

A Brief Historical Sketch of the Garrison Union Free School - Its Buildings and Grounds

Remarks by Jean Saunders November 25, 1968

Thank you for asking me to speak to you today. It is a great pleasure to see my last Kindergarten class and find them such a handsome Sixth Grade. And the Eighth Graders were my Kindergartners too. My how you've grown. And how the school building has grown! Did you know that your school began as a one-room school which stood where St. Philip's Parish House now stands?

I am going to tell you some of the history of the Garrison Union Free School and the property it owns. Previous to the Revolutionary War there were few schools in these parts and there was no system of education sponsored by the Colonial government. Most of the schools that did exist were sponsored by the churches. A letter written to Bishop Hobart of the Episcopal Church in 1813 stated that "a small decent School house was erected in 1785" at St. Philip's but not until 1793 do Vestry records mention a school. Perhaps the letter writer meant to say 1795. The Vestry minutes for April 10, 1793 state: "Resolved, that a building shall be erected on the land belonging to the Protestant Episcopal Church in Philipstown for the purpose of a Free School forever, which house shall be built by subscription." This would have followed the recommendation of the Board of Regents which had been established by the first New York State legislature in 1787.

As I have already told you the school house was built where the Parish House now stands. Attached to it or incorporated in it were living quarters for the newly married schoolmaster Jacob Lent. Space for a garden was also included in the land rented by the Church to the school Trustees for \$30.00 a year. The connection between the Church and the School was purely financial

and Mr. Lent was scolded by the Vestry for using the St. Philip's Chapel for "Scholastic Exhibitions."

When the church became more prosperous and the little red frame pre-Revolutionary Chapel was replaced by the present stone building the grounds were landscaped and the schoolhouse considered an eyesore. The school was asked to move and take its building away in 1864 but it was another two years before Frederick Philipse sold the piece of ground now owned by Mrs. Messimer to the School Trustees and a new schoolhouse built. This building is now Mrs. Messimer's home. Originally the building had a wing towards the road and a tower on it which were removed when it became a dwelling house. The old schoolhouse was moved from the churchyard to a site adjoining the new school to the north. It has since been moved twice and now stands on a foundation in the field on Nelson's lane waiting to be repaired and start life anew in a fourth location at the age of 175 years.

This second schoolhouse (now Mrs. Messimer's house) was called the Garrison Union Free School, the first Free School in Philipstown. This meant that parents no longer had to pay any part of the cost of teaching their children. The cost of running the school came from State funds (as it had for many years) and real estate taxes as it does today. The Garrison community was much interested in its school as it is today and five trustees serve the district whereas other districts had either only one or three trustees.

You may wonder where the students had room for sports and exercise. They didn't but they walked to school.

The next move for the Garrison Union Free School was to the west end of this building, the stone section built in 1908 on a plot of ground which lay between a line extending from the retaining wall outside this gym to the road on the north to a parallel line on the south starting at the steps to the road crossing. The depth

of the lot was only to the edge of the blacktop behind this wing. Not much room for a playground was there? This was essentially a four room schoolhouse with a classroom at each corner and two grades with one teacher in each room, 1st and 2nd, 3rd and 4th, 5th and 6th, and 7th and 8th. The northeast and southeast rooms were divided by a folding partition so they could be combined for an assembly room.

As you all can easily tell there have been a succession of additions to the stone building since 1950 and you now have a relatively large school building. But your school is bigger than this building; it is really as "big as all outdoors" and the boundaries of the schoolyard have literally been stretched for miles. Within the last twenty years land has been acquired (mostly by gift) north, east, south, and west.

To the west Philipse Common - your baseball field - was a gift from the Highland Public Society who had been given it by Mrs. Henry White Belcher in the late 19th Century for community use. On it have been horse shows, baseball games, church picnics, and firemen's bazaars. The Garrison Athletic Club like to play baseball on their home field because they know how to bat the ball up in the oak tree and so make home runs. The St. Joseph's Church picnics held on the Fourth of July were a popular social event.

To the north and immediately to the east, the present school property was once owned by the Garrison family and on it at the crown of the hill north of the roadway to Mr. Rakshys house was a huge summer hotel known as the Highland House. There were many buildings connected with the enterprise including a stable which held fifty horses. Guests from West Point attended parties here and girls staying here attended the "hops" or dances at West Point. They had to be rowed across the river for the steam ferry didn't run at night. Families brought their own horses with them for the summer and took

drives through the neighboring estates. One such drive was to the top of Fort Hill where Mr. Samuel Sloan had built an observation tower.

