

THE HISTORY OF  
THE SAYVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

A Report  
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by  
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In 1786, this particular section of the "Nicoll Patent", later known as Sayville, was sold to Willett Green and John Edwards; the former taking the west half and the latter the east.<sup>1</sup>

Sayville's first school was a little log-cabin, built about 1790, in the eastern section of the settlement.<sup>2</sup> (Historical data does not reveal how this land site was obtained.) It was thoroughly rustic both inside and out since it was built of, and even furnished with, the rough logs of the trees which were cut down to make the clearing.<sup>3</sup> The schoolhouse was about 14 X 16 feet. It had an old-fashioned fireplace and chimney. The teacher's desk stood between the fireplace and the door. The seats for the scholars were made of slabs of wood standing on legs inserted in the round side of the slab, the flat side being up. The scholars desks were sloping shelves attached to the side of the building

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<sup>1</sup>Public School Directory, Sayville, New York, For the School Year Commencing September 1, 1922, (Suffolk County News, Sayville, N.Y., 1922), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Sayville Senior, (Published by the Senior Class of Sayville High School, Sayville, N.Y., 1940), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

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and between the seats and the side of the room. The boys took turns at cutting the wood at the woodpile and kindling the fire in the morning and keeping it going through the day; the girls in sweeping the room and keeping it tidy. Only three scholars were allowed to go to the fire to warm at one time; if the fourth was found there he or she would very likely be punished.<sup>4</sup> (Refer to Plate I.)

About the year 1820 this building was moved to land donated by Reuben Edwards. This new tract of land was nearer to the village center; south of the original school site.<sup>5</sup> After five years, in 1825, a new building was erected in its place. This new building was a typical one-room "little red schoolhouse". It was much roomier than the first one and was heated by a large cast-iron stove instead of a fireplace.<sup>6</sup> The elder pupils sat on benches built around three sides of the one room, facing the wall. They bent over wide shelves built out from the wall. Those younger were in the next row and the smallest children sat in a circle around the stove.

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<sup>4</sup> David Edwards. Essay, "The Sayville Schools", Sayville Public School Records, Sayville, N.Y., 1890, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Senior Class of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 7 & 8.

The teacher's desk was at the back of the room and the pupils sat with their backs to him while they wrote. <sup>7</sup>

This schoolhouse answered for many years the double purpose of school house and meeting house for religious services. Religious services were held in the schoolhouse by the Methodist-Episcopalians and Congregationalists until 1848, when they built their own churches. <sup>8</sup>

In researching this paper, it is interesting to note how Sayville attained its name. In 1834, the citizens of the settlement met to discuss the all-important question of giving the settlement a name. Some declared for Edwardsville, others preferred Greenville, while a third faction spoke for Jutta. Finally, by way of a compromise, the body agreed upon Seville, for the sea-coast town in Spain. The clerk accordingly sent the name to Washington, but he either wrote it illegibly, or failed to spell it correctly, for when the name was registered by the post office department it went down as "Sayville." <sup>9</sup>

The Sayville School was in session for only three months a year until 1838. At this time, we find that the number of

<sup>7</sup> Clarissa Edwards, Essay, "Schools---From Early History of Sayville", Sayville Public Records. Sayville, N.Y., 1900, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, D., op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Public School Directory, Sayville, N.Y., op. cit., p. 3.

pupils in Sayville had increased to such an extent that it seemed practical to hire a teacher for a ten month session.<sup>10</sup>

People were attracted to the Sayville area because of the oyster and fish oil industries, which accounted for the increase in pupil enrollment.<sup>11</sup>

John Wood, a young man of 19, was engaged in the fall of 1838 to teach a ten month session in the Sayville School. He taught for the sum of \$12 per month and "boarded round". This was in accordance with the customs of the day, which compelled a teacher to change his boarding place every few days or weeks, distributing his patronage in proportion to the number of pupils each family sent to school.<sup>12</sup>

Mr. Wood taught in the Sayville School until 1839. He then embarked upon a career as a civil servant for Suffolk County; holding the offices of Justice of the Peace, Postmaster, County Clerk and County Supervisor. This last post he held until his death in 1886.<sup>13</sup> (It is interesting to note that no where in the town of Sayville is there a street, building or memorial in honor of the memory of Sayville's

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<sup>10</sup> Senior Class of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Public School Directory, Sayville, N.Y., op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> "Sayville Mourns-John Wood Dead", Suffolk County News, December 20, 1886.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

first school teacher.

