

## **And the Walls Came Tumbling Down.....**

### **Walworth High School: From Construction to Destruction** By Dorothy French

The September 8, 1930, opening of the newly-completed Walworth High School on Academy Street was a reason to celebrate. Students in the Walworth area could eventually be housed under one roof in a new facility designed to last for many years. Sadly, this 84-year-old building met its demise during the April 11-14, 2014, weekend when a wrecking crew and equipment began demolishing the once-proud structure. The final years had not been kind to this edifice.



**Above photos: April 11, 2014 Demolition**

## *A Glimpse Into History*

The building's history is scattered with milestones. In 1804 residents saw the need for a school, and a log schoolhouse was built on the north side of Center Street where a tennis court is now. Several other replacement schools were built at other locations, but it soon became apparent that a larger building was required.



### ***The Two Academies: prior to 1930***

In 1842 the first Academy was built of cobblestone at a cost of \$4,000 near the southeast corner of Academy and High Streets. A historic marker on the property notes the Academy was incorporated in 1842; however, this date may be incorrect based on museum records noting an 1841 date. The building was divided into two departments with a qualified teacher in each area, accommodating a total of 100 students. Professor E. B. Wadsworth was in charge.

A second Academy – a brick building three stories high - was erected east of the first Academy in 1857 at a cost of \$8,000. The original building was then used as a boarding hall, church, residence for the principal, and the Grange Hall for Patrons of Husbandry. The majority of the students lived nearby or were “basket boarders” who brought food and resided with a family in town during the school week. Children who lived in the outlying areas attended the many district school houses that dotted the countryside.

Additional information about the two Academies and the school bell will be published in a future newsletter.



### ***Historic Marker on Academy Street***

## *Construction of Walworth High School: 1930*

When the area's population continued to grow during the 1920's, the need for a school to house grades kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> became evident. On March 18, 1929, the voters of District No. 1 approved a bond issue of \$80,000 for the purpose of erecting a new school building. On February 19, 1930, the District bonds were sold to F. H. and A. D. Tuttle of Walworth for \$80,056.63. On March 1 the two Academies were torn down to make way for the 2½ story Walworth High School. During construction classes were held at the Grange Hall on Main Street (originally the Pacific Hotel and recently American Pool Supply).

The new school opened on September 8, 1930. The program for the October 3 Dedication Exercises stated the building was planned so that additions could easily be made. There were four grade rooms, two high school rooms, laboratory, shop, recitation room, office, teachers' room, music room, and library. A spacious auditorium/gymnasium would seat 240 pupils. The kitchen was located in the basement with a dining hall accommodating 100.

Enrollment during the 1930-1931 school year totaled 182 students. The first students to graduate from WHS were 11 seniors of the Class of 1931.



***Aerial view of Walworth High School  
and south addition: Post 1956***



***Photo: Walworth High School: 1985***

Through the years teachers shared their love of education with their students. The school day could also include visits by a medical doctor for physicals, dance lessons, sports (especially basketball and softball), school band, chorus, talent shows, and class photos (some taken on the front lawn by the flag pole).

A wall of photos of the high school graduates always is a focal point for visitors at our museum, where we also have an extensive collection of school yearbooks. We recently converted a 16 mm video into a DVD; it shows the children studying in their classrooms and participating in other indoor and outdoor activities. We hope to show the DVD at a future program at the museum.

## *Centralization: 1949 and Its Effects*

In 1949, a vote was taken to centralize the schools in Walworth and Ontario and merge to become the Wayne Central School District. The last graduating class from WHS consisted of only 13 students in 1949. According to the 1977-1979 Principal, Vincent Dellarocco, the Walworth grade students would remain in their building. All students in grades 7-12 would be housed in the Ontario High School on Ridge Road, Ontario.

To alleviate the overcrowding that resulted from this merger, in 1953 a new junior/senior high school for grades 7 – 12 was built on Route 350 in Ontario Center. In 1967 the Thomas C. Armstrong Middle School was built. The school district was reorganized in 1975-76 with levels 10-12 in the James A. Beneway Senior High School and levels 7-9 in Thomas C. Armstrong Middle School; both schools are located on Route 350/Ontario Center Road. Levels K-6 were housed in one of four elementary schools. Freewill Elementary School opened in 1969 on a 47-acre site on Canandaigua Road, Walworth. Gananda Central School District was formed in 1972 and serves the southern part of Walworth township.



