

The History of the Original Forwood School



FORWOOD

1799 Remember that plaque above the vestibule of Forwood School located on Silverside Road, and how you sometimes wondered about all the boys and girls who had played in the schoolyard below it over more than a hundred years, when that seemed forever, and you wondered too about the grownups that planned and built the school? For lots of us they were our own actual family, for some of us back to twice-great grandparents. For all of us they somehow tied us into exciting times before we were born.

Forwood School was to have an active life of 140 years, longer than any other public school building in Delaware has yet had. It's a story that goes back to the very beginnings of real public education not only in this State but in the country.

The late 1700's were years bubbling with new ideas in government, business, and general ways of living. In 1789 the Constitution of the United States had made a workable single country from the thirteen loosely allied States that had won the Revolution a few years before. Delaware was the first to join that union.

Delaware also drafted a new Constitution for itself in 1791/1792. One of its new ideas was an order to the Assembly to provide for education. This was one of the earliest State Constitutions to do so. There had, of course, been schools in Delaware back to Swedish times. Here, as elsewhere, schools had been of three kinds only : private ventures; church supported; and cooperatives where groups of neighbors hired a teacher for their own children. All types occasionally took in a bright child too poor to pay. Some apprentices were taught to read and write as part of their contracts. But there was nothing reliably available for the ordinary farmers' and craftsmens' children.

At least some of the delegates to Delaware's 1792 Constitutional Convention were thinking in terms of something different when they directed the Assembly to provide for education. One of them, a Wilmington schoolteacher and instrument-maker, had published a pamphlet on the subject a few months before the Convention met. In it he urged tax-supported schools in local districts to teach the basic skills to all the children, not as a private privilege but as the strongest defense a free government could have.

In 1796 the General Assembly founded a School Fund by investing the marriage and tavern license fees that had previously gone for general use. Incidentally, Delaware was possibly the first State to earmark for schools money that had been general revenue before. And the sum was not trivial : it had supplied about a fifth of the treasury's income in the previous year.

So people were thinking and talking about schools all through the 1790's. In Brandywine Hundred, by the end of the decade, they began doing something about it.

Early in 1799 plans that must have been going on for quite a while finally shaped up in one neighborhood. On June 19th Richard Justison and his wife Ann deeded half an acre to Robert and Jehu Forwood and Thomas Bird, Jr., in trust for the erection of a school for the use of the families living nearby. The land was given for fifty cents and "the esteem which they bear to their neighbors (and) a regard for the due education of their children".

We come now to a part of the story told by Avery Bell, our longtime mailman, in a 1960 newspaper column. Part of the account reads as if it were based on actual account books : He reports that volunteers collected local field stone; had lumber processed at Sharpley's sawmill at Foulk and Shipley Roads; and shingles cut at Webster's Mill on the Shellpot. Robert Forwood is said to have been the principle builder. Mr. Bell adds that the entire project was completed in two months and ten days, ready for dedication on August 17, 1799.

The finished building was almost square, 20 feet by 22 feet. Mr. Bell says there was a huge oaken desk extending clear across one end. There is no tradition about the students' seats, but these were probably benches arranged around the walls or in a semicircle in front of the teacher's desk. It may even have been like an old Kent County schoolhouse which had seats back to back, boys facing one way, girls the other. Unfortunately we

know very little about that first generation of Forwood's existence, 1799 – 1830. Tradition says the building was used every year. Each resident who sent children undoubtedly contributed to the salary of a teacher, hired by the quarter. We do not know if the building as originally finished had a fireplace, though we are sure the pot-bellied stoves of our own day were far in the future. Enrollment, too, can only be a guess. Quite likely, in the winter, when farm work was slow, there were mostly big boys with a man teacher; little folks most frequently came Spring and Fall to a woman; and the bigger girls whenever they could best be spared.

By 1829 the School Fund, accumulating since 1796, was producing an income large enough to distribute. Urged on by Willard Hall and others the Assembly passed a Free School Law. This set up school districts of walking-distance throughout the State, each to receive a generous subsidy if it gave instruction "free to all (its) white children", assumed a certain share of the cost, and taught reading, writing, arithmetic and grammar, plus whatever else the local people cared to add. The voters decided each year whether to open school at all and whether to raise the district's money by tax or voluntary contribution. Odd as it may sound now this was a very progressive law for its time. Massachusetts was ahead of Delaware (by two years) in abolishing tuition. Very few other States did so for another thirty years or more.

