

History recalled on arts festival landmark for 1973

By OLIVER WIARD

(Mr. Wiard was invited by the committee for the 1973 New Britain Arts Festival to discuss the history of the School Administration Bldg. and share his reminiscences of it. The building has been selected by the committee as the 1973 festival landmark. Ed.)

The Connecticut General Assembly in 1881 appropriated \$75,000 for a new building for the New Britain Normal School, then in its 31st year of operation, on condition that the town of New Britain would appropriate an additional \$25,000. This appropriation was made and a building was erected on the east slope of Walnut Hill, a commanding site, overlooking the city and the country to the east as far as the Glastonbury hills.

The building is 125 feet long by 85 feet in width. Above a high basement story of Portland brownstone there are two stories of brick with Ohio freestone window sills and lintels. A third story under the sloping slate of roofs was mostly unused space except for a long room at the south end which was used as a studio for art classes in drawing and clay modelling. A tower at the Northeast corner has an open-arched beltry-like story topped by a steep pyramidal roof whose crowning feature, a tall metal finial with a weather vane, no longer exists. A gabled porch reached by a high flight of steps was the principal entrance, used by officers and teachers.

Students used an entrance, also reached by a high flight of steps, in the south front of the building facing Camp Street. An unusual feature of the design is the wide black and white checkerboard frieze under the eaves, a motive that is repeated across the gables above the windows. The building was heated throughout by steam and was provided with a ventilating system that assured a continuous supply of fresh air. A large assembly hall on the second floor, with a stage, in addition to its use as a gen-

eral assembly room for the students, was frequently used for evening entertainments and lectures open to the public.

Many informative lectures were given under the auspices of the New Britain Scientific Association, formed in 1881. These were given by specialists in various branches of science and were illustrated by stereopticon slides, demonstrations and experiments. Laboratories for studies in physics and chemistry were located on the east side of the first floor. The janitor for many years was Emil F. Brumbaum. He had an office and supply room at the southwest corner of the basement and was a familiar figure to all the students, from kindergarten up.

Principal of School

Clarence F. Carroll, a Yale graduate, was principal of the school when this building was erected. He had succeeded I.N. Carleton in 1881. Prof. Carroll, a distinguished-looking man with a Van Dyck beard, was especially interested in developing a system of model schools for practice teaching.

This included a kindergarten, the first in Connecticut and one of the first in the country. This occupied two large rooms in the east front of the high basement story reached by an entrance from grade level. It opened in 1884 under the direction of Miss Clara W. Mingins, a pioneer in this field. She was assisted by Miss Fannibelle Curtis.

The writer of this memoir was one of the fifty children enrolled in the first year. The pleasantest memory of my kindergarten life is of the mat weaving with colored strips of paper which gave me my first taste of the delights of creating patterns in color. Two primary grade rooms were on the floor above in charge of Miss Emma Cartwright and Miss Jennie Darlington. My chief memory of these rooms is of the patient drilling Miss Cartwright gave each student in the correct enunciation of all the letters of the alphabet, especially of the vowel sounds.

In the course of time I learned to identify these sounds with the letter symbols on the printed page and suddenly, one morning, discovered that I could read the words these letters composed and what a wonderful unlocking of doors this was for me! Intermediate grades were accommodated in a building of the corner of Camp and School streets that had been built about 1870 for Prof. David N. Camp's Seminary for Young Ladies.

Rooms for grades immediately below the high school level were provided in an annex built in 1889 west of the main building, connected by a bridge intermediate between first and second floors. This annex also provided for the first time a large well-equipped gymnasium with locker rooms and shower facilities, also a large room for training in the manual arts where students could learn the use of carpenters tools under the direction of Charles A. Kunow. Basketball games for both boys and girls were held in the gymnasium. Miss Lucy C. Catlin was the first physical training instructor for the Normal School girls; in 1892 Miss Emily B. Scarborough came as physical instructor and in addition to her work with the students conducted a class for women not connected with the school who wished to improve their physical fitness. The gymnasium was also used by boys in the upper grades for military drill under the direction of Lt. Col. Alfred E. Thompson. Boys were provided with uniforms and military caps; long rods were used in lieu of guns for practice in the Manual of Arms.

Pleasant Memories

The present writer's pleasantest memories of the Normal School building are connected with the studio on the third floor where I had my first lessons in pencil and charcoal drawing, also in clay modelling and the making of plaster casts, under the enthusiastic instruction of Miss Emily Josephine Parker (familiarily known as Em-Jo). Among my fellow students in these classes were Estelle Case and Grace Chamberlain. The former much later became Mrs. Arthur Garde and was the first hostess at the New Britain Museum of American Art when this was opened in 1937. She had previously been in charge of the room in the New Britain Institute Library where the first paintings bought from the John B. Talcott fund were hung. In 1933 she made some charming

drawings of old New Britain houses for the Tercentenary booklet. Grace Chamberlain became the wife of Frank Vibberts, one of her fellow students in the model schools, and did many landscape paintings of scenes in the neighborhood of New Britain, some of which are in the museum's permanent collection.

In the early 1890's kitchen equipment was set up in the southwest corner of the large central space of the third floor, above the assembly hall, and Miss Carrie Conley gave instruction to both girls and boys in the art of cooking. This was reached by a short flight of steps up from the studio also from the stairway at the north end of the building. Students in the art classes on certain days left their easels to learn the mysteries of proper mixing and baking to produce tasty biscuits and other delicacies.

