

Nathan Power's Pride: An Historical Overview of the Farmington Schools 1944–1988

by Rebecca S. Davis



The Farmington Schools have come a long way since Nathan Power taught his first class of students in Farmington in 1826. A Quaker from Farmington, New York, Power breached the "Michigan Wilderness" and is credited as Farmington's first teacher. It is highly unlikely that Power, while teaching a handful of early students the 3 Rs and also tending the wood-burning stove in Farmington's first school, could have envisioned what is today the cities of Farmington and Farmington Hills and what is presently the Farmington Public Schools.

Consisting of 24 schools and serving a student population of approximately 10,000, the school district has grown tremendously in recent decades, although, like most school districts during the postwar era, it has had its ups and downs, with the changing demographics of the community it serves.

This article will highlight the interesting story of the district during its period of greatest change—the years 1944 to present. 1944 was selected as the starting point because the early history of Farmington's schools are adequately detailed in Lee S. Peel's book, *Farmington: A Pictorial History*. At the same time, Peel's book (copyright 1971) preceded many of the changes that have occurred during the postwar era. And the special significance of 1944 as a starting point is that year's consolidation of the existing eight, separate and distinct, school districts in the area now encompassed within the Farmington Public Schools.

Up until 1944, the district was not one but eight area school districts which were governed by the Farmington Township Board. An election to consolidate these eight districts into one was held on November 27, 1944. With the results of the election being 653 Yes and 213 No votes, a majority was reached and the question carried. A second election was held on December 12, 1944 to elect five members of the new Board of Education. The newly elected board, with Dr. Z. R. Aschen Brenner as its President, met for the first time on December 26, 1944 as the first Board of Education of the Farmington Township School District. The new board took over all records, monies, property, etc. on January 3 and 4, 1945, at which time the following districts ceased to exist: Fractional District #3 known as the Thayer District, District #4 known as the Fairview District, District #5 known as the Farmington City and Township District (Farmington Junior High School), Fractional District #4 known as the West Farmington District, District #2 known as the Nichols, District, Fractional District #6 known as the Bond District, Fractional District #1 known as the German District, and District #6 known as the Noble District. The results of these two elections were twofold - the eight existing districts were consolidated into one and the governing body changed from the Township Board to the Farmington Board of Education.

Although most of the 1944 schools no longer exist, I became familiar with one, the Nichols School, shortly after I moved to this area in February, 1973. Built before 1860, this one-room brick schoolhouse was named after the family from which the land for the school was obtained. It was located west of Farmington Road north of Thirteen Mile Road. The building was closed in the early 1930's. By the mid to late 1970's, the Farmington Historical Society was attempting to raise funds to try to purchase the school. The front page of the December 31, 1979 Farmington Observer described how, on December 26, the school burned down.

Four school buildings from the 1944 period still exist today, but only one is currently being used as a school. The German School, located on the east side of Middlebelt Road north of Northwestern Highway, was named after the owner of the land George German, one of an English group who settled in that area in 1835. It was also a one room schoolhouse built before 1860. After 1944, it was used as a Kindergarten, but is now owned by the Hillel Day School.

Farmington Junior High School, 33000 Thomas at School Street, was north of Grand River and east of Farmington Road. It was built in 1919 with additions in 1940 and 1958. A number of schools have occupied this site and the Farmington Training Center has been located there since 1958.

The Noble School, 23450 Middlebelt between Nine and Ten Mile Roads, was a two room school built in 1923. It was named after Adelbert Noble, who owned the land on which the school was built. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the building was used as headquarters for the Special Education teachers, after which it was used by the school maintenance department for about three years. Libby Lamb of the Farmington Area Advisory Council, Inc. informed me that they moved into the building in September, 1975 and have rented the building from the Farmington School Board since that time.

The Bond School, located on the north side of Thirteen Mile Road west of Orchard Lake Road, was named after Issac Bond, a township supervisor who had owned the property. The school was built in 1926, with additions in 1949, 1952, 1958, and 1964–5. The two-story brick building was closed in 1974. It was sold to developers in the early 1980's and turned into an office complex.