By 1834 the public school program was operating. Forwood School had become Brandywine Hundred District No. 5. (I believe, but cannot document, that the Hundred already had a network of substantially housed subscription schools, founded around the same time as Forwood, that became its other seven public districts. One of them has long been within the limits of Wilmington.) State Auditor's Reports for the next forty years contain data on School Fund disbursements that give bits of information about Forwood. In 1834 it raised \$108.00 locally, received \$59.00 from the Fund, paid out \$28.00 for general expenses and \$126.00 to its teacher. It was in operation for nine months and enrolled 58 students. Between 1834 and 1874 Forwood was always open from 6 ½ to 10 months a year, usually around 8 months. The lowest yearly attendance was 25, the highest 82: the most usual number was 40 to 50 or from 65 to 70. Both local and State support varied widely : \$25.00 to \$275.00 local; \$59.00 to \$176.00 for the State money. After 1855 both revenue sources increased steadily.

New Castle County Friends of public education met yearly from 1836 to 1855 to discuss the current situation of the schools and urge needed improvements. In several years Forwood sent one or more delegates and in two of them gave rather detailed reports.

In 1843 the district had 210 residents, including 45 children 5 to 15 years of age. Strangely enough, 40 boys and 28 girls attended school sometime during the year. The building was still 20' by 22", with rather inconvenient seating. A man teacher received \$60.00 per quarter. The trustees reported that they still had some difficulty raising funds but that conditions were improving.

In 1855 enrollment was 57 boys and 50 girls. Most of them were only studying reading, writing and arithmetic, but several took geography, grammar, book-keeping, general science (the called "philosophy") and "mensuration" (possibly surveying). How did 107 people crowd into a twenty-foot square room? They did not try. That year the building was enlarged to its present 40 foot length and the trustees proudly reported desks and benches "according to modern improvements in design"; the desks 36 inches and the seats 18 inches from the floor. Also remember that daily attendance was always poor, and that the older and younger students usually came during different parts of the year. There was, in fact, a man teacher paid \$23 1/3 per quarter and a woman receiving \$16 2/3 per quarter.

We have found no statistics for later years, but the School obviously continued to serve its children increasingly well. When the hundredth anniversary arrived in 1899 there was a gala celebration with an estimated four hundred present. The original deed was exhibited. The first speaker outlined the history of the School, ending with an original poem about its founding. A second speaker deplored at great length, that public schools were still largely supported by liquor taxes. A third talked of prominent people among former students, among them many Civil War veterans with outstanding records. Most unfortunately the reporters quoted the temperance speech at the greatest length and gave few specific details of the historical account or the notable alumni. The two of the latter mentioned by name were the then-current U.S. Surgeon General, William A. Forwood, and another prominent physician, J. Larkin Forwood. There was music by Thomas Bird's orchestra, both alone and accompanying soloists and audience. At the end of the afternoon long tables were set up with ice cream, cake, watermelon, and other delicacies to serve everyone present.

In the 1910 decade and into the 1920's at least the School was flourishing. Although we have no figures, enrollment must have averaged 45 to 60 in most years. We had good standard textbooks, reasonably up to date. Most of the teachers ranged from good to excellent : Miss Carpenter, Miss Moss, Miss Ely, Miss Weist, Miss Wheatley, Miss Prettyman, all fell into that class. Most of us who went on to high schools in Wilmington or occasionally Philadelphia almost always did well. Quite a few went on to professions, the highly skilled trades or responsible positions in business. So in the time of most of us here today, Forwood School was not just a relic of the very beginnings of public education in America : it was a very good school, frequently called the best in the vicinity in spite of somewhat primitive equipment. Some out-of district families paid tuition to send their children here.

I cannot recall that we had a formal PTA when I went (1914 – 1919) but we did have gatherings of parents at the School for entertainments, sociability, and discussion of school affairs, I believe several times a year. New bracket kerosene lamps were mounted in time for an evening Christmas program about 1914 or 1915. There were notable closing-day picnics, too.

