, on Apr. 6, 1903, Arthur D. Prince made a motion "that the school of the town should not be consolidated." The motion passed by a vote of sixty-nine in the affirmative to six in the negative. ⁴⁴

And yet, two weeks later, on Apr. 20, 1903, the town voted that the Kemble Estate, should be the site for a new schoolhouse: The Kemble Estate received fifty-nine votes, which was a majority of the number of one hundred and ten votes cast. ⁴⁴ Later, the vote was reconsidered and lost. ⁴⁴

The Board of Selectmen was instructed to purchase the Kemble site at the intersection of Main and Cherry streets. However, the owner declined to set a price for its sale. ⁷¹

With the Kemble site not being possible, 04-20-1903 – the New Schoolhouse Finance and Advisory Committee recommended that the selectmen be instructed to purchase the Perkins site. ⁴⁴ A year later, at the Mar. 7, 1904 Town Meeting, several sites were voted upon, including the Parsonage site; Kemble site; Perkins site; and Kavanagh site, 1. ⁶² None received a majority of the votes.

Finally, in 1906, a majority of the voters selected the Perkins site for building a central schoolhouse. ¹⁶ A year later, the fall of 1907, a four-room, two-story building was ready for classes to begin. ⁸ The building cost \$17,000.

In the 1907 Superintendent of Schools stated, ⁴⁵ "*Within a twelve-month the children of Wenham have left their limited school quarters, which have sheltered former generations, some of whom are now citizens and parents, who attach many pleasant associations to the long standing walls. The pupils are now housed in a modern, roomy, well-heated and finely-ventilated building.*" ⁴⁵

"Some trouble was experienced at first by a great number of requests to visit the basement, but this is gradually improving as the novelty wears



Center School, a four-room, two-story building, opened in the Fall of 1907.
Photo courtesy Wenham Museum

off. The requests, in themselves, show how much better children attend to their physical wants, when toilet appurtenances are in a comfortable condition. In schools where the sanitariums are separate from the school building, very few requests come to leave the room, whereas in a modernly appointed building such requests are numerous, indicating that many times children should go to the sanitariums when they do not if there is inconvenience and discomfort attached to them.”⁴⁵

The consolidation, however, was not complete. The Neck and East schoolhouses remained open: the Neck school closed in 1916, and the East school closed in 1921.⁷⁸ In 1917, there were 174 children attending the Center School.⁷⁵

In 1919, with increased enrollment of grades 7 and 8, it was apparent that a larger building was needed. The following year, 1920, the town voted to add a \$41,000 extension. The expanded Center School had a basement lunchroom, manual training and printing departments, three classrooms and a sewing and cooking room on the first floor. On the second floor, there were two more classrooms, an assembly hall, and the principal's office.⁸

The Center School expansion also was brought about when, in 1920, the school committee brought back the 9th grade Wenham students (9) that had been attending the Beverly Junior High School.⁴⁷ This was done to save the

out-of-town school costs.⁸ In 1949, Wenham would again be sending its 9th grade students to the Beverly junior high school.¹⁶

The planting of trees and shrubs, by the Village Improvement Society, softened the barren appearance of the Perkins property. Through the efforts of Dr. John Phillips, trees were planted on the roadway from Arbor Street to the schoolhouse.¹

In 1938, Wenham's school population was 150. Because enrollment in the first grade had jumped to 28, it was necessary, for the first time, to separate grades one and two.⁹

Also in 1938, the town considered possibly adding an auditorium to the Center School. The expansion was to allow the existing assembly hall to be available for additional classroom space. Also, the auditorium was to provide needed space for town meetings. However, no action was taken.⁴⁸

Perhaps the tabling of the school auditorium was wise, for three years later the U. S. was at war.

Following World War II, Wenham's population began to grow significantly, as did the number of school-age children.

In 1952, the Center School was updated.⁵⁹

In 1956, students no longer were ringing the school bells at the Center School. A new system, connected to the Bessie Buker School, automatically rang the Center School bells.⁵⁵

Bessie Buker School

At the 1945 town meeting, the school committee submitted a report on the school needs for the next 25 years. The school committee said that the Center School, built in 1906 and doubled in size in 1920 likely would be obsolete in meeting the town's school needs by 1965.⁹

A committee developed preliminary plans for a school to replace the Center School. However, it soon was very clear that the existing schoolhouse lot was not big enough for any expansion. The school committee tried, with no success, to obtain a portion of the adjacent Reardon estate (*now the Bruce Lane area of houses*) that was, at the time, an open field. The land was sold for building of houses.⁹