By 1859 the one room little red schoolhouse had been increased to two rooms, and later, around 1860, a two-story white frame building was erected.<sup>14</sup> This building was also outgrown and in 1875 two rooms were added. Three teachers were now employed constantly and a fourth during the winter months. The amount paid annually for teachers' salaries was about \$2,000.<sup>15</sup>

But even the two-story building was not sufficient for Sayville's needs for very long, and in 1888 it was abandoned.<sup>16</sup> In the fall of 1888 there were five teachers and a new building of eight rooms, which was erected on a plot of ground west of the center of the village.<sup>17</sup> By June 1894 the building was overcrowded and an addition was built the following fall. Again in 1906 an addition was added making a total of eighteen class rooms. This building served as the sole Sayville school until 1920.<sup>17</sup>

During the years prior to 1894 the school was known as The Sayville Graded School and its pupils went to Patchogue

<sup>14</sup> Roscoe C. Craft, Essay, "History and Present Status of the Sayville Union School District No. 4 Town of Islip, Sayville, N.Y., 1927, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, C., op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Senior Class of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Dedication Exercises of Sayville High School, (Sayville Press Inc., Sayville, N.Y., January 21, 1928), p. 1.

to take Regents Examinations in order to secure Preliminary Certificates. In 1894, under principal George F. Armstrong, it was decided to make Sayville School a Union Free School and to place it under Regents supervision.<sup>18</sup> Anna L. Greene was the sole graduate in the Class of 1895 and holds the distinction of having earned the first Regents diploma awarded in Sayville.<sup>19</sup>

At the time of the white frame schoolhouse, children entered the primary department at the age of five and remained there until ten or until sufficiently advanced. They then went "upstairs" and remained as long as they desired. School attendance was not compulsory. Upstairs they took reading, writing, grammar, algebra and whatever else the teacher knew. One of the residents in Sayville left this school at the age of sixteen and taught in Ballport the following year. At eighteen she secured a position as a teacher in the village of Sayville. She had sixty pupils and received twenty dollars a quarter for her services.<sup>20</sup>

Having fulfilled the requirements for admission to the

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<sup>18</sup> Dedication Exercises of Sayville High School, loc. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Senior Class of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

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University of the State of New York, by instituting a full four year academic course and by supplying the necessary equipment, the Sayville Union Free School District No. 4 was admitted to High School Standing in December, 1896.<sup>21</sup>

The course of study, as outlined by the state of New York, for the primary grades included the following: Spelling, Nature Study, Writing, Drawing, English Language and Grammar, Music, Geography, History and Arithmetic. Only with the advice and consent of the Principal could there be changes made in this basic program. The High School curriculum only offered these three courses of study; English Commercial, Latin Scientific and College Preparatory.<sup>22</sup>

As a student in the College Preparatory course in 1896, one had to tackle such courses as Caesar's Commentaries, Sallust's Catiline, Cicero's Orations and Virgil's Aeneid.<sup>23</sup>

Teachers, during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century, were obliged to conform to these regulations.

1. Habitual failure to observe the

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<sup>21</sup> Sayville Union School, Sayville N.Y., Course of Study, Rules and Regulations, 1896-97, (Suffolk County News Print, 1897), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp. 12-13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

following requirements will be sufficient cause to ask for your resignation.

2. School begins at 9 o'clock A.M. and 1:30 P.M. You are expected to be in your room ready for work at 8:55 and 1:15.
3. Have your work on the black-board ready to begin when school begins. Your work as a teacher will be judged in part by the appearance of the work on the board.
4. When sick send a syllabus of the day's work to the substitute, including the lessons to be assigned. The teacher pays the substitute three-fourths of her regular daily wages.
5. At the close of each month place on the office desk all the drawing papers of the pupils and the papers of one written lesson in any subject.
6. Do not drive nails into the walls. Inspect desks and books frequently so that no marks will be made without your knowledge.
7. Use corporal punishment only by the advice of the principal, and then only on the place intended by nature for such purpose and with a staff, rubber tubing or whip approved by the principal. Failure to observe this or excessive punishment may get you into serious trouble.
8. Do not abuse the privilege of keeping children after school by keeping large numbers daily, or for too long a time.
9. If you have letters to write, papers to read or any work not related to school work, do it outside of school hours.