An existing PTA minute book begins in October 1927, obviously not the start of the organization for it already had officers and outstanding bills. Members could join at age 12; dues were 5 cents a month. Meetings were fairly regular through September 1934, when the book was filled. The PTA supplied many small items like new window shades,

Door knobs and locks; repaired the clock; obtained new kerosine lamps and a stepladder. There were also more ambitious projects : a long-drawn-out effort to replace the halyard of the flagpole; getting considerable playground and sports equipment; getting a new piano and rhythm band instruments; arranging for electric lights and paying the monthly bills for them; underwriting trips to the County (or State) Field and Track Meet at Newark

on at least two occasions; obtaining additional blackboards from a closed district; and lobbying successfully to see that children forced to transfer after the 6th grade actually got their promised transportation. (It was about 1931 that the State closed the 7th and 8th grades in local schools.) The PTA also repaired the roof and replaced the pump in this 1927 – 1934 period. There were several adult education classes held in the building under State auspices but recruited by the PTA.

The teachers of those years were Mrs. Hickman who resigned in 1927; her replacement was Mrs. Duffield who came in January 1928 and stayed through the Spring of 1934; and Miss Berman from Fall 1934, until the school closed.

From the mid-twenties on, a combination of increasing auto traffic and changing educational theory began leeching the enrollment from single districts into the larger consolidations. Some, like Forwood and Arden, fought back bitterly. In Forwood there was a successful referendum to raise the local share for an additional building but an emergency elsewhere claimed the promised State funds. These were never made available though the district repeatedly asked for them instead of consolidation with Alfred I. duPont. In the face of contrary referendums in both districts in the preceeding several years, the State finally forced the merger which neither district wanted. On March 17, 1939 Forwood School was ordered to close at the end of the term in June. It was 140 years from the time the ground was deeded.

Ordinarily a school no longer needed by the State is sold to the highest bidder, but there was strong support in the newspapers and elsewhere for keeping Forwood School in public service of some sort. The Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, founded by Mrs. Henry B. Thompson, became interested; early in 1940 it received a deed to the property. The plan was to renovate the building and grounds as a community center available for meetings, picnicking and general recreation, and possibly for vocational education and a library. The major program was to be under Society sponsorship with a local responsibility for maintenance. Unfortunately there was a delay in getting the needed repairs under way. By the next Spring the threat of our involvement in World War II and actual hostilities after November 1941 interrupted all projects like this one. Before fairly normal conditions returned the Society itself had virtually ceased to exist. The old Forwood property was sold to Mrs. W.P. Forwood in 1947 for conversion to a house. It is still the property of one of her descendants.

In the closing years of Forwood School's active life a group known as "Forwood Schoolmates" formed. It was composed of former students at Forwood, mostly middle-aged and elderly women the age of our parents and grandparents. Beginning in 1934 it met quite informally in homes. In 1939, shortly after the closing, approximately seventy of the "Schoolmates" met on the grounds for a picnic and reminiscences. Those present came from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Washington D.C. as well as from nearby. One of the highlights was a photocopy of the original deed. The "Schoolmates" continued until 1942 when general war conditions made it hard to meet; there was no revival later.

Nevertheless, there were many who still remembered and loved old Forwood. When the Alfred I. DuPont District was erecting a new junior high school a few blocks from it, one of the administrative committees met to choose a name. In November 1960 it selected Forwood. For approximately twenty years the new Forwood Junior High served the seventh, eighth and ninth grades of the vicinity as efficiently as the old school had their parents, grandparents and uncles and aunts. An elementary school adjacent still preserves the name as it starts the education of the area's younger children.

Today there are nearly a hundred of us gathered for another reunion of schoolfellows, families and friends. Besides those physically in the room there are probably that many more thinking of us and we of them. Though the old Forwood School has been closed for almost fifty years now, what each of us has got is still very much a part of us, with one or another little piece of that legacy handed on into all the lives we have touched since our school days. In that sense old Forwood will survive for a long, long time.

Last Modified on October 20, 2009

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News

May 13, 2003

Owners of the property off Silverside Road near Marsh Road where the historic one-room Forwood School building is located have revived a long-dormant intention to develop the site.

Bob Forwood said Forwood School Associates, a partnership of himself, his brother Albert, and his sisters, Marty Johnson and Betty Harvey, would prefer having the 11-acre tract rezoned and building a 60,000-square-foot professional office building, a branch bank and two 24-unit age-restricted townhouse-style apartment or condominium buildings there.

