PAST AND PRESENT SCHOOLS OF FREDONIA.

Paper by Blair F Simons given before the Chautauqua County Historical Society at Fredonia, Aug. 7, 1943.

Since I consented to take a place on the program of the Chautauqua County Historical Society many subjects have been suggested to me as suitable for maintaining the historical prestige that has been attained by this largest village in our county. Fredonia has not become the well known place it holds in the county and nation by its location or population, but by the educational advantages it has maintained for nearly one hundred and fifty years. It has produced men and women of vision that have not only become leaders locally but throughout the nation. I cannot enumerate these individuals as that would constitute a topic by itself, suffice it to say that it only takes one Father Kelly to start a nation Wide Grange, one Esther McNeill to staff a Women's Christian Temperance Union, one Capt. Cushing to give us historical prominence, one gas well to cause a revolution in house illumination, one paisley shawl to give Fredonia the reputation of having the best dressed ladies of all the places visited by General LaFayette on his tour of America when he visited this village, June 4, 1825, one Academy to bring the desire for a continued educated community and one Normal College to enable the young man and ladies of the State to take a leading part in training the youth of our country in the principles of justice and freedom.

In the year 1809 when this village was only a few scattered houses in a densely timbered region Samuel Berry taught the first school in a log school-house which was located near what is now Main street in the center of Canadaway as Fredonia was then called. He taught the three R's and set the writing copy with a quill pen which the little handful of children followed religiously. Fifteen years later came the Fredonia Academy the first institution of its kind in Chautauqua County with Austin Smith as its first principal. The old district schools became known as Union Free Schools in time and each building had its own principal until the population reached 5000 when William B. Blaisdell of Cherry Creek became principal for several years retiring in 1924 being succeeded by Prof. Claude R. Dye of Villeneva who after two years as principal was made Supt. of Schools in 1926 and has served with distinction to date. The public schools have made steady progress through all the past years until today they are second to none. A rearrangement of district boundries at an early date made the boundry of District No. 8 co-incidental with that of the village with the school house on Barker street. The remodeled building is still in use as one of the Public School buildings. This arrangement lasted for many years until the Normal could no longer accommodate the overflow of Union School children of the fast growing village. When it became known that no written agreement had been made with the State to take children at all the consolidated district had to seek school rooms for the increased population of school children. This was met by procuring improvised school rooms in village and church buildings as well as in private residences. The arrangement proved very unsatisfactory and after many meetings it was decided to build some modern school buildings which was done by erecting one on Eagle street in the fast growing Italian section and another on Seymour street to appease that section of the village. Still there was a shortage of school room and the Junior High School was erected on the hill west of the Canadaway creek after several other attempts had been made to select a suitable site. The Junior later became our present Fredonia High School.
This building was built at the peak of prices causing a rather high school tax. Athletic field was later acquired which has a natural stadium valued by one State Educational official at a million dollars. A tennis court field and a driveway to Chestnut street has been acquired in recent years.

Although this paper is largely a history of the Normal given on its seventy-fifth anniversary it will be necessary for me to briefly review the history of the Fredonia Academy which was merged into the Normal so smoothly that it is hard to tell when the former ended and the latter started. The transition was as gradually and skillfully manipulated by leading citizens and politicians as ever was a monarchy or republic converted into a dictatorship.

A considerable biographical and statistical matter has been included in this article mainly to establish original data for record purposes.

The Fredonia Academy one of the oldest academic institutions not only in Chautauqua County but in this section of the State was chartered in 1824. Scattered in every state in the Union were thousands of its students, many of whom became known nationally. Prof. Cochran a former principal afterwards became principal of the first Normal School established in the State in Albany where he served for several years. Douglass Houghton who you will hear often mentioned here today, a Fredonia boy and Gov. Reubin E. Fenton of Jamestown, the Cushing boys who won fame in the Civil War and hundreds of others that time will not permit me to mention.

The last principal was Homer T. Fuller who afterwards made his home here living in the colonial house that stood in front of our High School. A few years ago this house was taken down and rebuilt on East Main street. Prof. Fuller retired after the spring term in 1867 and there was a suspension of the institution until the academic department was transferred to the Normal School at the opening in 1868. Willard McKinstry, father of Louis McKinstry, who was then editor of the Fredonia Censor stated at that time, "Our venerable institution of learning so long a subject of the fostering care of our citizens will enter upon a renewal and more vigorous career." Therefore it is a matter of record that the Fredonia Academy did not in reality cease to exist but was absorbed by the Normal. The building remained for years being used for various purposes. It was a two story frame structure located on the present site of the opera house part of our present Village Hall on Temple street and only a block from the present Normal building.

This institution sent out thousands of students who later became judges, legislators, teachers, high army officers, clergymen, lawyers, doctors, missionaries and astute business executives in every walk of life. It may be fair to assume that had there not been this fine old successful Academy there would never have been a State Teachers College in Fredonia.

The Academy established forty years earlier in the year 1824 was the first of its kind in this section of the State and nearly all the residents of Fredonia had received their education within its walls, and saw the benefits of higher education and better trained teachers than were being employed in the common schools.