Teachers in the 1880s who had less contact with the model school pupils included: Arthur B. Morrill and George P. Phoenix in the natural sciences; Ralph G. Hibbard, elocution and reading; Mary G. Peabody, history and literature; M. Gertrude Fenn, drawing and grammar; Elizabeth Allyn, mathematics and geography. Clarence F. Carroll taught the principles of teaching and writing. Prof. Morrill left New Britain in 1889 to become first principal of the Willimantic Normal School, established that year.

Four years later he was transferred again to become first principal of the state's third Normal School in New Haven. Ralph G. Hibbard also taught at Wesleyan University. His public readings of humorous passages in the novels of Charles Dickens were very popular.

A teacher remembered with special pleasure was Miss Helena Cowles, a graduate of the Normal School in the class of 1886. In the early '90's she was in charge of the room immediately below the high school. I cannot now remember in just what subjects she taught me but I do not forget the gracious charm of her personality. In 1896 she married Marcus White, who had come as principal two years before. Another well-remembered teacher was Miss Lillian Hart who gave me my first Latin lessons. She was later one of my teachers at the New Britain High School and opened my eyes to the beauties of the Roman poet Virgil. In the winter of 1909 I had the pleasure of escorting my early Latin teacher on a tour of the Palatine Hill in Rome.

History recalled on
Arts Festival land-
mark for 1973

April 27, 1973

page 2

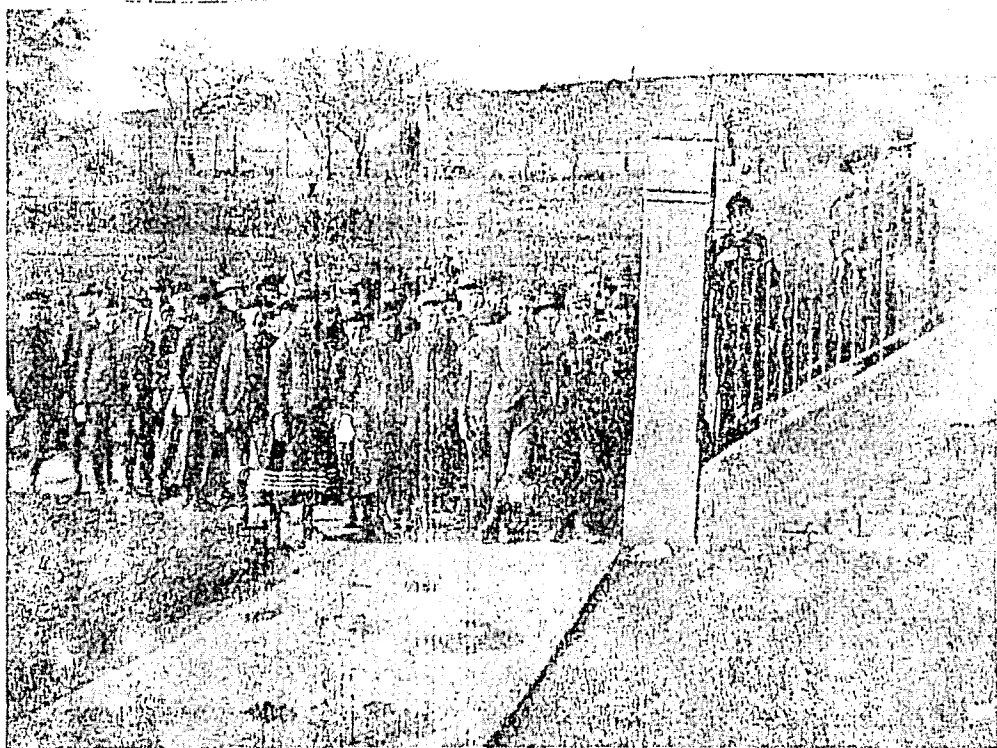
Extended system

In 1889, Prof. Carroll extended the model school system to include a high school. This occupied two rooms at the north end of the main building. The class of 1893 was, I believe, the only class to receive graduation diplomas. When Clarence F. Carroll resigned in the spring of 1894 a decision was made to discontinue competition with the New Britain High School and all students were advised to transfer to the institution at the corner of Main and Chestnut Streets. This decision was received with regret by many of the students and a number decided to continue their education at private schools. This writer was one of those who did make the transfer and were received as members of the class of 1897, the first class to graduate from the new building facing Franklin square, in which, however, we spent but one term.

Marcus White, a graduate of the Westfield, Mass., Normal School and of Wesleyan University, succeeded Clarence F. Carroll as principal in the fall of 1894 and for thirty five years his administrative ability, wit, and skill in public relations brought increasing prestige to the school. Though entrance standards were raised student enrollment increased soon after the turn of the century, it was realized that the building on Hillside Place was no longer adequate and White began quietly exploring the possibility of a larger site, away from the central area of the city, with room for a dormitory in addition to administrative and classroom buildings. In 1919, the General Assembly appropriated \$95,000 for the purchase of a 25-acre site in Stanley

Quarter with frontages on North Stanley and Wells Streets. A competition held in the fall of 1920 for plans and design was won by Guilbert and Betelle, of New York. \$750,000 was appropriated the next year for the construction of the building. This was completed in 1925 and the New Britain Normal School moved from the building on Walnut Hill that had been its home for forty two years. The old building was acquired by the city of New Britain and used as administrative headquarters by the School Board.

For a number of years a
"Health School" for the bene-
fit of retarded children was
accommodated in this build-
ing.



Class of '93

Students who completed their classes at the Normal School in 1893 gather in front of the building.



OLIVER M. WIARD

The author in 1897