On Jun. 16, 1948, at a town meeting, the school committee asked for funds to buy 87,855 sq. ft. (203 x 430 ft.) of the Reardon land. The townspeople approved \$3,500 to acquire a portion of the Reardon property and also to buy a small strip (115 x 166 ft.) in the rear of the school, from the Clay estate, to square off the lot.⁹

During this same period of time, discussions began concerning a possible regional school system. In Nov., 1949, a Wenham regional school planning board, in conjunction with similar committees in Hamilton, Topsfield and Manchester, considered a four-town regional high school.⁹ At the 1950 Annual Town Meeting, voters defeated the idea of the regional high school.⁹



Buker School complex, in 2013, included: 1- the old Center School building; 2 Original Buker School building; 3 – Expansion; 4 – Cafeteria; 5 - Perkins Auditorium & Gymnasium; 6 - Ball fields; and 7 - Playground. Photo, Google Maps

On June 29, 1951, at a special town meeting, voters approved \$350,000 for the building of a new school building. Six months later, on Jan. 7, 1952, voters approved an additional \$80,000.⁹

Slightly more than a year later, in September 1952, the new schoolhouse opened for grades kindergarten to 6. Grades 7 and 8 were at the Center School. In 1953, the 9th grade was brought back from Beverly's Biscoe School. A small classroom on the Center School's second floor became a school library.⁵³

A single-story building, the new schoolhouse had eight 24 x 28 ft. classrooms; an administrative section; and a large auditorium with a seating capacity of 280.⁹

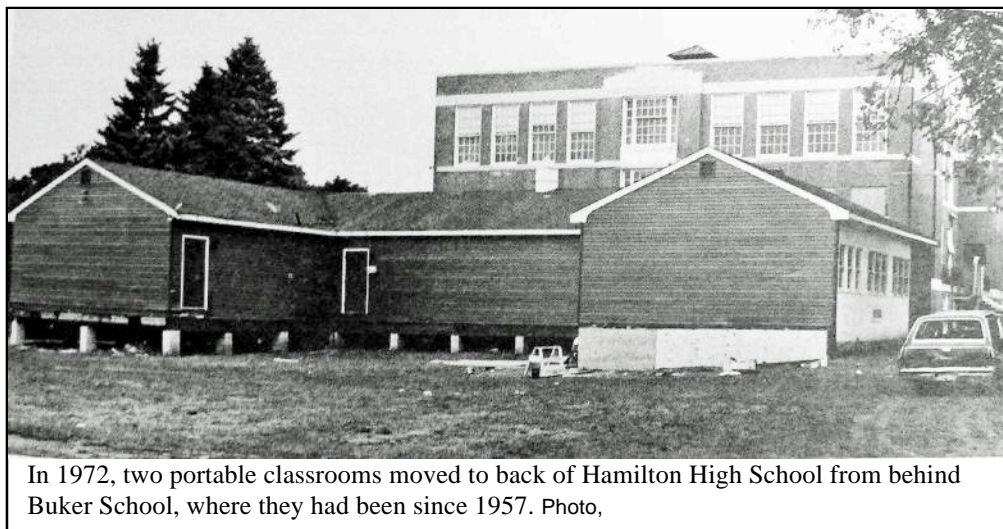
The building had a brick veneer over cinder block, with steel trusses and columns, and a colonial design with a hip roof. The T-shaped building had classrooms on both sides of corridors and an auditorium in center of T.⁹

The auditorium floor space was 55 x 80 ft. It had a large stage, and was designed for all functions of the school physical training program and assemblies, as well as for large town functions.⁹

A kitchen, at the rear of the auditorium is completely equipped for the school's hot lunch program.⁹

In the auditorium basement, there are two separate sections, one for the girls and the other for the boys, each section having a shower room, locker room, and team room.⁹

The auditorium was named for George H. and Bertha M. Perkins, not only in recognition of their bequest toward a new town auditorium, but because of their service to the town.⁹



In 1972, two portable classrooms moved to back of Hamilton High School from behind Buker School, where they had been since 1957. Photo,

At first, the new center schoolhouse had no name. Then, in 1953, it was named for Bessie Buker, a long-time Wenham teacher and first principal of the school.

Just three years after the opening of the Bessie Buker School, 1955, the School Committee said several additional classrooms would be needed before school opened in September 1957.⁵⁵ The town authorized, in 1956, the issuance of \$223,000 in bonds for the construction of a nine-room addition at the right end of the "T" layout.⁵⁶ In 1957, the Center School closed, when the Bessie Buker School was enlarged, by the addition of the nine rooms for grades 7 to 8.^{55, 68}

As part of the 1957 expansion of the Bessie Buker School, the School Committee wanted to close School Street for protection of children. An agreement allowed closing the street, with an iron link chain, during school hours.⁵⁵

Due to a sudden increase in school population in 1957, three portable classrooms, at a cost of \$70,000, were placed behind the northwest end of the school.

