Why Do They Call It Toad Hill District?

Richmond's Second School: District No. 8

by Joy Lewis

1812-1832 -- Dart's Schoolhouse

Two hundred years ago – in the spring of eighteen-and-sixteen – a schoolhouse was built in the southwest corner of Richmond. Four years earlier the parents of school-age children had organized their school, with classes being held four months each year in a make-shift cabin-come-schoolhouse. This was Richmond's District No. Seven. The time had come for a permanent schoolhouse.

The decision to build was undertaken in the autumn of 1815 at the annual fall meeting "of the freeholders and inhabitants of the district." It took some wrangling over the location of the school before they settled on a small lot on the corner of Rufus Bullock's farm. The schoolhouse was so close to the home of Chauncey Dart that it came to be called "Dart's Schoolhouse." This school was about half-a-mile south of today's Route 20A, on the west side of Purcell Road. It served the district for twenty years. And for some years through the 1820s it also served as the meeting place for the congregation of the Richmond Baptist Church.

Built of logs, the dirt-floor building was about twelve feet by fifteen feet, with window openings in two walls, a door in the front and a stone fireplace and chimney on the back wall. Backless benches were installed, and a table for the teacher. The only textbooks available were the Holy Bible and "The Blue-Backed Speller" (Webster's *American Spelling Book*). Both of these were in the possession of the teacher; scholars learned by recitation and memorization.

Minimum school fees were imposed upon the children's parents. The heaviest burden was the supply of fire wood. Each scholar was to furnish "four feet of wood to the schoolhouse" by early November. Benjamin Garlinghouse was elected Wood Inspector: if any student failed to supply his allotment of wood he was fined two dollars. The money thus collected was used to augment the wood supply as well as to purchase necessities, such as glass for the windows, fire dogs for the fireplace, and a pail and dipper.

The records for District 7 are quite detailed, accounting year by year for purchases – in 1820, 81¢ was paid for a padlock and 75¢ for window glass – and listing each duly-elected officer (Clerk, Trustee, Collector, Wood Inspector). However, in very few cases was the teacher's name recorded. What we do find in the record is a careful report of parents' names and details of expenditures. In 1827 eighty-five students were taught here, in one four-month session. Twenty-nine families were assessed about a dollar-twenty each and the district collected twenty dollars of "public money" (a town-wide

tax). Before the new school year began, it was decided to hire two teachers – one to teach the younger children during a three-month summer school, and one to teach the older ones during the winter.

Some of the children who attended this school have descendants living in Richmond today. Family names included Ashley, Briggs, Bullock, Chamberlain, Davison, Garlinghouse, Gladding, McCrossen, Norton, Pemberton, Reed, Short, Skinner, Starr, Stoddard, and Wright. In 1830 the Township of Canadice was separated from Richmond and Richmond's school districts were re-ordered. In November "the Number of School District Number seven was altered to Number eight by the commissioners of Common Schools" and new boundaries were set: Big Tree Road and south to the Canadice border; east to Curtis Road; and west to the Livonia border.

1832-1850 -- The School at Short's Corners

In the spring of 1831 it was noted that the schoolhouse was in sad repair. Fourteen dollars was spent to put up a partition, lay a board floor, repair the benches and stove pipe, and replace broken glass in the windows. The start of school was delayed until the first of December, but continued through March. Discussion began about building a new school, but twelve months were to pass before a new frame school was built on the west side of White Road, near the corner of Big Tree Road.

School was held here each year in two terms – the young children attended in the summer for eight or twelve weeks, and the older students in the winter for four months. Very little is recorded about the teachers during these years, but a few names appear in the record: Miss Parks, Miss Gilbert, and Miss Ann Reed all taught the summer term in the 1830s. Ann Reed was the daughter of John F. Reed and Antha Steele (who had been the first school teacher at the Richmond Center School in 1803).

Robert Hancock, who would go on later in life to pastor the Methodist Episcopal Church in Richmond, was twenty-three in 1834 when he began teaching the winter term at District No. 8. Other teachers who taught during the 1830s and 40s included Miss Wells, Mr. Wallace, Aaron Bullock, Speedie Short, and Otis Presbrey of Livonia.

In 1839 a school library was founded with an initial donation to purchase fifty books. Dr. Willard Doolittle was elected Librarian and filled that office for many years. Students could borrow a library book and return it at the end of three months. Anyone who failed to return a book on time was fined at the rate of 12½ cents for the first week overdue, then a further rate of six cents for every week past due.

Miss Sarah Brown taught the summer school in 1842 and Miss Eliza Skinner the next summer. Mr. John Calkins was the teacher for the winter school, followed by Milford Hopkins in 1844. The record is scanty, but tantalizing, as it mentions but briefly "the vacancy occasioned by the removal of Milford Hopkins." He was, it seems, dismissed in the middle of the term and the position was given to Jacob Frost.