Many persons even to this day believe that the first training of teachers began with the establishment of the Normal. Such belief is unfounded since the Academy had for many years prior given instruction to prepare students for the teaching profession.

The Academy Index under date of January 1860, a copy of which is now in the possession of the writer, under the caption "Education of Teachers" stated "The Regents of the University provide for instruction of a class in Theory and Practice of Common-School Teaching during one term of each Academic year."
It prescribed the subjects to be studied and limited the class to twenty. There was also a Teachers Normal Course such as would qualify students for teaching not only the best common schools but also High Schools and Academies.

A question frequently asked is why the Old Academy was abandoned and the Normal School supplanted? In explanation it may be stated that other academies had been established drawing away attendance and the village of only a few hundred inhabitants had grown as it became well known for its Academy and the several common schools found their school taxes increasing and their accommodations inadequate so when the State Commissioner of Education, on Dec. 3, 1866 was authorized by the state legislature to seek for four more Normal Schools in the State, one of which was to be given to the 8th Judicial District on condition that $75,000 be raised for the purpose the people in the near-by school districts gained the impression that the State would take over the education of the children and relieve them of the annual school tax burden. The Civil War reduced the attendance and the many Union Free Schools which then began to multiply throughout the State also further greatly depleted the attendance at the Academy. At this period Mr. Willard McKinstry in reading the 1866 session laws of the State which had been sent him as editor of the Censor for publication noticed an Act of the Legislature providing for the establishment of four additional Normal Schools. Remembering that Gen. Reuben E. Fenton was from Chautauqua County and that Victor M. Rice, the Superintendent of Public Instruction was also a citizen of the county he had a feeling that one of the Normals could be brought to Fredonia. When this information was conveyed to about a dozen of the leading citizens they decided to circulate a call for a public meeting which was held Sept. 28, 1866 at which the village trustees were requested to secure one of these schools if possible, the village to donate the site and erect the building. C. W. Johnson, a prominent attorney who lived in the house now owned by the American Legion but later in the large brick house adjoining on Temple street was selected to go before a Commission in Albany and succeeded in his mission.

After the State Architects had submitted plans it was found that the cost would be $100,000 which was somewhat above the expected cost but no objection was made and the village was banded for that amount and paid by taxation. In contrast when the Academy building was erected it was done largely by subscription the signers paying not in money which was scarce but by hand or team labor or products produced which could be converted into money including such items as lumber, wheat, corn, pork, pearlsh, whiskey etc.

Visitors to the library may see a painting of the historic Academy over the office door. The building painted white and for many years after being abandoned as an educational institution was used for various purposes including church services and a meeting place of the village volunteer firemen. In the picture may be observed the Barker Library building and Barker Commons the latter neatly enclosed by a white fence. Barker Commons was the gift of Hezekiah Barker one of the pioneer settlers and the Library building by D. R. Barker another early public spirited citizen. Incidentally Fredonia, the largest village in the county covering nine square miles has only one additional small park that being on West Hill and named Houghton in honor of Douglass Houghton an early distinguished citizen. Another distinction is that of having no public playground within or without the village.
The matter of deciding where the Normal school should be built was a matter that led to much difference and argument. The trustees in different sections of course wanted to secure it for their locality. Finally when convinced an agreement could not be reached it was agreed to leave it to the State Commission who sent Hon. Victor M. Rice, State Superintendent to make the selection. He came March 2, 1867, visited all sites proposed, listened to all arguments presented and then stated that three considerations influenced his decision: Central position, drainage and protection from winds. His decision was a "lot in the square upon which the public school No. 8 stood which gave general satisfaction. This square contains about five acres and is bounded on the south by Barker street, east by Temple, north by Terrace and west by Center. There were eight dwellings in the square at that time. At the present time the original Public School building which has been enlarged remains, all others have been removed.

The corner stone was laid Aug. 8, 1867 by the Masonic Order. This later lead to a considerable discussion since the leaders in the movement and those who would have to pay for the building in taxes were ignored and an organization that took no active part were honored.

The building was of red brick, three stories high with center edifice and right and left wings all three having spires. In general appearance it was superior to the present building which occupies the same site. The Normal opened in the old Academy building, Dec. 2, 1867 and closed about July 1, 1868 with Joseph A. Allen, president, Francis B. Palmer principal of the Academic department and seven other teachers. The Normal opened in the new building, Sept. 8, 1869 with John W. Armstrong from the Oswego Normal as principal. It may be of interest to know that during its three-quarters of a century existence, has had only six regularly appointed principals with an average term of about 12 years. Joseph A. Allen and Dr. J. H. Hoose were in charge for brief periods pending regular appointments.

The complete list is as follows:

Joseph A. Allen, 1867-1868
Dr. John W. Armstrong, 1869-1878
Dr. J. H. Hoose, 1878
Dr. Francis B. Palmer, 1878-1906
Dr. Myron T. Dana, 1906-1922
Dr. Howard G. Burge, 1922-1928
Dr. Herman Cooper, 1928-1931
Dr. Leslie R. Gregory, 1931- to date.