Failing that, he said, the family members will exercise their right under present zoning to construct up to about 50 townhouses.

Either way, he declared adamantly at a meeting of the Graylyn Crest Civic Association on May 12, "the property is going to be developed."

Several years ago, the Forwoods unsuccessfully sought a rezoning for a combination of commercial and residential uses. That proposal was opposed by residents of Graylyn Crest and other communities in the vicinity.

Bob Forwood explained that his father, also Albert, left the property to his adult children to assure their well-being and security in their advanced years. Because they are growing older, "we have gotten to the point where we have to move forward with some development," he said.

"We're going to get the full current value" from the property.

He asked the civic association to decide between the options. "It's going to be [the office-apartment plan] or it's going to be developed the way it's now zoned. We can't wait any longer," he said.

A similar proposition was made earlier to the civic association in Glenside Farms. Both communities abut the present Forwood property. They are on land which was part of a farm owned by the present generation's grandfather and was sold to developers in the 1950s.



This building off Silverside Road is said to have housed one of the nation's first free public schools.

County Councilman Robert Weiner, who would have to sponsor any rezoning, said he will be guided in whether to do so by community wishes. "I am not going to introduce any change in zoning unless the community wants it, he said. But, he noted that the Forwoods have the legal right to proceed under existing zoning as long as they comply with the technical requirements of the Unified Development Code.. "We would all prefer that nothing be done [to the property], but that is not an option," he said.

The school building is believed to be the oldest extant building in the original 13 states that had been used as a school. It was donated in 1799 by the Forwoods' forebears -- who were pioneer settlers in Brandywine Hundred -- for that purpose in what was then an embryonic free public school movement. It served as a proverbial rural one-room school until 1939, when Forwoods purchased it back and converted it to a residence.

The building currently is unoccupied. It had been the object of complaints because of its neglected condition. The exterior and the land around it has been cleared up and cleaned up in recent months. The interior reportedly is in poor condition. The building's landmark status is unclear, but it falls well within the preservation criteria of New Castle County's historic property law.

Clearly interested in persuading community residents to buy into the office building-apartment plan, Bob Forwood said preservation of the building is part of the proposal. He said its future use has not yet been determined, but that it will not be for commercial purposes.

Another feature of the plan would be the building of a service road through the property that would connect the adjoining Shops of Graylyn shopping center with Silverside Road at an intersection adjacent to the Silverside Dairy property directly across from the entrance to Branmar Plaza, another shopping center. Forwood said Delaware Department of Transportation has informed him that it plans safety improvements for that part of Silverside Road. Among other things, they will eliminate access to the Shops of Graylyn from the westbound lanes of Silverside Road and left turns onto Silverside Road from the shopping center.

The office building would be situated so as to block a view of the unattractive rear of the strip shopping center and both it and the residential buildings would be three stories high, one fewer than permitted the property code.

A street though Glenside Farms which on DeIDOT's maps extends through the Forwood property would remain unbuilt and the Graylyn Crest side of the developed tract would be left undeveloped. "They get to keep their [limited use] road and you get the green space," Forwood told some 40 Graylyn Crest residents who came to the meeting.

He did not say what would be done with the school building and designated roads if that plan is rejected and the townhouses built. The Forwoods would have only partial control over their fate.

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this Indenture to be her deed.

GIVEN under my hand and seal of office the day and year aforesaid.

* Lawrence R. Moore *
* Notary Public *
* Appointed April 10, 1945 *
* Term four years, Delaware *

Lawrence R. Moore
Notary Public

Received for Record, December 16, 1947

Burton S. Heal, Recorder

Compared
Barnes

THIS DEED, MADE THIS Second day of December in the year of our LORD one thousand nine hundred and forty-seven

BETWEEN, The Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, a corporation of the State of Delaware, party of the first part,

AND Emily H. Forwood, married woman, of Brandywine Hundred, County of New Castle and State of Delaware, party of the second part,

WITNESSETH, That the said party of the first part, for and in consideration of the sum of One Thousand Dollars (\$1,000.00) lawful money of the United States of America, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, hereby grants and conveys unto the said party of the second part, her heirs and assigns, all of its right, title and interest in and to,