More teachers for the 1840s are listed: Miss Eunice Tripp, Miss E.E. Ostrander, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Babbet, and Mr. Fisk Day, brother of Samuel Mills Day, twenty years old and studying to became a doctor. Mr. Palmer taught from early December 1849 until the end of February 1850; Mary Short had the school for three months in the summer of 1850. He was paid $51.00; she earned $18.00.

1850-1882 -- Years of Change

It was in the spring of 1850 that discussion began regarding the building of a new school. The old building and its lot were sold to Dr. Doolittle for thirty dollars, and a further four hundred was raised by taxing the freeholders of the district. A sturdy frame building, recorded on the 1855 New York Census as being in "good" condition and worth $400, was put up on the property of the late Thomas Briggs. This was on the west side of Purcell Road at the corner of Route 20A, opposite the cemetery.

Sam Reed, the twenty-year-old son of Wheeler Reed, was the first teacher in this new building. Persis, Dr. Doolittle's daughter, taught the summer school of 1851. Her sister Mary had the summer school two years later, earning two dollars a week. Mr. J.W. Davis, who taught the winter school that year, earned two and a half times Miss Doolittle's salary ($5.00 a week). Sam Reed was back as teacher in 1855, and Miss Woodruff taught the summer school.

On March 10, 1859, Teacher (whose name is not given in the record) failed to show up for class. Of the thirty-or-so students in attendance that day, most went on home. Four young men, however, stayed at school and completed their assignments: Richmond Beach, Richmond Briggs, Charles Curtis, and Mark Smith. At the end of the day they made a pact to meet on the anniversary of the date five years hence. All four honored that agreement. For two decades they continued to meet on March the tenth in five year intervals, bringing their wives and children with them in later years. Two of the men – Richmond Beach and Charles Curtis – taught at District School No. 8 in the 1870s. Mr. Beach's son Bernard married Mr. Curtis' daughter Blanche. Bernard and Blanche's son Robert became the instructor of instrumental music at the 1952 Honeoye Central School.

Mark H. Ray and William Doolittle were teachers in the 1860s and 70s, years that brought change to the school. A new wood-burning stove was purchased and the district boundary line was extended eastward. In 1874 school attendance for children between the ages of seven and fourteen became mandatory in New York State. Mindful of their increased responsibility, the voting members of the district decided in 1877 to incorporate new textbooks for the students' use: "for Reading – Sanders Union Readers; for Spelling – Sanders Speller; for Grammar – Brown's Grammar; and for Geography – "Mountains and Valleys." (This was a colloquial title, probably referring to *Comprehensive Geography*, a popular school book of the time.)

1882-1947 -- "Toad Hill"

After three decades of use, in the fall of 1882 the question was raised once again: repair the old school, or build a new one? Weeks of discussion and specially-called meetings ensued before the decision "to build a new school at a cost not to exceed $1000" was reached. A building committee was appointed: Willard Becker (Trustee), William P. Smith, Pitts Barnard, and Harrison Reed. Three months later, LeGrand Curtis was added to the building committee.

Another month passed while the discussion continued. The old building was sold in February 1883, netting $68.62. The buyer, Mr. Miller, was to remove the building from the site after April first. There was much dissention before deciding to build the new school on the site of the old one, with an outhouse behind and a "tight board fence" built to enclose the school and the outhouse. The new school was built that spring – a large

two-story frame building, with its front door facing south. When it was painted white, three walls (south, east and west) were given two coats of paint; the back wall was given a single coat of paint, as were the fence and the outhouse.

A wood-burning stove heated the school, and double-hung windows in three walls provided ventilation in the summer. There were manufactured desks bolted to the floor, a blackboard on one wall, and a large table to serve as the teacher's desk. Maps were hung and library books stacked on shelves. A pail and two dippers provided drinking water. The school bell, purchased in 1884, cost $6.25.

The question was raised whether to plant trees on the property, but a decade would pass before this was resolved. In 1894 a committee of three proceeded to purchase and plant several trees to shelter the school. Two years later another vexing question arose when the Commissioner of Schools proposed that the district close its school and send the children on the stage to the Union School in Honeoye. This suggestion was soundly defeated.

By the 1890s the school year was eight months long, with one teacher, male or female, taking the duty. Teachers in those years included Nellie Bostwick – she taught twenty students in 1891 and was paid $82 – and Will Trimmer, who taught the same students a year later and earned $120. Other teachers were Mabel Stillman, Mary Bullock, Florence Short and Emma Winch (who had taught earlier at the Richmond Center School).

