



*"Knowing our past, guides our future."*

## GLASTONBURY'S EARLIEST SCHOOLS

By Susan G. Motycka

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### **The Church-Run System**

When Glastonbury petitioned to become a separate town in 1693, the Colony of Connecticut required that a minister be hired, a Congregational Church built, and an Ecclesiastical Society established. All religious concerns were the responsibility of the Minister and the Deacons. The Ecclesiastical Society, also known as the "Town Men" was entrusted with the town finances. The Ecclesiastical Society approved the selection of the minister, determined his pay, managed the town property, conducted town business, set taxes, and was responsible for educating children.

The leading citizens of early Glastonbury, who dominated the Ecclesiastical Society, were determined to make their new town a seat of learning. Many were well educated, excelling in orthography (spelling) and penmanship. They began what has evolved into our present school system.

By 1699, Glastonbury's population reached 50 families and in accordance with colony law, a school had to be established. In 1700, the town voted to purchase the nails for a schoolhouse "eighteen feet square besides the chimney." Disagreements delayed construction. Should the building be south of the Town Green or on the Green next to the Meeting House? It took 11 years before the first school building, located near the Meeting House, was completed. In the meantime, classes were held in private homes.

Glastonbury Historian, the Reverend Alonzo Chapin, in his 1853 book *Glastonbury for Two Hundred Years*, wrote that in 1701 Robert Poog was employed to teach for three months. If his teaching were found satisfactory, he would be allowed to stay longer. His pay was to be three pounds for the first quarter and two pounds for each additional quarter. He would also receive lodging for himself and his horse. Apparently his services were unsatisfactory because in 1702, the Town's Men were directed to find a "sufficient" teacher, to be paid on the same terms.

To cover school expenses, "the town had an appropriation, made by a law of the colony, of forty shillings upon every thousand pounds in the grand list." These grants, known as "Country Money," probably were the beginning of state aid for local schools in Connecticut. The remainder of the schoolmaster's salary was paid, half from a local property tax and the other half from funds generated by an assessment upon children of "suitable age," whether or not they attended school.

Beginning in 1706, the school-master divided his time between the school in the Center, where he taught from four to nine months and Nayaug where he spent between two and four months. By 1714, the town had grown enough to allow the people at East Farms to hire "a woman to keep school among them two months." Apparently there weren't sufficient funds for a "well qualified Master."

"The Doings Of The Glastonbury School Society:" from The Town Records for 1717, states: "all boys between six and eleven, except those living beyond certain distance, to pay whether they go to school or not, and one load of wood to be carried for a scholar or three shillings to be paid." No mention is made of the education of girls. Later, Society Records referred to "scholars between four and fourteen," probably including girls this time.

For many families, sending a child to school was a hardship. Children were needed at home to help with farm work and household chores, including spinning, weaving, candle and soap making. There was no public transportation, and bad weather conditions often made traveling to school difficult.

In 1731, the people of Eastbury obtained permission from the General Court to erect their own meetinghouse and establish a second Ecclesiastical Society. Each of the two Ecclesiastical Societies became a distinct, independent School Society.

From 1731 until 1796, when state law separated School Societies from Ecclesiastical Societies, all school records were part of the parish records. During those years the population grew and additional schoolhouses were built. By 1796 there were seven schools run by the First Ecclesiastical Society and four run by the Second.

### **District Schools — To Each His Own**

Separation of church and state brought changes to the Glastonbury public school system. Until 1795, the Ecclesiastical Societies ran the schools. After the Separation Act, districts were established. The school locations remained the same as they had been under the Ecclesiastical Societies, which were now renamed School Societies.

There were 11 Districts in town, seven run by the Glastenbury Society and four run by the Eastbury Society. In 1845, the South Glastenbury Society became the third School Society. Each Society had a Board of Visitors who “dropped in” several times during the term to check on the schools. Their reports often criticized the condition of the schools and the competence of the teachers. As a result, there was frequent teacher turnover.

In Glastenbury for Two Hundred Years, Reverend Alonzo Chapin quotes from the Glastenbury School Society Records of 1820: “At a full meeting of the Board of Visitors, it was voted unanimously: That the several instructors of the District Schools in this Society, be directed to instruct the children in their respective schools, in the rudiments of literature, religion, morals, and manners; particularly in a knowledge of spelling, reading, and writing, and they are directed not to instruct the children in arithmetic, grammar, and geography during regular school hours.” The limits on what could be taught were included to raise the standard of education by compelling students to attend one of the private secondary academies.

Apparently this was unsuccessful because in 1853, Chapin wrote that there has “been a relaxation of effort in the cause of education ... Public education has been neglected, public schools have been undervalued, and the public interest mistaken. Glastenbury has ... a mission yet unperformed, upon which it is her duty and her interest to enter immediately. The light that gleams from her very name, the halo of glory that encircles her early English history, and the self-denying efforts of our fathers, all conspire to exhort us to spare no pains and shrink at no efforts necessary to enable us to realize the vision of our forefathers, making Glastenbury conspicuous as a religious and an educated people.”

