

Small Town Scholars: The East Pembroke Rural Seminary

Today, it's easy to take the privilege and ease of education for granted. Children are picked up by the school bus right from their doorsteps and taken miles away to a school that – in rural areas – often serves many communities. Education officials are continuously raising the bar for what they expect students to know. However, the experience was quite different for children in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As a farming community, education in East Pembroke wasn't a top priority. Children weren't required to go to school and many of the boys were kept home to help with farm work.

No school served the hamlet until 1856, when a few citizens raised \$3,413 to build one. After electing 15 trustees to oversee operations, the Rural Seminary was built on School St. in East Pembroke by William Eaton Babcock at a cost of \$2,300. Babcock had previously constructed numerous buildings and bridges in the area – many of which are still standing.

The Rural Seminary was immediately prosperous, employing four teachers. Within the first year, \$500 was spent on library and laboratory equipment. Town of Batavia resident Mark Hunt noted in his autobiography, *The Legacy I Leave: A Personal Account of Sixty Years, 1839-1899*, that he was 16 years old when the seminary opened. At the time, he was still working on common fractions. The seminary inspired Hunt, and upon his graduation two years later he had mastered an assortment of subjects including math, science and English. He went on to earn his teaching certificate and later tutored Major General Emory Upton's sisters, boarding at their house.



The Rural Seminary was built in 1856 and operated until 1939, when a larger school in East Pembroke was constructed.
TOWN OF PEMBROKE HISTORIAN

Despite initial success, the school found it hard to compete with the larger schools and colleges that were opening in nearby communities such as LeRoy and Oakfield. By 1889, Miss Emily G. Thrall, a renowned teacher from Batavia, taught at the Rural Seminary. Her continued operation helped see the private school flourish once again, and by 1890 there were 30 scholars enrolled.

The seminary became a "Union Free School" in 1893 after two smaller school districts consolidated, expanding the district's boundaries. Now called the East Pembroke High School, it saw \$600 worth of repairs by the newly-formed district. In 1930, a gymnasium was added behind the schoolhouse.

By 1938, the New York State Education Department required that school districts be centralized, thus eliminating the many one-room schoolhouses that dotted the landscape. The new requirement

merged East Pembroke High School with nearby Corfu High School, which had been built in 1937. The expanded districts and increasing enrollment not only created the need for school buses, but also an expansion to the Corfu school. Not long after, a new school in East Pembroke would be constructed to meet the needs of the larger district.

The schoolhouse in East Pembroke that began as the Rural Seminary closed its doors in 1939 when the new, \$300,000 East Pembroke school was built on the corner of Main Rd. and West Ave. The original schoolhouse was torn down after the completion of this new school, and the rear building that housed the gymnasium became the East Pembroke Grange.

Though the schoolhouse may be gone, its legacy of education lives on. It served the educational needs of the community and helped create the school district that continues to serve the area. ■