10. A conscientious teacher will do her work as thoroughly after she has decided not to return for another year as before such decision.

11. The board of education claims no right to control your hours outside of school; but it has a right to expect you to so dispose of your time that you may be in the best physical and mental condition for your work.

One of the language courses offered in the High School, in the early years of the twentieth century, was German.

When the United States Forces entered the war in Europe in 1917, this course was dropped from the curriculum and French put in its place.<sup>25</sup>

The year 1917 was also the year that Sayville High School first entered inter-scholastic athletic competition.<sup>26</sup> The Suffolk County Athletic Association formed a basketball league consisting of ten teams, with five teams in an Eastern Section and five teams in a Western Section. Sayville was included in the Western Section.

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<sup>24</sup> Syllabus of Instruction for Teachers, Sayville, N.Y., September, 1906, Sayville Public School Records, pp. 1-6.

<sup>25</sup> As per personal interview with C.F. Dickerson, Sayville Resident, Attended Sayville High School during World War I.

<sup>26</sup> Lloyd Rohn, Sr. Essay, "First Sayville High School Basketball Team", Sayville Public School Records, 1917, p.1.

Sayville's team had only five players. Having no substitutes, they could not replace injured players. If this situation occurred during a game, Sayville simply had to forfeit the game to the opponents. They also had the distinction of being the only team in the league without a coach.

The games were played in a public auditorium. The team also practiced in the same auditorium and had to pay for the privilege to do so. Since the auditorium was not heated, practice sessions were infrequent because of the cold. The team members also had to supply their own uniforms. To obtain money for the uniforms the team members held movie benefits in the local theater.<sup>27</sup>

During the years between 1920 and 1928, two elementary schools were built as well as a Junior-Senior High School. The High School building has the capacity for 600 pupils and an auditorium with a seating capacity for 700, large gymnasium, ample classrooms, library, three scientific laboratories, a lecture room, art, music, dramatic rooms, lunch room, two study halls, complete commercial department,

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<sup>27</sup> Rohm, op. cit., p. 1.

teachers' rest room and ample showers and lockers.<sup>28</sup>

As long as there have been schools, in Sayville, the students in them have provided themselves with some sort of diversion and recreation. There was no attempt, however, to include any sort of activity in the curriculum of the Sayville schools until about 1922.

By 1922 an idea was growing. It was expressed that as "Adults devote a large proportion of their time to doing, and if our nation is to take the place it should among nations, we must give more attention to this training for doing." For this reason the following courses and activities were added to the curriculum. Manual training for boys, home economics for girls, advanced subjects in mathematics, sciences, foreign languages, commercial subjects, mechanical drawing, free-hand drawing, music, Dramatic Club, Commercial Club, Orchestra, public speaking and debating and more extensive programs in interscholastic athletics.<sup>29</sup> The organization of a kindergarten was established in the Sayville Elementary schools in 1922 as well.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Dedication Exercises of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Senior Class of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> Dedication Exercises of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 7.

This was the extent of the curriculum until 1939, when a Student Council, Marching Band, Mathematics and Science Clubs were organized.<sup>31</sup>

No further curriculum developments were instituted until 1942. At this time, during which the United States was at war, a course entitled Avionics (airplane identification) was mandatory for all students.<sup>32</sup>

Pupil Personnel Services (Guidance and Psychology Departments), automotive, electronics and remedial reading courses were incorporated into the Sayville School system about 1944.<sup>33</sup>

A building boom occurred again in the years 1956, 1957 and 1958. During these years two new elementary schools and an ultra-modern high school were built to accommodate the increased enrollment in the Sayville School District.<sup>34</sup>

The Sayville School system has never been a leader in developing new ideas and concepts in education. The community tends toward conservatism and acts only when necessary, not in anticipation. This has been their history

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<sup>31</sup> Senior Class of Sayville High School, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> As per interview with T. Wenk, Principal of Sayville High School, 1951 to present.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

especially when it comes to constructing new buildings and hiring of additional teachers.

