

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XVII

3-8-95

No. 10

MEDINA HIGH SCHOOL — A FORERUNNER



On April 10, 1850 the Medina Free Academy was incorporated by an amended Act of New York State Legislature. The qualifying word here is "FREE." Hence, from this nugget, I will base our story.

Prior to 1850 there were only two high schools in New York State. One of these was the New York City Free Academy and the other was the Lockport Union School established in 1848. It was this latter one in fact, which became the model for all Union High Schools in Up-State New York.

We know that there were many academies for secondary education in the first half of the 19th Century but these were private schools and the students who attended, paid their own tuition. Consequently, those who could not afford a higher education could not get one.

In Orleans County we had several of these institutions. The first was the Gaines Academy established in 1827 which operated until 1844. The next was the Albion Academy which was incorporated in 1837 as a stock company with a capital of \$10,000. Shares were sold to individuals for \$25 each. The fate of the school went like most of the private academies as it could not financially maintain itself. In 1876 the property was sold to the Village of Albion and in its place came the Albion Union Free School.

Millville also had an Academy which was organized in 1839 and was located in a two-story cobblestone structure. This is the only academy building which is still in physical existence in our county. It later became a schoolhouse for District #7 of Shelby and is presently a dwelling.

Yates Academy was organized in 1841 and continued to operate until 1889. The Holley Academy was established in 1850 and continued for 18 years when its trustee turned over the property to the Holley Union Free School District. All these academies afore mentioned were primarily for boys as many felt girls did not need to be edu-

cated. However, Caroline Phipps in 1833 started a select school for girls and in 1837 opened the Phipps Union Seminary in Albion for girls. This school which was comparable to a high school in our terms today, operated until 1875. It was subsequently purchased by the county and is the site of the County Clerk's Office today.

Let's remember that all these academies and the Phipps Union Seminary were private institutions. But not so with Medina Free Academy as it started out from a different perspective. Indeed, the people of Medina were on the cutting edge of modern secondary education as we have come to know it. It was as early as 1846 when a group of citizens started contemplating the relative advantage of the union school idea. Upon an Act of the Legislature April 9, 1849, the trustees who were named, became in essence, the first board of education for Medina. They were: Christopher Whaley, Silas M. Burroughs, John Ryan, Daniel Starr, Isaac M. Swan and Archibald Servoss. The first secondary school building was opened in 1851 combining the primary school with the academic department. It is that school building which is pictured here. This was located at the head of Pearl Street and was used as a high school until a new one was built in 1897 and then served as a school for lower grades. In 1922 it was razed when a new high school was built on the same site.

The first important document for elementary education was passed by the Legislature in 1812. This provided for common school districts with trustees, a collector and a clerk. These districts were given power to raise taxes for school buildings and maintenance of education. The State paid part of the salary of the teachers and the rest was raised from tuition. This system was described as "free education" since all children were able to take advantage of this whether or not they paid the tuition. In essence, this is how it first worked for the students of the Medina Free Academy. This institution encompassed that part of the Towns of Shelby and Ridgeway in which the Village of Medina lies.

Silas M. Burroughs owned the land where the first so-called high school was built (pictured) and agreed to exchange his vacant lot for the old school building which was located off West Avenue near the railroad. By doing this, the school district got a much more desirable piece of property for erecting a three-story stone school. Prior to this any secondary education which took place in Medina occurred through private schools taught in private homes or available halls.

The plan of Union school districts which started in Lockport and picked up by Medina as early as 1849 became the norm. In 1853 the Union School Act made it possible for voters in two or more districts to create a board of education and set up an academic department or take over an existing academy. After this it did not take an act of the N.Y.S. Legislature to create each high school as it did in Medina. Naturally, the academies were opposed to this and consequently secondary education supported by taxation was the deathblow to eventually all of them locally.

Indeed, we can say that the Medina High School was the longest continuous free education program in Orleans County.