The portable classrooms were in use until 1972, when two of the portable classrooms were moved to Hamilton Junior High School, on Linden Street, and a third unit was moved next to the Hamilton library, on Main Street.¹⁰⁵

In 1983, two of the portable classrooms were closed for school use: one was given to Hamilton as an addition to its library, and one was rented, on site, to the Kid's Connection, a day-care center for preschoolers.⁶⁹ Ten years later, 1993, the portable classrooms were given to the North Shore Technical High School, in Middleton.⁶³

In 1959, the Wenham School Committee said *“that with the Regional High school in operation, the town's elementary classroom needs would be adequately met for at least a decade, by the 18-room Buker school and six rooms in the Center school, barring something now unforeseen.”*⁵⁸

Two years later, 1961, in its annual report the school board said that *“Wenham should be able to take care of approximately 660 pupils in grades one through eight. In view of the fact that our enrollment in nine grades, in 1960, was approximately 480.”*⁵⁹

Well, there were some “unforeseen” needs.

In 1962, the town purchased the Soucy land, adjacent to the Bessie Buker School lot.⁶⁰ The purchase was made for a future expansion of the school and to provide more play area.

At start of 1964, town had 16 classrooms in Buker School and 7 in the Center School. In 1965, to meet the need for 24 classrooms, the assembly hall in center school was divided into two rooms. It became all-to-evident that the two towns would need, in the near future, a regional junior high school.⁷⁷

In 1999, upon completion of the Miles River Middle School, adjacent to the Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School, the school board converted the Bessie Buker School back to an elementary school, for kindergarten to the fifth grade.⁷²

Junior High School

Up to 1957, junior high school grades 7 and 8 attended the Center School. The following year, after the Bessie Buker School was enlarged to 17 rooms, junior high school students also were schooled there.

Twenty years later, in 1978, the idea of merging Wenham and Hamilton junior high schools resurfaced. Wenham appointed a sub-committee to investigate the feasibility.¹⁰⁵ It was decided to move the junior high school students at Bessie Buker to the Hamilton Junior High School, which was in the old Hamilton High School building.

In 1983, the regional school system completed its 3-year consolidation plan. The Hamilton Junior High School was closed and the building returned to the town. Grades 7 and 8 were transferred to the Center School in Wenham, which was renovated and became the new Middle School.⁶⁹

High School

The first high schools to which Wenham students went were in Beverly, Salem and later Hamilton.

In 1907, two pupils, from center grammar school, after finishing the eighth grade entered Beverly High School; two pupils from east school entered Salem High School; and three pupils from the west school entered Salem High



In June 1963, the last class from Wenham graduated from Beverly High School on Essex St. Photo Beverly Public Library

School.⁴⁵ In the 1950s, the number of students attending out-of-town high schools averaged between 25 and 30, which was expected to grow in the coming years.

The question of having a Wenham High School became a matter of yearly debate, at town meetings. The cost of sending the increasing number of pupils to high schools in other towns was the principle motive.

In 1948, the townspeople voted “that the School Committee be instructed and empowered to participate in Regional High School planning activities in eastern Essex County.” In 1949, meetings were held with committees from Hamilton, Manchester and Topsfield.⁵¹ However, town committees and school committees reported adversely on the idea of regional schools.

In 1949, the state enacted the Regional Schools Act, which allowed the creation of regional school districts, as independent legal entities.⁵¹ The School Board was charged with the responsibility of keeping up-to-date with the Regional School Study being pressed by the surrounding towns of Topsfield, Hamilton and Manchester.

Again, nothing happened.

In June 1957, at a town meeting, voters approved the creation of a Wenham Regional District School Committee. The next month, July, the committee met with Hamilton's Regional School Committee. They agreed to establish a Regional High School, and planned for the high school to open in September 1962.⁵⁸

All this happened in the nick of time, for in 1958, Beverly informed Wenham that after 1960 Wenham's high school students would no longer be accepted at its high school.⁵⁸ A site for the high was found in Hamilton and construction began almost immediately.

The headline on page one of the Sept, 19, 1962 issue of the Hamilton-Wenham Chronicle was, "School's Open!" Almost five hundred students, their teachers and administrators entered the new building. It had thirty-five classrooms, five science labs, a language lab, an auditorium, a library, cafeteria, arts and crafts room, homemaking room, and a large gymnasium.⁶⁶ (*The school opened, with an enrollment of 481 students and a staff of 33.*)⁶³

In June 1963, the last class from Wenham graduated from Beverly High School.⁶⁰

In 1974, Wenham joined with other cities and towns voting their approval of a Regional Vocational High School.⁶¹

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