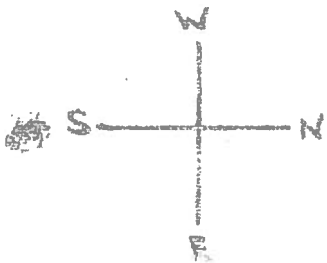
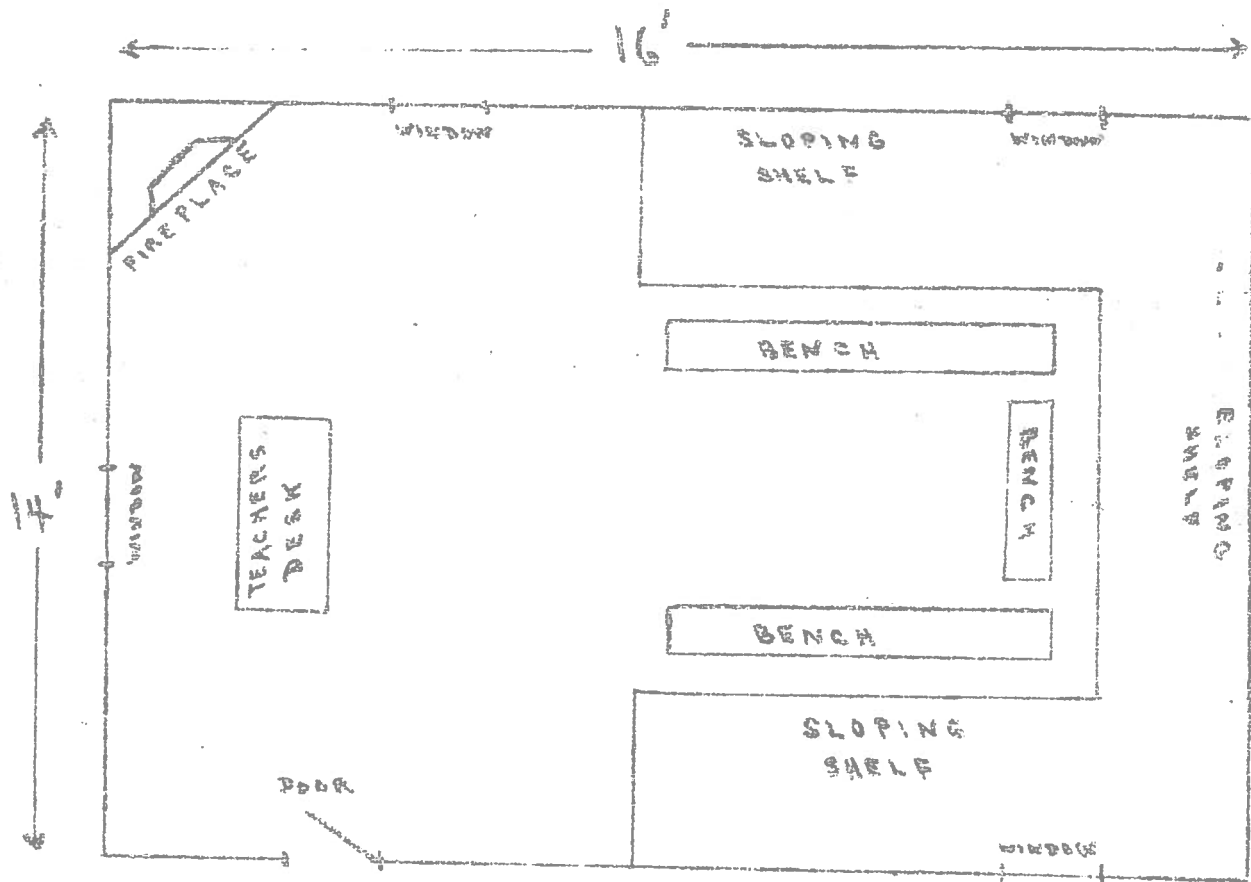
As for keeping pace with the modern trends in education, the system has been negligent. Outdated and archaic methods are still prevalent. This is possibly due to the administrations fear of failure in deviating from the stringent traditional path and their reluctance to accepting new methods even when they have been subjected to trial and error elsewhere.

Although this is my personal observation, I do not feel that Sayville's future is hopeless. Many of my professional colleagues and I feel obligated to pursue new ideas and keep attuned to modern developments in our educational field and not feel contented that what was good for our forefathers is always the best for us today.

PLATE I

Diagram of Sayville's First School

(1790)



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