By 1856 the town had grown to 17 Districts, and an 18th was soon added. All were still under the control of the three School Societies and their Boards of Visitors. The Society for each District was responsible for hiring and firing teachers, maintaining the buildings and determining the amount of firewood each child was required to bring: “Wood to be laid on the children’s heads.” They each decided which months their district schools would be in session, often scheduling classes around planting and harvesting. Usually there was a winter term and a summer term. By the end of the 1700s, Glastonbury schools were in session a minimum of five months a year. In 1865 the State required that schools remain open for at least six months.

The Town Report in 1908 states: “The people of Glastonbury should rejoice that they are soon to see the end of antiquated district system of school management...The smaller the number of school officials the better for the school interests.” From that time on the schools were managed by a Town School Committee, following the same calendar and abiding by the same rules. In 1931 the School Committee became known as the Board of Education. Since then, schools were rebuilt, retired, reopened, consolidated, and constructed, so that today there are six elementary schools educating students from the kindergarten through the sixth grade.

### **Private Academies — Education For Those Who Could Pay**

During the 18th century private academies provided the only opportunity in Glastonbury for education beyond the district primary schools. These academies depended entirely upon tuition fees for their financial support. As a result, those who could not afford to pay received no secondary education.

Numerous private institutions served the town. The Reverend Alonzo Chapin in his 1853 history Glastenbury for Two Hundred Years claimed that the old Academy on the Green, established in 1792, was “one of the best and most flourishing schools in the State ... aiding in the discipline and training of some of our most active and energetic citizens.”

By 1796 an exceptional New England grammar school was built in South Glastonbury. Students were offered classes in Latin, Greek, English literature, philosophy, and algebra. Later, the curriculum was expanded to include chemistry, astronomy, trigonometry, surveying, and navigation. Known as the Glastonbury Seminary, the school stood to the south of The Welles Shipman Ward House. The school burned down around 1845 and was not rebuilt. (The story of the Seminary’s school bell appears below.)

In 1862 a group of South Glastonbury citizens drafted a constitution and put up stock for another private school, the South Glastonbury Academy. The stockholders purchased the abandoned Episcopal Church, located by Old Church Cemetery, moved it down Main Street to the southwest corner of Main and Stockade Road, and called it Academy Hall. It operated from 1862 until 1883.

By 1882, the newly built Hartford High School had the reputation of being one of the leading schools in the country. Many Glastonbury families were most anxious to have their children attend. To prepare them for entrance, Miss Jennie Pratt established a private academy on the second floor of the Welles house, which still stands at the corner of Main and High Street in South Glastonbury. Miss Pratt's school was in existence from 1884 until 1893.

The distance between the northern and southern parts of town made it difficult for some young people to attend school regularly, especially without public transportation. In 1869 several Glastonbury citizens organized a stock company for the purpose of building and maintaining a secondary school at Glastonbury Center. Shares were \$25 each and the stockholders subscribed for amounts varying from one to 52 shares. \$8,000 was raised and used to erect and equip the building that was located on the site behind Town Hall where its old bell now stands in the center of the circular drive.

A Hartford paper reported: "The building erected by the Glastonbury Academy association for academic purposes, was dedicated on Friday afternoon, April 15 1870 ... A large number of citizens then assembled, completely filling the spacious and beautiful hall ... the founders of this institution intend, not only to have the best school we can obtain for our money, but the best school money can buy." The account goes on to describe the beautiful location overlooking the river.

Tuition rates were set by the Academy trustees. Tuition included a small charge for fuel and for maintaining the building and grounds. The school principal collected tuition payments, taught classes, and paid expenses, including salaries. The first term opened with an attendance of 43 gentlemen and 50 ladies. Attendance fluctuated, with fewer students in spring and fall terms than in the winter. In 1877, the trustees voted "if the number of pupils does not exceed 36, they would hire Mr. Parker, the principal alone. If the number exceeds 36, and does not exceed 45, Miss Scudder could be employed part time and if the total exceeds 45, Miss Scudder could be employed full time."

The Academy thrived in what is now called the "Victorian" period. According to its rules: "profane language, scandalous conduct and the use of tobacco on academy premises are prohibited. All pupils are also expected to attend church on the Sabbath. Violation of this regulation shall render the offender liable to expulsion by a majority vote of the trustees."

Some in the student body came from South Glastonbury. Their parents organized private transportation for them, taking turns furnishing a horse and two-seated wagon. During farming season when the weather was good, horses were needed for work, and the students walked. Otherwise, the students used a horse that, during school hours, was stabled in a nearby barn.

For 20 years the Academy provided good secondary education. Students from Glastonbury and neighboring towns paid tuition fees and prepared for college. By 1890, the Association could no longer exist on the small tuition and appealed to the citizens for support. Three individuals responded by donating a total of \$25,000 to endow the school as a Free Academy. The funds also made it possible to enlarge the school building, adding rooms for recitation and a library.