Since the school district consolidation in 1944, many additional schools have been built. The following is a chronological listing of those schools with some pertinent information listed for each one.

- Middlebelt Elementary School at 24400 Middlebelt north of Ten Mile Road, was built in 1949 with additions in 1952, 1958, 1965, and 1972. It was named after the street on which it was built. The school was closed in June, 1983 and reopened in August, 1986 as an American House Retirement Residence.
- Ten Mile Elementary School at 32789 Ten Mile Road between Power and Farmington Roads was named after the road on which it was built in 1949. Additions enlarged the building in 1952 and again in 1958. Ten Mile closed in June, 1978 and that Fall opened as the Adult Education Center. Adult Ed. moved out in June, 1987 and the building now houses the Board of Education Administrative Annex. One half of this building is now the 47th District Court.
- Farmington High School, 32000 Shiawassee west of Orchard Lake Road, was built in 1953 with additions in 1955, 1958, and 1969.
- Eagle Elementary School, 29410 West Fourteen Mile at Middlebelt Road, occupies the northwest corner and is therefore in West Bloomfield. The school's name was derived from Ward Eagle, the owner of the property where the school was built in 1955. Additions were added in 1958 and 1964. The Eagle family house and barn are still located across the street from the school on the south side of Fourteen Mile.
- Shiawassee Elementary School, 30415 Shiawassee, is located east of Orchard Lake Road. The school's name came from the street it was built on and Shiawassee was one of the early Indian trails that crisscrossed the Farmington area. The school was built in 1955, with additions in 1958 and 1971. Shiawassee School closed in June, 1979 and it is now a special education facility.
- Gill Elementary School is located at 21195 Gill Road south of Nine Mile Road. It is yet another school named after the road where it was built. Gill was opened in 1955, with 1958, 1964, and 1972 additions. There have been four principals at Gill.
- Dunckel Junior High School, 32800 West Twelve Mile Road between Farmington and Orchard Lake Roads, was named after Orville Edward Dunckel, Superintendent of Farmington Schools from 1939 to 1943 and again from 1946 to 1956. During Dunckel's lapse in service, he served in the U. S. Navy. Dunckel School was built in 1957, and a new wing was added in September, 1960. Mr. Dunckel died September 16, 1970. In September, 1980, Dunckel Junior High School became Dunckel Middle School. I thank Mrs. Howlitt, Dunckel School secretary, for this information. Mr. Donald Keen is the current Principal.
- William Grace Elementary School, 29040 Shiawassee, is located east of Middlebelt Road and south of Nine Mile Road. The school was built in 1957 with additions in 1960 and 1969. Mr. Close is the current principal. According to the *Illustrated Atlas of Oakland County, 1896*, William Grace owned the land on which the William Grace School was later built.
- Cloverdale Elementary School, 33000 Freedom Road, between Farmington and Nine Mile Roads, was opened in 1958. It was named for the street behind (north of) the school. It is no longer an elementary school and is now called the Cloverdale Training Center, a special education facility.

