

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MARLBORO HIGH SCHOOL/ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

People and groups with an interest in the history of our County have recently been alerted to the proposed demolition of the building known as OMES – the Old Marlboro Elementary School, the original part of which was built as the Marlboro High School in 1921. The proposal includes the construction (on the site of this school building) of a Family Justice Center that would combine all of the offices necessary to serve individuals and families in need of assistance. There are of course serious logistical problems that would have to be resolved before proceeding with such a plan, but the Historical Society will concentrate on the historical value of the school building and site, and the consideration of potential adaptive re-use and possible preservation. The Society's Board plans to host as soon as possible an informational meeting and discussion on the subject. The property has been designated an Historic Site under the County's Preservation Ordinance, because of its importance in the history of education of the white students of the area. It contains not only the High School/Elementary School building, but also the separate, adjoining small principal's residence (originally 1890s girls' school), and the burial place of Dr. William Beanes and his wife.

This is the property on which Dr. William Beanes lived in the early 19th century. Dr Beanes was the Upper Marlborough resident who was taken as a hostage by the British invaders in the summer of 1814, because he and several of his friends had captured several British deserters/stragglers. (He was taken to Baltimore, and it was during the attempts of Francis Scott Key to liberate Dr. Beanes, that Key wrote the lyrics to what became our National Anthem.) Dr. Beanes returned to Upper Marlborough, and lived on this property until his death in 1828; he and his wife are buried on the property, and their burial place has been carefully preserved, although it is currently in need of attention.

After Dr. Beanes' death, his house was altered to become the new Marlborough Academy, established in 1835 by an Act of the General Assembly of Maryland. The subjects taught included Dictionary, Geography, Latin, algebra, Geometry, and Cyphering; Greek and French studies were soon added. Hours were 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and September was vacation month. At first only boys were admitted, but by 1840 there were female students as well; a report for 1844 indicates the attendance of 42 boys and 18 girls. (In 1867, after the establishment of the Board of County School Commissioners, a separate public school for girls was established immediately east of the academy building, and the two buildings were separated by a "good and substantial fence.")

In July of 1855 the Academy building burned to the ground. The Upper Marlborough newspaper, *The Planters' Advocate*, reported that "The buildings of the Marlboro' Academy, in this place, were destroyed by fire on the afternoon of last Friday. . . . The fire originated in the garret room of the Academy proper, whence it communicated to the adjoining dwelling of the

Principal. The latter was not occupied at the time but was in a state of repair – a considerable sum having been already expended in refitting it, all of which is of course a loss. The fire was not discovered until between 6 and 7 o'clock, and no signs of it were observed at the time school was dismissed about two hours previously. . . . The dwelling portion of the building was one of the oldest houses in the village and was for many years the dwelling of the late Dr. William Beanes.” The building had fortunately been insured, and a new academy building was erected by the end of December in that year.

We have several contemporary descriptions of the Academy during the 19th century, the most charming being the reminiscences of Frederick Sasscer, Superintendent of Schools for Prince George’s County, and Editor of the Upper Marlborough newspaper, the *Prince George’s Enquirer*. Towards the end of 1920, Editor Sasscer was temporarily confined to bed, and he used the time to write and publish in his newspaper “reminiscences “ of his childhood in Upper Marlborough in the years just after the Civil War. “My little heart fluttered with excitement when, without warning, on a bright autumn morning in 1863 my father announced at the breakfast table that I, the eldest child, was to begin my school career. Accordingly, he led me to Academy Hill and introduced me to Mr. Edward Bushell unto whose tender mercies I was committed . . . my father took leave and I well remember how I cried when I realized I could not return home with him . . . soon I became a part of that little school circle . . . by the next day I had grown big enough and brave enough to go to school and return all by myself.” [Young Frederick Sasscer lived at Kingston, just a short distance south of Academy Hill. The Academy building that he attended had been built only eight years earlier to replace the old Beanes residence that had been destroyed by fire.]

Editor Sasscer continued, “The Academy building then consisted of two rooms, one of which was the school room and the other the bed room of the professor. . . . His classes, wonderful to tell, ranged from boys learning the alphabet, the first step in education, then to classes in Cicero and Xenophon. . . . The furniture was of the rudest kind. Desks with sloping lids in sets of three, in all about 30, were arranged against the walls. . . . The very small boys, who had no writing to do, found resting places on two long benches with backs. There were no blackboards, no free books and few physical comforts. The old professor sat at a small table in an arm chair, and was always supplied with a goodly number of supple rods, for the rod was not spared in those primitive days.”

Sasscer went on to contrast the simplicity of his mid-19th-century schooling with the improvements that he had seen by 1920 (he had served as Superintendent of Prince George’s County schools 1902-1914, and had been an innovative and progressive leader), and he noted that Upper Marlboro would soon have a new high school. He referred also to the fact that in 1908 the Academy property had been turned over to the Board of County School Commissioners, and that this 1855 building had thenceforward been used as a public high school – “. . . the trustees and patrons of the Marlboro Academy desire the establishment of a High School at the County Seat . . . it is ordered that a committee be appointed . . . with authority to

enter into an agreement whereby the property of said Academy . . . may be used for said proposed High School to be established under the provisions of the General School Law relating to the opening of High Schools.” In 1920, Mr. Sasscer recalled that transition, which had occurred during his tenure as superintendent, and looked forward to the construction of the new high school which would be completed in the following year. “The old Academy lost its identity about twelve years ago, when the property was turned over to the School Board in order that the present High School might be established, and our boys and girls alike might enjoy the benefits of instruction in the higher grades. . . . May the new High School building soon to be erected embody in its conveniences all the comforts of the new age, and may the children of the present generation and of generations to come find keen delight and rich enlightenment within its walls!”

The Mission-style two-story high school of 1921 can still be seen at the rear of the present building, Built by Thomas H. Marsden for \$38,000, it was of masonry construction, coated with white-painted cement, and distinguished by a handsome shaped parapet on its south entrance façade. It had eight classrooms, offices and a library, as well as rooms for manual training and home economics. The new school was dedicated on May 19, 1921, with considerable ceremony, and a lengthy speech about the very historical Academy that it was replacing. Soon after the high school opened, elementary school classes also began in the new building. During the 1930s, the building was significantly enlarged - a large red-brick addition including eight more classrooms and an auditorium was built, wrapping around and hiding the south entrance façade of the original 1921 structure. In the 1940s, the original 1921 building was used to house the elementary students, while the newer red-brick structure operated as the High School. After the construction of Frederick Sasscer Junior/Senior High School in 1947, the older students moved to that new school, and elementary school classrooms took up the entire structure on Academy Hill. Known now as the Old Marlboro Elementary School, this building was closed by the early 1970s. For years after that, it served as the office of the Sheriff’s Department.

From 1835, when the Marlborough Academy was established, until the 1970s, this site has been an important educational landmark in the County Seat. We will keep you posted as plans for its site unfold.

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