A charter was secured from the Legislature early in its 1893 session, and on April 25, 1893, the 11 Corporators together with the ministers of the local churches met and organized the Glastonbury Free Academy. For the first time, free secondary education became available for Glastonbury children.

Soon however, income from the endowment failed to meet all of the expenses. The Town responded by appropriating \$200 annually for the Academy, at the same time appropriating \$300 per year for a private school in South Glastonbury. In 1896 a third teacher was needed and the Town contribution was raised to \$600, and in 1899, \$1000. The Academy Charter was amended in the 1899 session of the Legislature, allowing the Town, which was helping to support the school, to appoint six members to the Board of Corporators for three-year terms.

Assistance from the Town continued until 1901 when there was a vote to establish a public high school. In 1902 the Academy Corporators voted to turn the building over to the High School Committee, the predecessor of our current School Board. The Academy Corporation also agreed to pay the income from \$20,000 of its invested funds to support the public high school. The remaining funds were used to pay off debts. In 1922 the Academy Corporators agreed to move the building to make room for the new Glastonbury High School, which opened in the fall of 1923. The old Academy building was used as an elementary school until a new Academy School building was opened on April 11, 1930.

The Glastonbury Free Academy Corporation continues to exist as required by its charter, administering the endowment fund and dispersing income. Several Corporators are descendants of the original 11, others have long standing personal and family ties to the Academy. The Town Council now appoints three Town Corporators for six-year terms.

Current pastors of the churches originally involved in establishing the Academy are still invited to attend the annual meetings. Each year, the Free Academy donates money to Mary A. Kingsbury Memorial Library at Glastonbury High School.

### **South Glastonbury's Old Plantation Bell**

In the nineteenth century, a school building often had a school bell. Two of these school bells still can be seen in Glastonbury. One is behind Town Hall. The other is in front of the firehouse at Main and Pratt Streets. This is the story of a Glastonbury school bell that was destroyed.

Many historical accounts come from old town records, while others are stories passed down from generation to generation. Local historian Florence Hollister Curtis recorded one old story for posterity. In her history Glastonbury, published in 1928 by the Woman's Club of Glastonbury, Mrs. Curtis tells the story of a bell that once hung in The South Glastonbury Academy.

The academy, formally known as the Glastonbury Seminary, was located south of the Welles Shipman Ward House. Considered an exceptional New England Grammar School, its teachers included Elihu Burritt and Noah Webster. Burritt, the "learned Blacksmith" from New Britain, was said to know 50 languages, including dialects. He was also known for his strong blacksmith's arms, which according to one of his pupils, Henry T. Welles, helped Burritt maintain discipline.

Situated near the Connecticut River, the Academy was within easy walking distance of Log Landing, near the mouth of Roaring Brook. The students were aware of the many ships built there and at the shipyards in Tryontown and Pratt's Ferry. During the 18th and 19th centuries, several hundred ships, including schooners, sloops and brigs, were launched from these Glastonbury shipyards. The ships made trips to the colonies to the south, and to the West Indies, carrying lumber, beef, pork, potatoes, and onions.

A Glastonbury man was the captain of one of the many ships destined for the West Indies. After unloading his cargo, he started on the return trip. He was already quite a distance from the Indies when he became aware of a strange sound coming from the hold of the ship. Upon further investigation, he discovered that the noise was coming from a well-hidden bell.

This most definitely was not part of his usual return cargo of sugar, molasses and rum. Inquiries revealed that some unruly members of his crew had stolen the bell from a West Indies plantation. They had hidden it in the ship's hold hoping that their treasure would remain undiscovered. However, the bell gave them away.

By this time, it was too late in the journey to turn back and return the bell. For the guilty crew members, crime did not pay. They were not allowed to reclaim their bounty. Never again would the bell ring black slaves back to work on a plantation. The Captain presented it to the Glastonbury Seminary, where for many years it called white children to their classes.

One day while school was in session, a young boy entered the classroom and took his seat. After a few moments, he leaned over and softly whispered something to his neighbor. The second boy was not so timid. He jumped up and shouted "the school house is afire!" That fire was quickly extinguished and caused only minor damage. Years later, a second fire started late at night. This time, the building was completely destroyed. The beautiful "sweet toned" Spanish bell, which contained a large amount of silver, fell to the ground and broke into many pieces.

People gathered up the fragments of the bell and stored them in a neighbor's attic, hoping that eventually the bell would be recast. Years passed, the school was never rebuilt and the beautiful bell was nearly forgotten. A new generation lived in the home where the fragments were stored. One day the housewife, probably doing her spring cleaning, unaware of the history of the old pieces of metal in her attic, sold them for junk. When the old timers learned what had happened, they regretted not acting sooner to recast the bell. Unfortunately, it was too late. So far as we know, that was the end of Glastonbury Seminary's plantation bell.