- **Kenbrook Elementary School, 32130 Bonnet Hill, is located north of Twelve Mile Road and east of Farmington Road in Kendallwood Subdivision. The subdivision derived its name from R.K. Floyd of the Kendall Oil Co. who owned many acres of land in the area, including the Victorian Gothic-Revival stone house on Twelve Mile just west of Farmington Road. Kenbrook was built in 1958 with additions in 1959 and 1974. Its current Principal is Miss Carolyn S. Plsek.**
- **Wooddale Elementary School is located at 28600 Peppermill, west of Farmington Road between Twelve and Thirteen Mile Roads. The original structure was erected in 1958 with additions in 1961 and 1972. The current Principal is Mr. Coffin.**
- **Alameda Elementary School, 32400 Alameda north of Power Road, was built in 1959 and closed in June, 1981. In September, 1981 it reopened as Alameda Early Childhood Center.**
- **Longacre Elementary School, at 34850 Arundel Drive, is located south of Grand River between Farmington and Drake Roads. It was named for the nearby street of Longacre, according to Longacre Principal Mrs. Millie Bennett. Built in 1959, Longacre was expanded in 1971.**
- **Beechview Elementary School, 26850 Westmeath, is in Kimberly Subdivision north of Eleven Mile Road between Orchard Lake and Middlebelt Roads. It was so named because of the large forest of beech trees in that area. The school was built in 1961 with one addition in 1976. Mr. Wallace Prince became Principal in September, 1986.**
- **North Farmington High School, 32900 West Thirteen Mile, Road between Farmington and Orchard Lake Roads, was the second high school to be built in the Farmington School District. When it was built in 1961, it took the name of North Farmington after an early Farmington unincorporated village of the same name that had been located in that area. There were additions in 1965 and 1969, the latter adding a pool and auditorium to the school's facilities. Mr. Don Cowan is Principal.**
- **Flanders Elementary School, at 32600 Flanders, is located east off Farmington Road and north of Eight Mile Road. It was named for the street on which it was built in 1962. There was one addition in 1974. Mr. Frank Delewsy, the original Principal, is still Principal today, although he was Principal at two other Farmington Elementary Schools in between those times.**
- **East Junior High School, at 25000 Middlebelt, is located on Middlebelt between Ten and Eleven Mile Roads. While many of the Farmington schools were named after either the former landowners or the streets on which they were located, East Junior High (currently East Middle School) was named after its geographic region in the Farmington area, as there was already a Middlebelt Elementary School just south of it. East was built in 1963 with an addition in 1965. It became East Middle School in September, 1980. Mr. William Martin is Principal at this time.**
- **Highmeadow Elementary School, located at 30175 Highmeadow at Alycekey, is north of Twelve Mile Road and west of Middlebelt. It was built in 1963 and closed in June, 1980. Then it became Lutheran High School Northwest until June, 1987. From September, 1987 to the present, it has functioned as the Community Education Center of the Farmington Public Schools. In September, 1988 it will reopen once again as an elementary school.**
- **Larkshire Elementary School, 23800 Tuck Road, is located south of Ten Mile Road and west of Middlebelt. It was built in 1965 and was expanded in 1971. Mr. Al Lanigan is Principal.**
- **Fairview Elementary School, 28500 Oakcrest, is located east of Middlebelt Road and north of Northwestern Highway. It opened in 1966, its name being taken from the original Fairview School which was on Grand River near Halstead, overlooking what is now Independence Green and the Chatham Hills subdivisions. The original bell is displayed in the front yard of the new Fairview School and was dedicated November 9, 1966. A plaque was inscribed with the words of Board President Richard Peters, "This bell from the original Fairview School built in 1835 continues to summon Farmington students to the path of knowledge, and is hereby so dedicated." Mr. Ruiter, the present Principal, told me that the bell can be rung from inside his office and that, on occasion, students are permitted to do so. Fairview closed as an elementary school in June, 1978. It is now known as the Fairview Early Childhood Center.**

- **Forest Elementary School, 34545 Old Timber Road, is located west off Farmington Road between Thirteen and Fourteen Mile Roads. It is located in the center of four subdivisions: Rolling Oaks, Wedgewood Commons, Briar Hill, and Muer Cove. The school, when opened in 1967, was located deep in the forested center of Section 4, hence its name. School secretary Mrs. Joan Bowen told me that Forest has only had two principals, Mr. Weldon Petz and now Mr. Walt Jablonski. When Forest opened, it became the eighteenth elementary school in the district.**
- **Power Junior High School, at 34740 Rhonswood, is located north of Eight Mile Road and west of Farmington Road. It became the district's third junior high when it opened in 1968. Its name came from the Power family, the first settlers in Farmington, and it probably was also influenced by the fact that Nathan Power is considered to be the first teacher in Farmington. In September, 1980 Power Junior High School became Power Middle School. Mr. Brown is the current Principal.**
- **Wood Creek Elementary School, 28400 Harwich Drive, is north of Twelve Mile Road between Middlebelt and Inkster. It is located in Wood Creek Subdivision, hence its name. The school was built in 1970, making it the newest of the elementary schools. Its Principal is Mrs. Barbara Novatis.**
- **Harrison High School, 29995 West Twelve Mile Road, is located between Orchard Lake and Middlebelt Roads. Built in 1970, the building is 208,000 square feet on 42 acres of land just north of the I-696 freeway. It is the newest of the three high schools. The school was named to honor Gerald V. Harrison, who was the Superintendent of Farmington Schools from 1957 to 1967. Mr. Clayton Graham is the current Principal.**
- **Warner Junior High School, at 30303 West Fourteen Mile Road, is located between Middlebelt and Northwestern Highway. It was named after the prominent Warner family of Farmington. P. Dean Warner was elected to the Michigan House of Representatives in 1865 and was speaker of the House in 1867. He also served as Senator from the 5th District in 1869. His adopted son, Fred Maltby Warner, was elected Governor of Michigan for three terms: in 1904, 1906, and 1908. The school was built in 1973. In September, 1980 its name was changed to Warner Middle School. It is the newest of the middle schools. Mr. Walt Scobie is the current Principal.**