ALL That certain piece or parcel of land, together with the buildings thereon erected, situate in Brandywine Hundred, New Castle County and State of Delaware, lying on the westerly side of Silverside Road which leads from Talleyville to the Philadelphia Pike, said road being referred to in a deed of 1799 referred to ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ hereinafter as Isaac Grubb's Road, said lands being more particularly bounded and described as follows:

BEGINNING At a point in the center line of said Silverside Road, a corner for this parcel and lands now of Harry Hubbard and running with the center line of said road north forty-nine and one-half (49½) degrees west ten (10) perches to another point in the center line of said road, a corner for this parcel and lands now of William F. Simon; thence binding with the said Simon lands and running south forty and one-half (40½) degrees west nine (9) perches to a point in line of lands of said Simon; thence continuing to bind with said Simon lands and running south forty-nine and one-half (49½) degrees east ten (10) perches to another point in line of said Simon and being another corner for this parcel and lands of said Hubbard; thence binding with said Hubbard lands and running north forty and one-half (40½) degrees east nine (9) perches to the center line of the aforesaid road and being the place of beginning, laid out to contain one-half (½) an acre of land, exclusive of the said road, be the same morsor less, and being the same lot of land conveyed by deed of Richard Justison and Ann Justison, his wife, bearing date June 19, A.D. 1799, and of record in the office of the Recorder of Deeds, in and for New Castle County, in Deed Book G, Vol. 3, Page 554, unto Robert Forwood, Thomas John Forwood and Thomas Bird, Junior, Trustees, and also being the same lands and premises formerly used for school purposes in Forwood District No. 5 in New Castle County.

BEING the same lands and premises conveyed to the party of the first part by deed of the State Board of Education of the State of Delaware dated Mar-

ch 13, 1940, which deed was not recorded and is now lost and by confirmatory deed of the State Board of Education of the State of Delaware dated November 21, 1947, and recorded in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds in and for New Castle County in Deed Record ,Vol. ,Page .

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, The said The Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, a corporation as aforesaid, hath caused its name by H. Rodney Sharp its President to be hereunto set, and the common and corporate seal of the said corporation to be hereunto affixed, duly attested by its Secretary, the day and year first above written.

Sealed and delivered in the presence of

Martin A. Klaver

BY: H. Rodney Sharp President

ATTEST: Charles L. Lund Secretary

* The Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, Incorporated 1937, Delaware *

STATE OF FLORIDA) ;SS. LEE COUNTY)

* U.S.I.R. STAMPS * \$1.10 Cancelled *

BE IT REMEMBERED, That on this 2nd day of December in the year of our LORD one thousand nine hundred and forty-seven, personally came before me a Notary Public for the State of Florida, H. Rodney Sharp President of The Delaware Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, a corporation existing under the laws of the State of Delaware, party to this Indenture, known to me personally to be such, and acknowledged this Indenture to be his act and deed and the act and deed of said corporation, that the signature of the President thereto is in his own proper handwriting and the seal affixed is the common and corporate seal of said corporation, and that his act of sealing, executing, acknowledging and delivering said Indenture was duly authorized by a resolution of the Board of Directors of said corporation.

GIVEN under my Hand and Seal of office, the day and year aforesaid.

* Harry B. Whidden Notary Public State of Florida at Large *

Harry B. Whidden Notary Public My commission expires April 23, 1951 Bonded by Mass. Bonding & Insurance Co.

Received for Record, December 16, 1947

Burton S. Heal, Recorder

Compared Hasen

THIS DEED, MADE THIS 16th day of December, in the year of our LORD one thousand nine hundred and forty-seven (1947),

BETWEEN, JAMES S. CONLY AND ESTELLE T. CONLY, HIS WIFE, of Brandywine Hundred, New Castle County and State of Delaware, parties of the first part,

AND PHILIP H. RASH AND BERTHA J. RASH, his wife, of Brandywine Hundred New Castle County and State of Delaware, parties of the second part,

WITNESSETH, That the said parties of the first part, for and in consideration of the sum of FIVE DOLLARS (\$5.00) lawful money of the United States of America, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, hereby grant and convey unto the said parties of the second part, their Heirs and Assigns, as tenants by the entirety,