**South Wing: 1956**



**South Wing: 2010 – Weeds and neglect**

### *Walworth Elementary School: 1930 – 1980*

In 1956 Principal Roger Pembroke declared there were 300 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Due to a lack of space the kindergarten was housed in the Christian Education Building of the Second Baptist Church on Main Street. Enrollment continued to increase in the elementary school, and a 7,540 square foot south wing was added facing High Street in 1956. The 60's and 70's were periods of population growth in the Walworth area, but it soon was apparent that registration numbers were dwindling.

In January 1980 Wayne Central School District officials proposed closing the Walworth Elementary School at the end of the current school year.

### *50 Year Celebration: June 8, 1980*

A "Farewell to Walworth High School, 1930 to 1980," Open House was held on June 8, 1980, at the elementary school. More than 150 persons attended the ceremonies in recognition of the years of service by the structure. Rogert Wignall, senior Walworth citizen and sole surviving member of the 1930 Board of Education, noted that a total of 315 persons had graduated from Walworth High School in the years of 1912 (when it was a union free school district) to 1949. Roger Pembroke, principal from 1950-1977, as well as former student and trustee of Walworth Elementary School, spoke of the history of education and the school buildings in the Walworth area. Dr. Gerald Greenstein, Superintendent of Schools for Wayne Central School District, stated the district would work to find uses for the building which would be "fitting to its heritage."

Mrs. Becky Appleman and Mrs. Marcia Standera, co-chairpersons of the Walworth Elementary Parents Guild, presented a plaque with names of each of the children and employees in the building during this final year. The building's 1930 dedication plaque and portrait of Principal Roger Pembroke were presented to Walworth Town Supervisor Frank Guelli, who noted the items will be preserved for the history of the Town of Walworth. Larry Ruth, president of the local teachers' association, presented a single stem rose to each of the teachers at the school. A cake, made by Mrs. Bea Holcomb of Walworth and designed in the model of the school building, was a highlight of the refreshment table.

## *No Longer Used as a School: 1980 and Beyond*

After the Town of Walworth declined the offer to take over the building, it sat empty for five years until it was taken over by C.A.S.H. (Community Action in Self Help, Inc.) in 1985 and rehabilitated into 26 low-income apartments. The project eventually failed and the building was again abandoned, beginning a slow deterioration. It was again offered to the Town of Walworth and the suggestion was made in 2005 to turn it into a community center. Voters defeated the referendum and the building continued its downward spiral. The property then went to Wayne County for back taxes.

Through the succeeding years the structure was neglected; vandalism was frequent and extensive, and the building was condemned. Several businessmen individually purchased the building, hoping to resurrect it into something usable. Bruce Carey purchased the building (then known as the Academy Street Apartments) in the spring of 2006 at a county tax auction, but sold it several months later when it was bought at auction by Alex Tamoutselis. The neglect of past years became evident when the walls and part of the roof facing the west collapsed in March 2010. The windows and doors were boarded, the building was declared unsafe for occupancy, and the parking lot was chained off.



**West Side: 1985**



**WHS Immortalized in Concrete**

## *Destruction of Walworth High School: April 11-14 Weekend, 2014*

According to the April 13, 2014, issue of The Times of Wayne County, Alex had hoped to raze a portion of the building and possibly construct an apartment building. However, his insurance company notified him in early April that the building was in such bad shape they would be pulling their coverage. The decision to raze the building was inevitable.



All that now remains is an empty lot at the corner of Academy and High Streets. Alex plans to give the museum the 1930 concrete cornerstone (left photo) to the Walworth Historical Society, along with concrete sections of the school's name that graced the front of the building. Thank you to Kathy Aeckerle, our genealogist, for rescuing some of the bricks as keepsakes for our museum, and to people who donated pictures of the demolition process.

The faculty and staff at Walworth Elementary authored a poem as a tribute to the Class of 1979, prefacing it with these words:

*Long after the halls of Walworth are empty, they will echo with the delightful memories of students' past. It is memories, not mortar, that make a building what it is.*

In time, memories fade but recorded thoughts remain for posterity. Let's not let this school fade from us.

**Editor's Note:** Information and photos for this story were obtained from our museum files. Additional information is reprinted with permission from The Times of Wayne County.