

## **The Park Street School, School District No. 1**

By Mary O'Neil

The Superintendent's Report of 1873 gives the following advice:

At the Junction, there should be erected immediately a new building of sufficient size to accommodate all the children of school age, or of sufficient capacity to accommodate the Higher and Intermediate departments, the old house repaired, and perhaps a new one erected in some other portion of the village, all of them supplied with modern furniture, the two last named for the Primary school.<sup>1</sup>

The schoolhouse for School District No. 1, sometimes known as the Anna Early house or the Discovery Museum, had overextended its capacity some years before. (The school enrollment for 1860 lists 86 scholars at the Anna Early house;<sup>2</sup> in 1873 the enrollment jumps to 139.<sup>3</sup>) As the Town had welcomed the Chittenden Classical Institute in 1855 for higher learning (built with private donations), the village was compelled to construct a larger, more spacious building to provide the three levels of instruction that it had offered at its smaller schoolhouse further down Park Street.

Town of Essex Land Records reveal that millwright Almon D. Rood and his wife Abigail deeded the land to the Graded School District May 29th, 1873 for a cost of \$800.00.<sup>4</sup> As was the popular custom, Mr. Rood was transferring land adjacent to his own homestead on Park Street. The Rood home still stands, but is nearly obscured as it is encapsulated within the commercial strip that houses the Domino's Pizza and Bouyea-Fassetts Bakery Thrift store.

Doctor, and historian L.C. Butler offers this viewpoint:

In 1872, Essex Junction Graded School, so called, was chartered by the Legislature, and in the year following the present commodious and well-arranged school building was erected upon the large and ample grounds, which surround it. It was built at a cost of nearly eight thousand dollars, by a tax upon the grand list of the district. It has three grades - primary, intermediate, and grammar - and is well sustained. Thus the scanty means of education enjoyed by the girls and boys of 1796 have been multiplied and improved as the progress of civilization and

population demanded. With all its schools and privileges, Essex ought to be in advance of its neighbors.<sup>5</sup>



*The Park Street School was built for \$8,000 in 1873. It was never just a high school, but always a mix of graded and secondary classes.*

Essex Junction had newfound prosperity, with the arrival of the railroad in 1849. This beautiful, Italianate brick school was a reflection of that prosperity. Along with that success came the reputation of having the most prosperous and engaging schoolhouse in the district:

The schools in District No. 1 are, in many aspects, the banner schools of the town.... These schools have attained their present position by the dint of earnest, persevering, self-sacrificing, unrequited (peculiarly) labor on the part of the prudential committees who have had them in charge, and the aid of the superior teachers that have been uniformly employed.... The people of the district are justly proud of their schools, and are to be commended for the zeal and interest they manifest in the important work of free education, for all the children within their

limits. I would commend their example to the other districts in town as one eminent worth to be followed. There is no reason why just as good schools, with just as good teachers, and just as thoroughly progressive, may not be enjoyed by the children of every other district in town.<sup>6</sup>

An interesting note made by the Superintendent in 1873 reflects the two sides of the new economic boom brought to the village with the railroad. Although the new schoolhouse is evidence of this prosperity, there is also an emerging problem of school absence. There is an extraordinary anomaly in the student attendance number for the village, as pupils from age 12 to 19 have a greater percentage of school absence compared to other schools within the town. The Superintendent remarks:

It is safe to assert that (some) will not attend school. Some of them are married. Some are brakemen and firemen on the railroad trains. Others are engaged in various pursuits. A large percentage of the entire number have no adequate idea of the value of education, and are wanting in parents who ever attempt to assist their feeble inclinations to attend school by wholesome parental authority.<sup>7</sup>

The Park Street School still stands on the original site, having remained within the ownership of the school district until the present. Its use, however, has been modified as four more elementary schools have been constructed in the interim.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, the building has housed on the upper floor the ACE program, a specialized alternative educational opportunity for students who have not found success in traditional school settings. The main floor had been home to a preschool for many years. Until this past year, it sheltered the Early Essential Education program; another resource for early diagnostic effort and response to developmental challenges in pre-school children.



*The Prospect Street School, built for \$40,000 in 1912, served as high school until 1956. Named the Fleming School in 1973 after Thomas Fleming, a custodian at the school from 1944 to 1967.*

The interior of the school remains amazingly intact. Wood wainscot surrounds the entrance vestibule and ascends up the stairs. Asbestos abatement has already been achieved. Although the twin chimneys have disappeared as well as the belfry, the original form of the schoolhouse remains strong, easily discernable, and historically intact. A few of the windows on the east façade and the back have been bricked up.

