

One Room No Longer

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A recent issue of the *Ellenville/Wawarsing Alumni Association* newsletter (Issue #14 – Spring-Summer 2003) featured as its cover story the **Ulster Heights School** and its current restoration project, plus news about some other former school buildings dating back to when an entire school was one room. That story and the ongoing work at the **Ellenville Central School** complex on **Maple Avenue** serve as reminders that much has changed since the Town of Wawarsing elected its first school commissioners and inspectors on April 6, 1813.

The three commissioners met in July and divided the Town of Wawarsing into seven districts. Six inspectors were to examine the teachers and the schools. According to the 1812 Common Schools Law of New York State, each township was responsible for the establishment of school districts and for at least a portion of their support. In addition to the “public moneys” distributed by the State Superintendent of Common Schools, additional funds came from local taxation and a form of tuition called the Rate Bill. The real estate tax was paid by all property owners in each district and covered the erection and maintenance of the school building and property. Under the Rate Bill, parents who had children in school were required to pay the teacher’s salary and related charges.

The parental share was apportioned to the days the child attended school. If you couldn’t afford your share under the Rate Bill, you just didn’t send your child to school. The finance system was faulty from its inception and certainly created both budget deficits and inadequately educated children. The earliest record of annual school district meetings begins with the November 11, 1828, meeting of District No. 13 Wawarsing (no, that’s not a “typo”; that spelling continued through 1859).

The meeting was held “at the house of Nathan Hoornbeek,” located where today’s **Hunt Memorial Building** stands in **Liberty Square**. The first school house was a small brick building erected in 1830 on the southwest corner of **Market & Warren Streets**. (photo below, at current site of Verizon Building parking lot.)



During the next 100+ years, districts were divided, combined, and boundaries were continually changed. In 1833, the Town of Wawarsing had twenty school districts. An 1866 committee recommended the establishment of a *Union Free School District* in Ellenville, “a school which



shall not only be open to all but free to all; where no parent shall restrain his children from school for fear of not being able to meet his rate bill...” Ellenville’s voters agreed.

All these advances applied only to what generations have called “elementary education.” Education beyond eighth grade was handled by private schools. In 1853, a private academy was erected on **Maple Avenue**, to be administered by S. A. Law Post. Six years later, Mr. Post purchased the school from its owners and placed his own school under the New York State Board of Regents. For some years the school’s name varied, but local residents generally referred to it as “*the Academy*.” At one point, it was called the *Ulster Female Seminary*, but boys were always welcome. After Mr. Post’s death in 1873, the school closed briefly, but the *Union Free School District* took it over and graduated its first class in 1881. Silas A. VanWagener was the only boy in the first graduating class of seven. (Photo above shows what became the first High School in Ellenville; the rear portion was added in 1890. It stood until torn down 1914-15 to make room for the new High School.)

By 1945, Town of Wawarsing parents began seriously considering the feasibility of centralizing their small neighborhood schools with the town’s two union free districts, No. 2 in Napanoch and No. 29 in Ellenville. There were some very acrimonious battles as voters in the different districts debated their choice of joining either Ellenville or Grahamsville in centralizing. It was not until December 1950 that the vote to centralize was held (1166 yes; 397 no), but District No. 24’s assignment to Ellenville by the Commissioner of Education was appealed and the boundaries of **Ellenville Central School District No. 2** did not become final until January 1954.

The new **Central School District No. 2** of the towns of Wawarsing, Rochester, Ulster County; Mamakating, Fallsburg, Sullivan County, embraced twenty-eight different common and union free school districts. A recent volunteer project at the **Ellenville Central School** has traced many of the property transfers related to the districts that were eliminated by centralization. Each disposition of property required a meeting of the voters of the common school district to determine the fate of the buildings that would not be used by the centralized district. Since many of the original gifts or sale of property for the erection of a schoolhouse were informal, no deed record has been found for some. At least one was in an unnumbered district. This presentation of “whatever happened to the old school?” answers is far from complete; additional information would be welcome.

School District No. 2 served Napanoch children on ➤