The Normal did not have a very auspicious beginning as a rather bitter fight developed among the members of the local board of fifteen members over the selection of Prof. Allen who was named by one majority to be in charge at the opening in December 1867. As a result of the divided sentiment the school was closed in the winter. Legislation was passed that terminated the Board and the Educational Dept. at Albany selected a new Board and Dr. Armstrong as principal and several assistants and the school was reopened in Sept. 1869 in the Normal building and has made a steady growth for three score years and fifteen.

It is not strange that throughout these many years there should occur many amusing and regrettable incidents, a few of which may not be out of place here. Miss Hattie Burhans, a student in the early nineties had the misfortune to fall through a hoisting shaft and was quite badly injured. The Court of Claims in 1894 awarded her $3,500 damages. Another accident that cast a gloom over the teachers, students and community was the accidental death, March 17, 1894 of the much beloved Elizabeth Richardson who was instantly killed in an elevator that she was operating. She unlocked the door of the elevator on the second floor starting the cab upwards from the basement to the third floor dormitory, over which she had charge and
was caught in some unknown manner and crushed. She was born in Villenova, entered the Normal as a student in 1867, graduated in 1871 and then became a teacher where she served with marked success for twenty-two years. She was the highest type of Christian womanhood and her influence over students and teachers for a better life will be remembered as long as the school itself. She is buried in the cemetery at Hamlet.

Then on a bitter cold morning, December 14, 1900 came the greatest tragedy of all, the burning of the Normal building and the death of the janitor and six young lady students who occupied rooms in the dormitory. The writer witnessed this terrible fire as did most of the towns people of that time. The death of the saintly Miss Richardson and this later most sad and tragic event will long remain the most painful recollections in the history of the Normal. Those who perished in the fire were:

- Inez Jones, Busti, N. Y.
- Bessie G. Hathway, Cannonsville, N. Y.
- Cora M. Storms, Eden, N. Y.
- Ruth Thomas, Pike, N. Y.
- Ada May Williams, Lake Como, N. Y.
- Phineas J. Morris, Fredonia, N. Y.

They died together and the sentiment was so strong that they be buried together that a fund was provided for buying a plot, erecting a monument and providing for a continuous display of flowers. This was done and a Barre granite tombstone bearing all their names may be seen on the main drive in the center of Forest Hill cemetery.

The present main building was built in 1900-1902 and opened in 1902. The total cost was $250,000, but since the village carried $85,000 insurance on the building burned it left the net cost of the present building $165,000 which was paid by the state.

The new site of 60 acres between Central Avenue and Temple street was purchased in 1930 at a cost of about $60,000. The Legislature in 1931 appropriated $1,000,000 for additional building but the bill was vetoed by former Governor Roosevelt. A state appropriation of $325,000 was made in 1930 for the new music building which was first occupied in 1941.

It is reported that the Board of Regents of the University of the State have recommended to the State Post-war Planning Commission as a post-war public works program the construction of a new administration, class room and library building costing $450,000; an auditorium and gymnasium building at $300,000; a school of practice building, at $375,000 or a total of $1,125,000 bringing the cost of the entire plant to $1,450,000.

When the Board of Regents a few years ago set the maximum enrollment at 500 fearing a surplus of teachers now proves to have been a mistake as the enrollment in all state teachers colleges is now way down and a serious shortage of teachers is developing in the state.

Over a four year period it is found that students attending the College represent 48 counties of the state, coming from as far north as St. Lawrence and as far east as Suffolk. In the year 1938 there was a student body of 547. Cattaragus county had 43, Erie county 110, and Chautauqua 294. Those commuting that year numbered 44, from Dunkirk 66 and Fredonia 73 or a total of 183 local students.

There are now two curriculums, one for elementary teachers, the other for public school music teachers. The special art curriculum was discontinued in 1931. Both curriculums are four years. The first four year class to graduate was that of the music class of 1924. The first four year elementary music teachers to graduate was that of 1942. Music graduates receive the bachelor of science degree authorized in 1940, while the elementary teachers receive the bachelor of education degree authorized in 1941.
The present faculty numbering about 60 is approximately the same size as it was a decade ago but better prepared. In 1931 only one faculty member had three years of graduate or post-graduate study to his credit while at the present time there are seventeen with college degrees. Salaries amounting to more than $175,000 a year are received by teachers and employees. In keeping with all other colleges that are having difficulty in filling their freshman classes the registration at the Normal this year will not close until September 15, 1943.

An innovation which should not be overlooked which few schools or colleges have acquired is the camp site and lodge which has attracted the attention of a number of national teachers magazines, schools and colleges many of whom are laying plans to carry out a project of this nature. The site comprises about 125 acres located three miles south of Brocton on route 380, purchased by the students for winter sports and educational purposes and is well worth visiting when gas is available.

Fredonia has often been called the "Athens of Chautauqua County", the village however may not justly be entitled to such honor. It is true that the citizens of the village have taken a greater interest in education than in industrial plants. Our people are living in hopes that the Board of Regent's post-war planning for a larger Teacher's College here will become a reality in the not far distant future.

Clair F. Simon