Dave Willey, an Essex High School student and athlete 1944-1948 remembers the upstairs basketball court. It was the practice of the team to allocate part of their pre-season in the task of repainting the walls and floor, as a method of holding down the ever-present dust. The walls were essentially the court sidelines: If the ball hit the outside wall, it was considered out-of-bounds. The athletes also had to play around a coal stove, taking care to prevent incurring a nasty burn. Backboards were nailed directly from the ceilings, so any shot trajectory had to be relatively flat to be successful. One end featured primitive bleacher constructed of rough-sawn lumber. It was only considered part of the home court

identity.<sup>9</sup> Supervising Principal DeForest Bartoo had remarked in 1926:

The basketball Gymnasium in the primary building is a success. Several visiting teams have expressed their delight and approval of same. We hope more people will learn where this gymnasium is located and patronize it better next year.<sup>10</sup>

The Park Street School was added to the register of Vermont State Historic Sites in April of 1980, and is recognized by the state as a significant historic resource. Although neighboring communities built similar style schoolhouses in the ensuing years (Jericho Corners School, now the Town Offices, the Jericho Center School, now owned by the Congregational Church, the Riverton School or the New Haven Mills School, now both private residences), none equals the grandeur of the high style brick Italianate school on Park Street. It is also the only school of that era that remains in use for which it was intended.

Ironically, this building is endangered. Three years ago, the Prudential Committee (school board) voted to allow their board the power to sell this building upon the discretion of the board. A boiler failure during the winter of 2000 triggered talk of the building's sale. The Park Street School's close proximity to village amenities and ample parking possibilities caught the attention of several business owners. Village residents flocked to the school board meetings, requesting that the school district not only make necessary repairs to the heating system, but to consider placing the district offices of the Superintendent at this site. What could be more appropriate, it was asked, than locating the central offices of local education in this building, which historically had served the needs of education for more than 123 years? Although the board ultimately decided to repair the boiler after property services staff was able to locate replacement parts, the future of the Park Street School remains in question.

Most recently, a plan outlined by the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization for the Burlington Rail Project specifically included the Park Street School parcel. Their Draft Environmental Assessment details the "irretrievable commitment" of this resource for a 136-space commuter parking lot for the rail service. Final conclusions in the assessment detail the consideration by

school officials to designate the school as surplus, "so the use of the parcel for additional parking will not displace any existing uses."<sup>11</sup>

The school district does not appear to have a procedure for declaring school property "surplus" at this time, although the Village of Essex Junction Land Development Code only allows the conversion of public schools into elderly housing.<sup>12</sup>

After an objection was filed with the CCMPO, the Park Street School was removed from consideration as a parking lot as part of the rail service. Even if the building were to remain standing and the lawn paved up to the door, there would be a significant impact on the setting of the school. Built on a rise above the village green, it corresponds to the late 19th century formula for educational buildings to assume a "higher ground" both physically and in their commitment to address the moral and civic responsibility they accepted in educating the youth of the town. Superintendents strove also to construct schoolhouses that were architecturally worthy of standing alongside other significant public buildings. Even after this controversy, however, the Park Street School is still without a firm plan to guarantee its survival.

Essex has demonstrated a long and sincere commitment to education. The original land allotments made by the selectmen for schools, including the land on which both the Anna Early house and the Park Street School sit, describe the intended use for educational purposes for as long as wood shall continue to grow and water to run.<sup>13</sup>

Fundamentally, we must see ourselves as caretakers of those resources that have been left to our watch. The Park Street School is a tangible reminder of our enduring commitment to accept the challenge of educating the youth of Essex.

1. Annual Report of the Town Officers. (Burlington: Free Press Steam Book and Job Print, 1873), 13.

2. Town Record. 2:382.

3. Annual Report of the Town Officers. (Burlington: Free Press Steam Book and Job Print, 1873.), 11.

4. Town of Essex Land Records. 16:87.

5. L.C. Butler. Essex Centennial. The One Hundredth Anniversary of the Settlement of Essex, Vermont.

(Montpelier: Argus and Patriot Book and Job Printing House, 1883), 22.

6. Annual Report of the Town Officers. (Burlington: Free Press Steam Book and Job Print, 1878), 20-22.

7. Ibid. (1873), 13.

8. It merits mention that currently there are five separate buildings with the village of Essex Junction that have served as High Schools: The Anna Early House, Park Street School, Prospect St. School (Thomas Fleming), Albert D. Lawton School, and the Essex Community Educational Center.

9. David Willey (Telephone interview, 12 January 2002).

10. DeForest Bartoo, Supervising Principal. Report included in the Fifty-Third Annual Report of the Essex Junction Graded School District. (Essex Junction: Essex Publishing Co., 1926), 8.

11. Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization. Burlington-Essex Rail Project; Draft Environmental Assessment. June, 2002. 4-3.

12. Village of Essex Junction Land Development Code. May 15, 2001. 118.

13. Essex Land Records. 2:130.

Editor's note: The reader is also directed to "Essex Junction High School in the 1930's," by Noah C. Thompson, in the Spring 2000 issue of the ECHO for details on the high school on Prospect Street.

Mary O'Neil is a third year Historic Preservation graduate student at the University of Vermont. Her research has spurred invitations to speak at several local historical societies and to publish in the Newsletters for the National Council for Preservation Education, the University of Vermont Historic Preservation Journal, and the *History Forum*. Her scholarship, recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, re-identified the Chicken Bone Café as the circa 1815 "Captain White House" at 43 King Street in Burlington's historic waterfront district. Her particular fondness for 19th century schoolhouses resulted in three separate studies for the University of Vermont of surviving building examples. She is the 2002 recipient of the Weston A. Cate, Jr. Fellowship for the Vermont Historical Society. She lives in Essex Junction with her husband and seven children.