Since 1944, many changes have come to the Farmington schools. The name has been changed from a conglomeration of eight different district names to the original name after consolidation, Farmington Township Schools, and in turn to the Farmington Public School District of Wayne and Oakland Counties to the present name, Farmington Public Schools. Between 1973 and 1983, one junior high school and eight elementary schools were closed, the result of declining enrollment. Here are those nine schools: Farmington Junior High School, Cloverdale, Bond, Ten Mile, Fairview, Shiawassee, Highmeadow, Alameda, and Middlebelt.

In 1980, the junior high schools were changed to middle schools, with the sixth grade taken from the elementary school and placed into the middle school and the ninth grade taken from the junior highs and put into the high schools.

The result is the following list of twenty four educational facilities over which the Board of Education presides: two early childhood centers, Alameda and Fairview; eleven elementary schools, Beechview, Eagle, Flanders, Forest, Gill, Kenbrook, Larkshire, Longacre, William Grace, Wood ,Creek, and Wooddale; four middle schools, Dunkel, East, Power, and Warner; three high schools, Farmington, Harrison, and North Farmington; three special education facilities, Cloverdale, Farmington Training Center, and Shiawassee; and one community education center, Highmeadow.

The period in question has been marked by both growth and decline in enrollment, and in the last few years, a resurgence in the district's student population, in keeping with the nation's and Metropolitan Detroit's changing demographics and the profound changes in the make-up of the Farmington area. How could Nathan Power, the area's first teacher of a handful of pioneer children, have envisioned Interstate highways, thousands of homes, hundreds of businesses, 24 schools, and over 10,000 students in an area that in his day was still crisscrossed with Indian trails. Undoubtedly Power would be proud of the progress made in the Farmington schools since 1826.

Acknowledgements

I wish to recognize the following sources not previously mentioned:

- Betty Wolford in the Office of School and Community Relations of the Board of Education
- Tina Theeke, Head Librarian of the Farmington Library
- Kay Briggs
- Lee S. Peel's *Farmington: A Pictorial History*
- A pictorial chart of the Farmington Public Schools facilities in the Board of Education meeting room

The Farmington Enterprise and Observer for the following articles:

1. *School Development History is Reviewed*, November 7, 1963
2. *Shutdowns Cause Boundary Shifts for High Schools*, March 12, 1979
3. *Alameda Closing is Next*, January 21, 1981, by Mary Gniewek
4. The *Suburban News (Farmington Forum)* for articles which appeared on the following dates, April 11-17, May 2-8, and August 15-21, all in 1974; *History of the Farmington Public Schools with Emphasis on the Special Education Department 1964*, by Kathryn Briggs

and the following Farmington Schools Board of Education publications:

1. *Report to the Community, 1966–1967*
2. *Farmington Public Schools Building Statistics, December, 1971*
3. *Task Force on Declining Enrollment: Final Report, December 14, 1976*, p. 20
4. *Annual Report of the Farmington Public Schools 1977-1978*, by Lewis Schulman, Superintendent of Schools
5. *Annual Report Farmington Public Schools 1979-1980*
6. *Up Front—A Newsletter from the Farmington Public Schools*, November, 1983, Volume 4, No. 2