It was about this time that the area of southwest Richmond – including a bit of southeastern Livonia and dipping into northeastern Canadice – acquired the nickname "Toad Hill" referring to the ubiquitous amphibians populating that quarter. The school, whose common designation was "The Curtis District," came to be known as the Toad Hill District. It was seldom referred to by the locals as District Eight.

In 1900 a notation was made in the school's account book that the Clerk be "authorized to purchase a new Record Book for the District." For eighty-five years the same small book, about six inches by eight, had been used to record the minutiae of the District's business. The new book, somewhat larger, commenced in September 1900 with a list of taxpayers living within the district boundaries: Bacon, Barnard, Becker, Briggs, Bullock, Curtis, Fletcher, Hayward, Huff, Miller, McCrossen, Owen, Purcell, Ray, Reed, and Smith were some of the names listed. Expenses for that year included the teachers' salary of $120 and the cost of six cords of firewood: thirty dollars. By 1905 a coal-burning stove had been installed, resulting in a substantial savings in fuel costs. Four tons of coal, a winter's supply, could be obtained for a dollar a ton.

In November 1902 the short-lived "Alert Literary Society" was organized and governed by the pupils themselves. Meetings were held every other Friday evening at various homes and particular subjects were chosen for discussion, such as a "study of the presidents, commencing with George Washington." The society met nine times, dissolving in March 1903. Participants included most of the older students at Toad Hill: Clarence and Ernest Bacon, Glenn and Solon Barnard, Percy Briggs, James, George, Harry, and Wilhelmina Bullock, Ernest Daniels, Alice and Ray Dusenbury, Olin Mather, Maud Miller, Charles and Olin Owen, Willie Petrie, Florence Reed, Florence and Lucia Smith, Pearl and Ruth VanValkenburg, and Lena Warren.

Nancy Lahey was the teacher during the years of World War I. In 1918 she and her students were commended in a short article appearing in the *Livonia Gazette*: "Miss

Lahey's boys and girls knit 42 eye bandages and made one quilt for the Honeoye Red Cross." When Miss Lahey, aged 93, died in November of 1961, her obituary noted that "she was born in the Town of Canadice, daughter of Patrick and Ellen Lahey…A retired school teacher, she taught school for 34 years in Ontario County."

Nineteen-twenty was the year that American women received the vote. It is also the first year that a woman was elected to serve on the school board of District No. 8; Mrs. Hattie Purcell was named Collector for the year. Ten years later Mrs. Louise McClintock made history when she was elected to serve as Trustee, the first woman in the district to hold that office.

Improvements at the school in the 1920s included an indoor toilet, and fifteen dollars were spent to provide "swings for the benefit of the children's recreation hours." The biggest change came in 1926 when it was decided to send "the four pupils of the eighth grade" to school in Honeoye, "the parents agreeing to transport their children to and from school without expense to the district."

The nineteen-thirties saw a steady decline in the number of pupils attending the district school, and, through the Depression years, a sharp decline in funding. Folks began to talk about closing the school. A proposal was made in 1936 by Professor Francis Hungerford, principal at Hemlock, that *all* of District 8's children attend school in Hemlock. The offer went down in defeat. It was agreed, however, that the high school students would go to Hemlock School, with the district bearing the cost of tuition and transportation.

Three years later the question of closing the school came before the board again and they "called Harold Larned up from Hemlock to explain in detail." The district would not be charged tuition for its students, Mr. Larned explained, though they would be responsible for getting the kids back and forth from their homes to the school. A motion was made, the vote was taken: seven for, five against.

For the next eight years the Toad Hill School stood empty, although the school board remained active, as the decision was made year by year to send the children to Hemlock. For a couple years the district was not charged tuition. Then in 1944, when there were nine District 8 pupils, tuition of $25 per student was levied. By 1946, when the number of students was thirteen, annual tuition had risen to $50 a head. The district was also responsible for paying transportation costs. Bus drivers Willard Becker and Joe Deats got the students to school each day and home again safely. This expense amounted to $1,320 in 1946, about twice the cost of the kids' tuition.

As the reality of school consolidation drew nearer, Toad Hill's school board was dismantled and the building and furnishings were sold in the fall of 1946. Mr. Furman Huff bought the building and moved it to his farm, converting it into a house. The school desks were sold to Hemlock School; Willard Becker paid eight dollars for the teacher's desk; and the silk flag was purchased by Mrs. Huff. The era of district schools had come to an end.

Description of school by Howard Barnard, about 1927
"Our teacher was Mrs. Bush. There was a little rostrum higher than the rest of the floor across the west end of the school. The teacher had her desk up on it and there were curtains that could be pulled across. At Christmas, we had a little program with recitations and a tree at night. Lamps and lanterns were used for light."

About 1897 or 1900
When Solon Barnard was at the school #8, there were eleven boys attending there and all their names began with B – Briggs, Barnard, Bullock, Bacon. These were all the children in the school for some years.