Fort Hill is now your school's forest. The tower was built on the site of a Revolutionary Redoubt known both as South and Middle Redoubt. Some of you may have studied maps showing the forts and have read Mr. Frederick Osborn's essay on the School Forest in which he says that General Washington visited the fort the day that Benedict Arnold received the news of Andre's capture and Arnold left Beverly in haste and went to the British ship Vulture. The story of Major Andre and Benedict Arnold is one of the greatest spy stories of all time and the most important part of it happened right here in Garrison. Here is an account of that infamous day of September 1780 written by the Rev. Joseph Rankin Duryee in his book "The Story of Samuel and Margaret Sloan" privately published in 1927:

"On the 5th of August, 1780, General Benedict Arnold took command of the WestPoint Post and established his headquarters at the Beverly Robinson house on the east side of the river. Early in September, he forwarded to General Washington, then at Hartford, Connecticut, in conference with Count Rochambeau, a long report telling of the conditions of his command. There were 10,800 [possibly 16, 860] troops in all, the most of whom were in cantonments on the east side of the river. The description of the South and North Redoubts, built alike, is as follows:

'Built of stone 4 feet high; above the stone wood filled in with Earth, very dry, no ditch, a Bomb Proof, three batteries without forts; a poor Abattis; the approaches under cover to within 20 yards. The work easily fired with Faggots dipped in pitch.'

Washington received this report and soon after started for West Point, arriving on Sunday, September 25th at Fishkill. There he spent the night and at daybreak on the 25th set out for the Robinson house

fourteen miles away where he intended to breakfast. He rode by the Old Post Road to where the one to West Point meets it. Coming to the point where, on the present Peekskill Road, stood the large encampment I have described, the officer in charge of it asked him to visit the South and North Redoubts and he consented. [This encampment was near where Mrs. George Dale lives and is marked on the Revolutionary maps Robinson's Farm Camp.] The detour and inspection must have occupied at least an hour. In the moments Washington spent where the tower now stands, word came to Arnold that Major Andre was captured with the incriminating papers and he abruptly left the Washington house and escaped to the British war ships in the River below Peekskill. Often as I have stood on the Old Redoubt I have thought that had not Washington gone there on that early morning he would have faced Arnold as that message came and, with his quick intuition, realized that it was a matter of vital concern. With his dominating will he probably would have insisted on reading the news and thwarted the escape of Arnold. If this had taken place Andre's life would have been spared, Arnold would have met a traitor's death, and his country been spared the terrible destruction he led her enemy to inflict. The cannon balls found when the tower was built and the old trees covering mounds of earth and stone are indeed eloquent symbols of what the winning of liberty and the founding of the United States cost our fathers. One summer evening as I sat with Mr. Sloan on the piazza of his home I told him at length the story here outlined. He asked me to write it out for him, for he was deeply interested, and said a tablet should be placed on the Redoubt."

I would like to see more than a tablet. Eventually I would like to see the Redoubt rebuilt. This would require expert archeological research and would not be easy since over the years so much has been disturbed by

individuals doing private research without proper guidance and the most disruptive was of course the building of the tower. Things such as buttons and cannon balls which were found have scattered and not properly recorded. This site is a National Shrine and with the coming celebration of our War for Independence will undoubtedly be included for preservation by the National Trust. Expert advice on preservation is available to you now. Just today I have talked with Mr. Gerald Stowe, curator of Ordinance and History at the West Point Museum. He is a professionally trained archeologist as well as a student of the American Revolution. He knows the Redoubt and says he would be happy to come over and tell you what should be done in the way of clearing trees to preserve what remains of the fortification. He also said that he would be happy to give a talk to the school about the military encampments in this area. The most important thing at the present time to preserve the site is to prevent anyone from doing any digging. I hope you will call on him soon to give you his advice.

It occurs to me that I have talked about Arnold's treason and some of you may not know what that means. Simply put because General Arnold was owed a lot of money by the Continental Congress for expenses in the war, was deeply in debt and had lost faith that he would ever be paid he decided that the British would pay him well if he sold them plans of the fortifications of West Point. Major Andre of the British Army was the go-between but Andre was caught by three Americans in Tarrytown and turned over to Lieutenant-Colonel Jamison at North Castle (near Pleasantville) who sent a report of the capture to General Arnold at Beverly. The captors were John Paulding, Isaac Van Wart and David Williams. The report arrived at Beverly, Arnold's headquarters, just when General Washington was due for breakfast.

There is much I have left unsaid about the history of your school and the school property and I hope you will make an effort to find out more about it. Many prominent people have lived and do live in Garrison such as the Hon. Hamilton Fish, a governor of New York State and Secretary of State under President Grant, whose father Nicholas Fish was a Revolutionary officer stationed here in the Highlands; Judge Pierrepont in whose orchard the newest addition to the school stands, and whose granddaughter Miss Mary Pierrepont Beckwith at the age of 94 has just designed and had built for herself the new house across the lane at the south; the Osborn and Sloan families and the Garrison family and its descendants. Ask questions of some of the older residents of the community. Talk with Mr. Bosco and Mrs. Pascale. They were Garrison School pupils. Write down what you learn. History is like a big jigsaw puzzle; it takes a lot of little pieces properly put together to make a good picture and like those big round puzzles the more people who work on it the more easily and faster it can be done.

Jean Saunders

November 25, 1968

Transcribed from the original typescript in the collection of Putnam County Historical Society